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"Reflection - a place to start: challenging and changing professionalism in early childhood education?"

Brief rationale

My theoretical grounding is relevant to the congress by inquiring into traditional boundaries of established theory in early childhood education in Norway. My paper is inspired by the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's (1813 –1855) ethics and his strategy "to make aware". Facing the challenges of diversity, "life is understood backwards but lived forward". This paper is thus various reflections of metaphorical borders of theory in education relating to the idea that "ethical reality is superior to possibility".

This paper is exploring and examining alternative perspectives in early childhood educational theory. The paradox is that pre-school pedagogy is anchored in scientific, humanistic and social sciences at the same time. My paper analyses the "inner rules" of teaching, in terms of a Danish philosophy defined as postmodernism and characterized by associations and contradictions.

Border as a metaphor relates to Kierkegaard's many examples of choices between passion and choice and mere technical and scientific reflection.

Session format:

I will be including the participants by handing out written questions and asking people to discuss them. My intention is that selected quotations focus on the theme of my presentation. I intend raising the understanding of the participants through the presentations of my work in progress. At the same time I will be using overhead transparencies.

The assumption of the theme is that pedagogical documentation helps people get into new ideas. Thus I will challenge the audience in a dialogue/group interview, emphasising polarity and diversity, related to theorising *in* practice vs theorising *for* practice in social scientific research.

Abstract

This paper is about reflections on professionalism in early childhood education. A social scientific approach is described critically through partial and philosophical insights. These involve engagement, critique as analysis and transformation as evaluation. This is seen as a meaning making discourse in reconceptualizing professionalism in early childhood education and theory.

Introduction

My paper is based on my recently presented dissertation from Oslo University College. My theme is: How does reflection as a tool in theorising have an impact on professionalism in early childhood education? What is reflection? Which possibilities are acknowledged as legitimate in pre-school education and practice?

My focus will seek to reveal the dichotomy of theorising in practice as a reality and a possibility, thus exploring a professional “research stance”, enabling the participants to throw up new and profitable questions for my work in progress.

Here, an assumption is that for reflection in pedagogical theory and practice to be meaningful and productive, it must contain contrast. My point of view is that pre-school teachers themselves must strive to widen professional, constitutive and traditional boundaries to reconceptualize early childhood education in Norway. At the same time pre-

school teachers are exploring theoretical matters in practice. This is thus regarded as border crossings, confronting established theory and reflection as confirming tradition instead of transforming theory and practice.

Those of us who work with practice are not literally able to be in two places at the same time, and we are faced with difficult choices. Here, events that occurred in the past, return coming back through memories and through the consequences of those events continuing to affect practice. Either this influence will transform theory by transforming educational texts and thinking, or it will in some way or another become the vehicle through which the actors and their actions are transformed. Either way the integration of theory and practice transforms the reflective teaching of "a pre-school teacher as a social scientist" in his/her everyday environment.

Scientific and professional thinking in pre-school teaching appears characterised both practically and theoretically by intuitive and tacit dimensions. Through exploring theory in practice in a critical way it seems that it is possible to go beyond the tacit dimension and make it less problematic. This is neither normative nor descriptive. Consequently this is not a categorising point of view. It is a memory of practice "feeling right" challenging and changing boundaries in a way that the pre-school teacher may construct his/her selfhood and professionalism, subjectively and socially.

The first point is that you can't literally translate and expect 'the meaning' to come across to listeners and readers. So in an international and globalized world Norway has to make some decisions about what to say and what to write. This is because of what the English language does: it takes over, as a colonizing power. Early Childhood Education (ECE), in English, is about institutions for children aged 0-8. This includes all kinds of day care centres, pre-schools, kindergartens, nursery schools and early schooling. Words change depending on where you live and when. Having this 0-8 focus makes it difficult for any Norwegians who might see a cut-off point at age six because this is when school starts. Further, the competence of people from outside Norway will never be like the competence of 'Norwegians', regardless of the age group focused upon.

