

# **Contrasts Between (Alleged) Intentions And (Actual) Actions In Danish Day-Care Institutions.**

## **1. Introduction**

In this article I shall present an analysis of what is going on right now in Danish day-care institutions, concerning the question of how to break children's negative social heritage. As an illustrative clarification of the field I focus on ethnic minority children and the question of their verbal language. I shall show how and why the official approaches are doomed to failure and finally I shall briefly outline an alternative.

First I mention some important premises:

### **1.1 Globalization**

We live in a globalized world – no one would contradict that. Money and information freely cross borders – some people do too; most people do not. The ongoing climate-debate also points at significant, globally interdependent connections. Logically this might call for close international co-operation. But: As our world is organized it rather implies a global competition – also when it comes to education – and of course every country wants to win that competition (I sometimes wonder what the losers will be up to).

A few years ago the Danish government announced that Danish educations were to be among the ten best in the world – and that the Danish population as a whole should be very well educated.

They did not explicitly tell what would be the criteria, but it was and is obvious that education is regarded from a marketing, neo-liberalistic point of view: How can education enlarge the gross national budget – thus undermining a tradition for critical and creative thinking. This of course is in complete harmony with the competition-thing.

### **1.2 Pisa**

According to this goal (and way of thinking) we have PISA: An international test of schoolchildren all over the world (here and now I shall not question what and how is measured in these tests). Unfortunately the Danish children do not perform too well in these tests – and it is obvious that particularly non-middle-class children have severe problems. Also these children do not go on in the educational system after public school – meaning that more than 20 % of a generation does not get any further education. Presumably because their social heritage in some way or other blocks these children's way through the

educational system. This surely is bad prospects as regards the Danish government's goals.

### **1.3 America In The Fifties**

This situation has similarities with the “Sputnik- chock” in America in 1957 – when the USSR succeeded in bringing a satellite into orbit – ahead of America. One of the American answers to this was the “Head-start-programmes”:

Comprehensives aiming at catering for the so-called pool of ability: Blacks, women – and other under-privileged persons.

The programmes were based upon the fact that tests showed that children with a certain verbal language (i.e. that of the middle-class) performed well in the educational system. And the assumption was that under-class-children could be trained in that language and then go on to higher educational levels.

It did not work out too well – the children stayed under-class and under-educated.

Now back to the Danish authorities' alleged attempts at raising the educational level by educating under-privileged children. These days those children will not be working-class children (as we have very little industries left – most of them are exported to the third world) – typically their parents will be on welfare or they will belong to ethnic minorities – probably both.

## **2. By Which Pedagogical Means In Day-Care Institutions Does The Danish Government (Claim To) Try To Prevent Negative Consequences Of The Social Heritage - Thus Hopefully Raising Educational Standards Later On**

It is a well-known fact that what happens in early childhood has important consequences later on. So it seems reasonable to look also at day-care institutions when you want to improve results later on.

If you want to break the cycle of deprivation – in order to get a well-educated population – it is a good idea to start early. The snag is that there are various possibilities – also when it comes to interventions in early childhood.

Up till recently early childhood institutions in Dk have been characterised by a high degree of creativity and playfulness. According to a certain understanding of children, underlining their vital needs for exactly creativity and playfulness. And according to goals about democracy, critical thinking and the value of communities.

The test-material focuses on: Then came the kind and interpretation of globalization mentioned initially. And then came the neo-liberalistic answers. And then came PISA – and nearly everybody panicked.

What did the Danish authorities choose to do?

They of course have chosen a number of things and here I shall just point out a few examples that are representative for the logic involved.

### **2.1 Day-Care Curriculum: Verbal Language**

Since 2004 day-care institutions have had to work with a certain curriculum with a fixed number of themes, one of them being “language”.

Also “language” can be interpreted in different ways and I shall now look briefly into the area to decide which conception of language is implied – to suggest some probable consequences.

Interconnected with the language-theme in day-care institutions is the fact that every institution must offer the parents an evaluation of their three-year-old-child’s language. Till now it is voluntarily but probably it shall soon be obligatory. And till now the municipalities can choose between several test-materials – and here I shall look at the most widespread.

When you examine a test you also see very clearly what is the most estimated inside the area tested. So then – what does the most widespread test-material suggest as the most important features in children’s language?

This question is very easily answered: The test focuses largely on two phenomenons:

**Glossary:** The creators of the material have selected what they regard as the most important 100 words when you are a 3 year-old-child in Dk. Thus ignoring that different children in different social, ethnic and geographic contexts do have very different glossaries – as glossary is closely connected to everyday-life

**Norm-pronunciation:** As the (correct) assumption is that school requires standard Danish this is measured in the test – without any consideration of the fact that most children talk different dialects.

Furthermore the test gives absolute primacy to verbal, spoken language, though small children express themselves in a large number of other bodily, aesthetical ways.

