

Danish University Colleges

The research program: Inclusion and everyday life

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The research program:

Inclusion and everyday life

The research programme investigates how professionals understand and practice inclusion relative to people's social participation across different contexts of their everyday lives. We focus on the opportunities available to children, adolescents, and adults with respect to participation in society's communities and activities, for instance in public day-care facilities, schools, education, or at work.

Some children, adolescents and adults are in vulnerable positions without access to the same social resources and opportunities, which others take for granted. They may be students who are bullied at school; or children with disability who struggle to become part of an ordinary day-care group; they may be adolescents placed in out-of-home care who experience not belonging at school or being marginalised in the course of their transition to adulthood. We conduct our research across these areas, and we generate knowledge as to what the difficulties can be, and how professionals' understandings and practices in different institutions may develop and become more inclusive.

The ideal of inclusion springs from a historic interest in focusing on how inequality within welfare systems contributes to social exclusion. Thus, inclusion comprises a radical criticism of such conditions as may give rise to people experiencing othering and discrimination on the grounds of e.g. disability, ethnicity, gender, and social status. Rather than holding the individuals themselves accountable for social problems, the concept of inclusion will facilitate the highlighting of social problems as being rooted in the probability that groups of children, adolescents, and adults lack influence on and command of essential life opportunities and communal societal benefits. Based on the fundamental criticism of understandings and categorisations that individualise social problems, our research focus on people's learning and development *opportunities* through social participation. Thus, we deem opportunities to be linked with change and the development of conditions of participation within relevant communities. Since children, adolescents, and adults live their everyday lives across contexts, inter-professional collaboration is of considerable importance with respect to the ways in which people can develop their life opportunities.

Communities

We conduct our research into the social significance of how we organise communities – inside and outside the institutions of the welfare state. We look into the ways in which communities provide people with different op-

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portunities for living their lives. By way of access to jointly created resources, the individual will be in a stronger position with respect to dealing with such conflicts, dilemmas, and current life disadvantages that will always constitute a part of one's life when it is lived together with others. How will communities in day-care institutions, schools, youth education programmes, and placement develop and change? Understanding people's life opportunities is crucial in terms of being able to conduct research into inclusion and exclusion processes in specific social contexts. We focus on processes, conflicts, and the allocation of resources within a variety of social communities. In relation to the Danish "Folkeskole" – the Danish municipal primary and lower secondary school - this means, for instance, research into how children make conditions for one another; how teachers and social educators collaborate; and how parent-teacher cooperation is organised. Many participants are creating conditions for child communities in school and our research focus on how conflicts and contrasted practices create obstacles, powerlessness, and particularisation.

Everyday life in professional practices

Children, adolescents, and adults develop, live, and create meaning through their participation in an everyday life characterised by a variety of activities and involvement across specific *contexts*. Nursery school, school, family, or residential care may represent such settings. The Folkeskole, for instance, is a place where the majority of Danish children live a considerable part of their childhood and youth. Thus, communities at school constitute a central context for children's development and learning, as it is precisely here that children and young people gain experience about the world and about asserting themselves in the company of others. Children will move across settings, and therefore research, seeking to comprehend what problems are about, must likewise investigate transversely. Whether it is a matter of children and adolescents in residential care, students having problems at school, adults with mental disability, or adolescents experiencing problems in the transition to adulthood, we are interested in the ways subjects experience their life situation and participation in everyday life across settings. Everyday life takes place under historically created conditions; and taking an interest in subjects' way of life is a means to link the understanding of subjectivity with the social contexts within which people participate and develop.

Subject perspectives

We seek to *break with* the traditional understanding that problems are rooted in people's behaviour or personality, and assessed as either normal or non-conforming. Instead, together *with* people, we strive to look at their living conditions and to investigate people's *reasons* for acting the way they

do, in order to steer our attention towards their life situation. Thus, a child's 'behaviour' at school cannot be understood in isolation, but needs to be analysed, taking our point of departure, in the school's organisation of learning communities, in the way in which it establishes conditions for the individual and for the community.

For instance, how will children experience themselves as having an opportunity for playing a prominent role, and how will diverse ways of organising school life have an impact on the children's collective life situation?

Thus, our research focus on subjects' perspectives of their everyday lives. What, then, can we research based on this perspective? By sharing peoples' perspectives, looking at their life situations, we detect the ways in which they create everyday life relative to a collective creation of social practices undergoing constant change. Many parties will contribute to the establishment of opportunities in social practices. For instance, the Folkeskole is at the same time a historical institution, aimed at meeting a societal obligation, while also being a political battleground. It takes the involvement of many parties for our schools to function the way they do. Thus, we analyse the individual perspective, social communities, and societal structures as interconnected in dynamic developmental processes.

