

Social Enterprise and Social Innovation in Danish kindergartens

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Introduction

This research examine how employees in kindergarten, which are members of The National Association of Frie børnehaver og fritidshjem (FRIE), relate to paragraph 1 in the association regulations: "...activities in the national association has a social economic base and are supporting the social economic perspective in the related institutions, among members and partners."

FRIE is the largest umbrella organization of self-governed and private childcare-institutions in Denmark – 450 independent institutions are members. The association was founded in 1949 advocating a self-governed childcare model independent from municipalities and working to influence policies concerning childcare and education. According to the association-regulation FRIE provides administrative services to the institutions. Depending on the type of membership FRIE also support in educating employees, engaging greater parent involvement, independence from municipalities. Thus the organization may contribute to more democratic alternatives than 100% state-financed municipal institutions in the provision and governance of social services. Based on these statements FRIE may potentially contribute to meet the demographical, political and economic challenges in the 21st century welfare state in new ways (Pestoff).

Research question: The study examines connections between the written statues in the regulations and the daily practice and articulation by employees in kindergartens and has a focus on user and staff participation and involvement of the local community.

Empirical materials from a recent study of childcare in Denmark will be used to examine the research question.

Methods and approach

The research is based on a social constructionist perspective according to the textually oriented discourse analytic focus on how employees in three different kindergartens articulate and thereby construct understandings of their daily practice (Fairclough).

The informants where selected by FRIE, based on the criteria that the kindergartens are pioneers in terms of promoting elements of social enterprise and social innovation in a daily basis.

The interviews where all conducted in groups of minimum two members of staff in the kindergartens.

The key concepts for developing the interview-guide and examining the research question are based upon literature on social enterprise (EMES) and social economy (Hulgård). The questions in the interview-guide are inspired primarily by research in democratic governance and social enterprises (Pestoff).

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Significant findings

Results from the study show that the informants' descriptions of their daily practice do not define the kindergartens explicitly as social economic or as being part of a social economic field. Whereas the results show elements of social economy in varying forms and intensity according to a definition made by EMES: They work to promote a social purpose, they work directly with the users and are organizational independent, and the leader(-group) is visionary and idealistic. Furthermore the empirical material show presence of coproduction processes and participatory democracy (Pestoff) in strategically selected areas in the daily procedures such as user involvement and participation.

Perspectives

These findings suggest low incidence of meta-reflection related to social economy, social enterprise and social innovation, whereas the empirical material also shows awareness and articulation of skills and competences, theoretical methods and educational ideals. Conditions of possibility shown in the empirical data invites to a next step where researchers and staff cooperate (Moulaert) to exploit the potentials for change in both discursive and the social practice in the institutions (Fairclough). Change that might lead to processes of social innovation, explicate democratic participation and elements of social economy in the social practice of the institutions.

The research is limited by the number of interviews conducted. Further data collection is required to determine if there is a pattern in daycare institutions organized in FRIE concerning social economics, social innovation, democratic participation and co-production.

Keywords in the study are social enterprise, democratic participation, welfare-state-challenges.

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