This lies within a structuralistic, neo-positivistic conception of language that corresponds perfectly to the neo-liberalistic points of view that dominate the discourse of education. And that easily gives way to measuring and counting different phenomenons (so as words and sounds) so that your investigation seems evidence-based and highly reliable.

This conception of language is based on the assumption that language can and must be isolated from the dialogical, social context in which it is produced and used. And it certainly does not take into consideration questions about language, identity, communities, and self-esteem.

And this tendency seems to be strengthened by

Performance: The test is carried out with one pedagogue with a computer and one child in a room. The child's performance is continuously ticked off and the score is delivered immediately.

This emphasizes the implied conception of language as completely distinct from children's social life and communities – and their whole bodily expressions

Purpose: To identify the children that seem to need special help to improve their verbal language. According to the implied theory of language that probably will be different programmes of training.

### **3. Which Consequences Do These Attempts Seem To Have? And Why?**

It is obvious that ethnic Danish middle-class-children will deliver as their glossary, their pronunciation, and their performance will match what the material asks for.

It is accordingly obvious that underprivileged children will have severe difficulties in handling the demands, implied in the tests. And of course these difficulties will be even harder for most children from ethnic minorities. As a matter of fact in Denmark today “underprivileged children” are nearly synonymous with ethnic minority children – not because of their ethnicity, of course, but because of the way the Danish majority society meets these minorities.

These children will be further excluded and will have their educational and social future perspectives further diminished by these tests – the more so as their mother-tongue is completely neglected.

Now, having realized that, what is done then – to improve these children's future prospects? And the future gross national budget of the state of Denmark? Remember that the language-test allegedly is made to point out the children that need further help.

It seems as if the failures from the American head start programmes are repeated – over and over again:

#### **3.1 Compensatory Education**

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The whole thing (the underprivileged children's bad test-scores) is looked upon as inherent defects in the single child – or perhaps in her or his family – or perhaps in their culture – or their language. Something that hopefully can be repaired in the individuals. And something that never ever is connected with society as such – and therefore never will require any changes on this level. What is done is that the ethnic minority children are offered special education in Danish language and culture - in the hope that they might then cope better with the demands in school when they enter this institution.

The logic is obvious: What is required in school is beyond discussion. Children must be made to fit school – not the opposite. And what school requires is middle-class Danish verbal language and culture. Let us then put that into the children that fail to deliver what is wanted.

This is called compensatory education. This is what they did in America in the head start programmes. This is what did not work then – and has not worked since either. It seems that you cannot just add language and culture as an external thing – a lot more is needed.

Furthermore these programmes overlook very important characteristics in children as a group, regardless of ethnicity, class, sex and whatever: Small children need to be in motion most of the time, and so much of their needs and feelings are expressed bodily; in songs, drawings, role-play, dancing etc. Ignoring this you probably hamper their development of verbal language instead of encouraging it.

### **3.2 More factors that contribute to exclusion**

Above it was about the specific language theme in day-care institutions – and about language tests. That turned out to increase rather than diminish the negative consequences of the social heritage. But it might be just bad luck – so let us look at children's lives in day-care in general – and let us again concentrate on ethnic minorities as the authorities claim that they particularly will benefit from day-care. As a matter of fact huge pressure is laid upon ethnic minority parents with the purpose that their children attend day-care institutions.

And it does sound reasonable – that ethnic minority children might pick up a lot of Danish language and culture during their stay in institutions – together with an often vast majority of ethnic Danish children. During all those small seemingly insignificant conversations and events during a quite ordinary day one should think they would be indirectly and very effectively socialized into dominant norms, culture and language

But that does not seem to be the fact – rather the reverse:

Recent research points at several mechanisms in daily life that contribute to the marginalisation and exclusion of children from ethnic minorities, for instance:

What you talk about:

If you for instance talk about typical Danish festivals (like Christmas) or typical Danish camping-holidays – then you exclude the children who do not share these experiences. You give value to the things you talk about – and what you do not talk about you do not attach significance to.

The way you talk:

There are certain standards for “proper language” – all of them attached to middle-class: Certain words and pronunciations (as mentioned before), but also a lot more: You do not shout, you do not swear, you do not use taboo-words, you do not express negative feelings. As a matter of fact there is a lot of do-nots in this area. If you break the rules you will be either ignored or reprimanded. Not to talk about that the spoken language will not be your mother tongue. And when there is given no respect neither to your first language nor to the way you talk your second language you are really hit in your self esteem. You may then lose a lot of initiative and courage – and as a matter of fact be severely mentally damaged.