My next point is that any kind of taking over, by English or by anything or anyone else, is a political act. If we are not aware of what is happening we simply don't know this. This is what the movement towards critical research is doing. By being critical of who and what stands in the centre, it is hoped that those who are on the periphery, in the margins, will get away from this unfortunate positioning. This happens with women being paid less than men and having less of the high status jobs. It happens with people of immigrant background who try to work in their new country at their real level of competence instead of just conforming to the status quo. It happens with the very young who have been labelled by adults as 'children', and whose agendas are adult determined.

My third point is that any knowledge exists only in its own time and its own place. The effect of this is that we must always have change if we are to keep up with time, and if we are going to acknowledge that where we are is more and more complex. This complexity is partly because of global space. Many people today are at home in more than one place. They speak more than one language, they travel a lot, they understand more than one culture. So it is quite problematic to talk about knowledge without seeing that (1) knowledge is constructed because of where you are; and that (2) maybe your head is not really into 2002, it's still back in the 1980s or earlier. Also with knowledge, we have to ask whose knowledge it is that counts. Is it the knowledge of a small child or a parent or the knowledge of a person with a big enough research grant to be writing books? And where do the teacher-carers come in?

So I have made three points as the basis of this talk. This first is that meaning is problematic, especially regarding language. The second is that power is what constructs people and institutions that dominate or colonize. The third is that knowledge is only because of time and space, and these always change even if we don't think so.

What I am doing now in my writings is partly linking these three points to documentation and reflections. My wish is to increase professionalism and make aware the need of dialogues and consciousness about theory in practice. This is seen as a tool in challenging and changing actions to improve practice and at the same time theorising actions, pedagogically and politically. My assumption is that reflections on knowledge may improve

practice of various kinds. I am doing this from perspectives that not only come from my twenty years of experience working in Norwegian *barnehager*. Added to this is my recent work through the Union of Education (a teacher union) for which I am a special consultant in a department of documentation and development, working especially with ECEC and the *barnehage* as part of the education system. I say this because I think we have to deal with who we are: as we teach, as we read, as we write, as we research and as we theorise.

Back to my main points, which are:

- Politics and power are constructing pedagogy and *barnehage*.
- Meaning and reflection is problematic, especially regarding signs and language.
- Knowledge and discourse are always changing because of time and space.

Taking these further I would say the following regarding contemporary discourses in ECEC in Norway. There are a number of shifts in what is happening.

Firstly, the profession is taking over its own knowledge. This means that knowledge is coming from the floor of the playroom upwards. This is quite different from having 'the knowledge' descending from those above, who quite often had no professional experience of working and playing with children. In this way we are less likely to listen to 'experts' coming in from outside. Rather we listen to our own experience, and to our own critical reflections of what is happening as practice and what is not.

All of this means that the profession itself, made of the people who work in the *barnehage*, is that professionalism itself is becoming empowered. One of the ways that this is happening is through more higher education: more people are writing about what they know. And through this writing they come to know more, and can talk about it more, and can do more. In my experience it is this that causes change within the profession. You can't just go on and on with more practice without becoming stale or burning out.

One of the outcomes of this is that people with professional experience and formal qualifications of working with and for the very young are gradually empowering the field of research, taking active research stances. At the same time a new generation of highly

educated practitioners is coming in (and the 'new generation' includes the people in their forties and fifties who have just finished a *Hovedfag i barnehagepedagogikk*).

In particular the battle is between those of us who are pedagogues/teachers and those who are not.

Historically, psychology, especially developmental psychology has been seen as the 'natural' leader of pedagogy, or even as a substitute for it. When sociology became more influential there was a slight reduction in developmental psychology's power. But cultural studies, a discipline set up in the early 1990s in English-speaking countries, has yet to have much impact on what happens with the young in so-called 'multi-cultural' settings. And pedagogy/education (and the related disciplines/fag in Higher Education for Early Childhood Education) should be making up its own mind about where it stands in relation to these, and where it stands on its own.

Linked to this is matter of how you do research, which should be matched to the kinds of knowledge you want to construct, and what you decide to reject.

Here an earlier approach to research methodology was a positivist one, based on the model of the sciences like physics and chemistry. Early research in education had to get particular findings. We had to be like detectives hunting for information as objectively as possible. We ourselves were positioned as the experts.

