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Experiences and Professional Strategies of Pedagogues, in Light of New Ambitions of Quality Control and Monitorial Demands

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Contribution

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Danish kindergartens, their play based curriculum and history of focusing on formation in a broad continental tradition, emphasizing care and development based on everyday-life and democracy, has long been admired and looked upon as something to work towards in early childhood education research, development and policies. Whereas Danish kindergartens and pedagogues have a history of being predominantly self-managed, leaving curriculum and quality discussions to local communities and professional autonomy and judgment, the tradition is challenged these years, as the early childhood area is becoming increasingly monitored, standardized and marketized as a result of new and evolving relations of political and economic interests. The pedagogues are facing new demands regarding basing their practice on centrally defined tools, models, manuals, and programs, legitimized in evidence based research. The focus of the professional pedagogical field seems to shift towards conceptual definitions of "what works", rather than a contextually situated professional judgement, providing critical accounts on the many and complex questions concerning education and pedagogy. Thus, this project examines the influence of the increasing monitoring, standardization and marketization of the professional pedagogical field and public Danish daycare institutions on the pedagogues, their conceptualization of their own professionalism, their daily work and their concrete strategies regarding administering the ethical balance between external standards and goals on the on hand, and local professional traditions, values and ambitions, and immediate needs and interests of children, on the other. The research takes its departure in the Michael Lipsky-informed idea of the professional pedagogue as street level bureaucrat and policy maker and thus, puts the pedagogue in a powerful and influential position in doing and transforming
the externally imposed conceptualizations of the daycare work.

“When there are uncertainties over what will or will not work, there is greater room for admitting and tolerating a variety of approaches and objectives. In such a situation there is often a hunger for discovering successful techniques and an apparent willingness to modify objectives to suit the techniques. The speed with which new ideas in education come and go primarily suggest a search for successful techniques, but also indicates indecisiveness in objectives attributable as much to goal ambiguity as to flexibility.” (Lipsky 2010, p. 41)

When the Lipsky perspective is chosen, it is because this particular framework allows us to view the street level bureaucrats (i.e. the pedagogues) in ways that encompasses the human dilemmas and alienations which the employees face, in the implementation of public policy. One of his most important contributions is his description of coping mechanisms, which, according to Lipsky (2010) occurs in three ways: First of all, the street-level bureaucrats develop new patterns of practice (routines and stereotypes), to limit the demand of their time and other resources. Secondly, they modify their understanding of their job, to minimize the distance between goals and resources. Thirdly, they modify their understanding of the service user(s), to make the inevitable distance between goals and achievements more edible. (Halliday et.al. 2009)

The main purpose of the research project is to understand how the pedagogues react to this new boom in externally exposed techniques, concepts and registration/documentation demands. Can new professional strategies of the pedagogues be identified, in light of the demand for increasing systematic approaches, centrally defined goals and the mandatory use of centrally decided pedagogical methods, programs and concepts? What is the impact on professional ethos and autonomy? Does this conditional change in professional performance result in a similar change in pedagogical strategies?

Method

The ambition is to conceive the professional pedagogues as active agents, as professionals that constantly attempts to emphasize the opportunities/possibilities that the structured methods, programs and concepts offers, even though it is challenging. The pedagogues are enrolled in an ongoing process, handling the dilemmas, paradoxes and challenges, in a constant attempt to make their local practice meaningful. We assume that the pedagogues - as street-level bureaucrats - handles the challenges by conducting various forms of adaptations of the many (often contradictory) demands, aims and special attentions, in order to able theirselves to balance and fit them all into a pedagogical practice of everyday professional agency, to which they are able to apply local meaning. Therefore, the project is set up as an explorative, qualitative study, focusing on the pedagogues’ articulated views, experiences and understandings. We have conducted a series of dialogue sessions (Plotnikof, Hviid og Melander 2012), with a total of 85 pedagogues in 15 day care institutiones across Denmark. In each dialogue session, the pedagogues initially draw an individual mind map regarding their experiences and views upon working with new pedagogical concepts, systems and programs. Mind maps can be described as coherent illustrations with relatively short text fragments, often detached from each other, categorized in boxes, organized in certain patterns of relation to each other, sometimes hierarchical, chronological or in other ways dispositioned. They are typically connected by lines or arrows.

“Related to cognitive maps in psychology (…), concept maps provide a visual representation of dynamic schemes of understanding within the human mind” (Wheeldon & Faubert 2009:69).

The concept maps allows access to the pedagogues’ individual worlds, understandings and experiences, in the light of the increasing implementation of evidence based programs in public day-care facilities. Based on the front-end visual construction of a participant’s experience provided in a map, it also allows more specifically design subsequent stages of data collection and use participant-generated themes to help guide more in-depth analysis. (Wheeldon & Faubert:2009:72, Wheelson:2011).

The mind maps function as a starting point for an informant-centered and collective dialogue concerning conceptualization of their daily work. Furthermore, the intention of dialogue sessions is to establish situations, set apart from the forced agency of everyday practice situations. (Plotnikof, Hviid og Melander:2012:20). All dialogue sessions are video recorded, transcribed and structured via inductive construction of patterns and types regarding the pedagogue’s experiences and views upon conceptualization of daycare pedagogy.

Expected Outcomes

Danish pedagogues are on the one hand seemingly involved in a process featuring an intensifying of various externally initiated governing conditions. They are facing a series of new demands regarding documentation and an increase in efforts from the municipalities, to implement systematic quality control systems. This has resulted in a rather intense arrival of so-called “evidence-based” programs, registration tools and commercial concepts. This development has led to a very
fundamental change in the ways the pedagogical planning of everyday life in day-care centres is carried out. In this sense, the pedagogues have witnessed a development, to which they have had only very little influence. On the other hand, it is suggested that the pedagogues is actively reacting upon this process, partly by making collective adjustments, to maintain or preserve the local institutional consistency, and partly – as individual agents – by conducting ongoing modifications and ethically reflected adaptations, taking their own ethical views and values into account. (Dahlberg & Moss 2005)

Therefore, in this research project, pedagogues is regarded as active agents, constantly attempting to apply the concept methods to their practice in constructive ways, and as professionals that constantly attempts to handle the dilemmas, the paradoxes and the challenges, in the ongoing mission to incorporate very different interests and agendas, in constant constructions of coherent and meaningful practice.

The initial empirical data leads us to expect, that a series of coping strategies and various forms of adaptations can be identified. The ambition is to analyse these, as patterns of professional navigation balances. We expect the empirical data to support the following set of professional balances:

- certainty – uncertainty
- recognition – suspicion
- short distance – long distance
- ownership of methods – method subscription
- individual – collective
- focus – distant view
- action - coercion

References

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