How you dress:

It is a well-known fact that “the clothes make the man” – you create certain expectations by the way you are dressed. And though you say that you cannot judge the book by its cover this is exactly what is done. And as under-privileged families cannot afford to dress their children like middle-class-children these children will be met with lower expectations if not by direct rejections. And as some minority parents take pride and pleasure in dressing their children according to their own cultural standards this might also create problems – if the pedagogues fail to appreciate varieties

How the pedagogues talk about the children – and to the children:

The pedagogues of course talk about the children according to all the above mentioned. And if you talk about a child in a way that makes it quite clear that you find this child irritating, noisy, under stimulated, and deprived - then this child will live up to your expectations. It is a very well-known psychological mechanism, called the Rosenthal-effect.

And evidently it has consequences how the pedagogues talk to the children - for instance you can be kind or nasty and the child can be happy or sad. But it is still more sophisticated: Studies point out two different kinds of tones in day-care institutions: The teaching tone and the dialogical tone. The teaching tone is used to inform and instruct – and it emphasizes of course a hierarchical relationship.

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Whereas the dialogical tone emphasizes a relationship of friendship and equality. Every child dearly wants the dialogical tone, and every child fights to obtain it. It seems though that it is particularly hard (often impossible) for the ethnic minority children, due of course to all the above mentioned barriers.

Surely no pedagogue deliberately acts this way. No pedagogue wishes to take part in this systematic exclusion. It just happens. And it just happens because it is totally consistent with everything else – in and around us. So we see that all these small everyday incidents systematically adds to the picture, made by the tests: Already in early childhood most institutions contribute to the negative consequences of social heritage, thus diminishing the children's actual and future prospects – including their educational future.

And this is just the opposite of what the authorities claim that they want to happen.

Since these mechanisms are not secrets but are research-related facts and openly discussed – then why are things not changed? I am not able to give a satisfactory answer to that – although of course I have my assumptions. But I shall briefly outline some alternative efforts:

#### **4. What can presumably be done to democratize children's lives in day-care institutions – thus contributing to minimize the negative consequences of the social heritage?**

Above I illustrated how the pedagogy may result in further exclusion – though the intentions are claimed to be just the opposite. Let me summarize:

A child does not live up to the standards, she seems to be most of the time in the periphery, and her verbal language is poor. The most common answer to this situation will be different kinds of compensatory actions – thus excluding the child even further. But no one – child or grown-up - wants to be excluded. Exclusion causes a sense of unwanted isolation, loneliness, and uncertainty for everybody.

And when these feelings dominate you, it is painful – and it gives great difficulties in learning.

Everybody – child and grown-up - needs to be an estimated member of the community. Everybody needs to participate in meaningful activities together with others. It seems that this is an absolute vital condition for learning.

So in some day-care institutions, in some municipalities, the pedagogues try to change the pedagogy:

Instead of looking for imperfections in the individual child, her family, and her culture - trying to repair these failures in the individual - the pedagogues ask themselves: what can be done to establish fruitful conditions for a community in which this child will be fully appreciated?

The key-conception in these efforts is called *Inclusive practice*, defined in strict opposition to exclusive, compensatory, and assimilative pedagogy. Inclusion means that everybody is respected and appreciated in a certain community. Whoever you are and whatever you bring with you. It means that diversities are celebrated and conformal standards are rejected – and thus you also might bring a tendency to social and democratic sustainability into children´s daily lives. Inclusion has been on the European political agenda for some years, mostly grounded on the work with human rights in relation to people with different sorts of handicaps. Recently it has entered the pedagogical agenda as a possible means to raise educational standards.

When it for example comes to children´s verbal language one consequence is that you will not offer so much interest to fixed standards as you will find it essential that every child´s language is considered important and beautiful – not only the language of white, western, middleclass-children (as in the tests). In practice this for instance means that children from ethnic minorities in Danish institutions must have their mother tongue met with respect and curiosity. The best thing would be that every child in day care meets a grown up that shares her mother tongue, but that will not always be realistic. Then you have to make use of lots of other possibilities: Making great efforts in learning how to pronounce the child´s name – and laughing together with the child because you fail – it is too difficult – and it is such a lovely name . . . . . Asking the child for the names of this and that – learning to count to 10 (or 100). Trying to sing their songs, cook their food etc etc. Doing that you will confirm the children´s self-esteem, and that is a condition for so much more, for instance learning Danish – and at the same time you will add worlds of sounds and meanings and fun and colours to the lives of the other children. This might seem a very limited area but it does serve as an example of so much more in the pedagogical practice. This way of thinking and acting should permeate every corner of children´s lives in day care – thus stemming the marginalisation, discrimination and exclusion that increases the negative effects of the social heritage and leads to the un-equal access to further educations.

Here one might object that society is still – well what society is: Competitive, excluding, marginalising, discriminating. And of course that is of dominant significance, and of course you will have severe difficulties in changing your way of thinking, feeling and acting in a more full hearted including direction. But perhaps you can contribute to a little more dignity, a little more fun, a little more self-esteem - and in the long term: a little more inclination for further education by working according to these, including principles. You certainly can not if you continue as I outlined initially.

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