Inter-professional collaboration

Several different groups of professionals, each with their own specific competencies, collaborate on attending to specific difficulties in the lives of children, adolescents, and adults.

Teachers, social educators, and social workers meet people in different contexts where they have focus on different tasks and responsibilities.

Problems, manifesting themselves in one way within the school's communities, may appear completely different in a residential care context.

Although professionals across children's "living domain" may participate in the same task of care, they need not necessarily share the same perspectives on a child's life situation.

Particularly these differences, with respect to knowledge about and insight into what is at stake for children and parents, may be valuable elements in the common development of possible options of action. We consider collaboration related to change and development of conditions for participation in communities to be the central purpose of mutual inter-professional collaboration.

Research at university colleges

From our point of view, the purpose of research conducted at a university college is to contribute to professional theory development, seen from a user's perspective. This means that our research focus on how professionals' initiatives influence on people's lives and support their participation in

communities. We aim to contribute new perspectives to the understanding of practice problems – theoretically, as well as practically; in particular, the way in which professionals can collaborate for the development of inclusive communities.

We perform empirical research into how current welfare state organisations and specific professional help have a significance on the social opportunities of children and adolescents. Involving a number of perspectives, children, adolescents, relatives, and professionals are informing research by their knowledge about the subject matter and common concerns. This means that, in our capacity as researchers, we seek to create knowledge about participants' ways of establishing communities; therefore we are curious to understand what, in certain situations, will condition inclusion and ownership of the shared resources and what, in other situations, will lead to mutual helplessness and giving up.

The research programme pivots on collaboration in institutional welfare and is engaged in questions connected to how to conceptualise and practice welfare. We are engaged in developing and qualifying concepts as e.g. care, community and diversity in professional work. Seen from the perspective of children/users/relatives, how does welfare specifically emerge in people's lives together with one another, and how can professionals contribute in their welfare-developing capacity, as seen from a child/user/relative perspective? Here, research must also involve parties from local communities and voluntary organisations. In order to provide research-based answers to the question of how to practice inclusive welfare a concept development is necessary in order to admit the research of complex conditional structures in practice. Here, we apply theoretical comprehension of social practice, participation, collaboration, and community creation, as we consider inclusion to be the key for many parties to develop command of life situations created in common. In short, the programme's efforts are about research into conditions, the shaping of which takes place in joint participation between professionals, users and social structures of practice, and it is precisely this creation of shared conditions that will provide a foundation for the individual's personal development of agency and access to social resources.

Practice research

The starting point for our overall approach is a tradition for research into, and with, practice. When, as researchers, we involve ourselves in the everyday lives of children, adolescents, and professionals, we find ourselves in a position that allows us to gain insight into the way in which different social and material conditions make opportunities for action for the participants. By gaining access to the everyday lives of the participants through prolonged field studies, we gain access to knowledge about how everyday life

is experienced seen from their perspectives. In this research process, ethical and relational aspects connected to our positions as researchers will be of significance. How can participants experience to have influence in our research cooperation?

The point of departure for our research is a close collaboration with the profession field and with the users involved. By involving the perspectives of many parties in our research, it is our ambition to establish mutual learning across research and professional practice. Therefore, our research approach is collaboration, in which participants will have an opportunity to take part in a common exploring and investigating of the specific problems. The shared investigation of problems may take place through a variety of different organisations. This may be when researchers share observations from school classes or day-care facilities for joint interpretation and discussions at meetings with professionals. It may also be when we organise research panels with consultants and teachers and in collaboration investigate understandings of inclusion in everyday practice; or when, together with children and adolescents attending the Folkeskole, we explore the significance of evaluations with respect to the classes' everyday life and community building.

This approach is suited for contribution to the development of practice, as well as to professional theory development because we understand research as an integral part of a close collaboration with the research field. By accompanying children, adolescents, and professionals into the complexity of their everyday lives and explore their conditions together with them, the research collaboration may potentially contribute to an enhancement of children's, adolescents', and professionals' scope for action. We consider ourselves critical sparring partners of equal standing, who, in a democratic way, intend to contribute to clarity of, how problem understanding and practices may involuntarily complicate inclusion processes; in this way, we intend to provide inspiration for new lines of action within practice.

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