Next, in historical time, came interpretative research, where the researcher looked for 'the meaning', and words like phenomenology and hermeneutics came in. This is about the knowledge of the researcher looking for small moments of meaning. There is still an important place for this approach in today's research.

A third approach regards being critical. Here people taking up critical theories say that we must at all times be critical in our research of what we are doing ourselves, how we are positioning those we do the research with. Critical approaches go well with action research, where you don't do research 'on' people, you do it 'with' them. This kind of research is also useful as document analysis, where the researcher looks at everyday documents like what is

up on the parent's noticeboard, what children are drawing, and what curriculum documents say.

The most recent approach to social science inquiry is the poststructural or deconstructive approach. This is tricky if the people who read your writing don't know much about it, because it doesn't come from a psychology-way of working at all. It comes from cultural studies and from literary theory, and is about how meaning itself always shifts, depending on where you stand at the moment. With deconstructions you don't, as the researcher, become an expert, and neither do you get 'findings' that positivists will recognise as 'excellent research'. More and more though this approach is coming in, often usefully in combination with the critical.

The paragraph above tries to say how the knowledge you'll get will be different according to what approach to take up. The approach of reconceptualising early childhood education are questioning research that labels children, that categorises people's efforts or abilities, that makes the researcher the one who says what is happening, that normalizes. Instead cultures of reflections try to write up research so that people reading it or hearing it get new ideas for themselves. With this approach there is a pedagogical function in the act of researching, from the very start to the very end of a project or process.

The agenda is in this way a political one, in that postmodernists seek to challenge and change professionalism in ECEC. I might also be trying to do this through my work, which after all my writing is just an extension of.

What I am saying is that the shifts in teaching/research are happening together. Whole cultures of teacher/researchers are together making linked changes. It is very exciting to know that this is happening internationally, across languages and cultures. But it is not easy trying to change the systems of education.

This is why if you want to work differently you need to explain your position trying to build and find networks of people similarly positioned. I find going to international conferences keeps me up to date with what is happening, and lets me try out my ideas on people whose experiences in some ways match with mine. Also I am wanting as much as possible, everyday

language. I am wanting to de-mystify the research process; I am wanting to empower the practitioners. This then represents a challenge to established research bodies, writings and institutions.

As I said at the start of this talk, I see all things as political. I see all 'meaning' and language as problematic; and I think power must always be critiqued. Because of this we must widen up our boundaries, be open to new knowledges, in new times and new spaces. I would therefore call this talk of mine challenging and changing professionalism in Early Childhood Education. In this case we are the people who are making the changes, we are changing the past into another present and another future. How these changes will happen is up to us.

The word for this is 'agentic'. We become agents of change. In theory this is called agency: It means that people themselves take action. They don't wait for someone else to do things. Instead they just do what they know to do.

In postmodernism, for example, this is a much more empowering practice than simply hoping people will be socialized or follow a role model.

What I have just done with the word 'changing' is play like a poststructuralist. I have said that ECE is changing. But I have also said that it needs to, and implied that 'how to change' needs to be on our agenda. This reading of many readings, at the same time, is a poststructural reading practice. In poststructural theory nothing stays the same as it was; there are always other readings of texts and and other readings of events (episoder). Even the same person can understand things differently because of the discourse they decide to take up. (For example you can take up a discourse of Christianity. You can take up a discourse of fathering. You can take up a discourse of children in official documents.) If your agenda is a political one, you might want to be engaged as an agent of change, with a positive agenda for change. I am applying this to what the focus of research is, to what socially scientific theory is and to what research methodology might be.

At this point I want to tell a little story about positioning ECEC within a political context due to Starting Strong. I have chosen to call it:

Early Childhood Education and Care: Lifelong learning – the Case of Norway

In Norway, day-care institutions, kindergartens, and pre-schools are officially named barnehage. The barnehage is a pedagogical institution offering caring, playing, learning activities, and educational components for children in the age group one to five years. Historically barnehage was defined as a child welfare institution, under the Act of Social Welfare (1953) headed under the former Department of Social Welfare. Originally the barnehage was regulated as both a pedagogical and a social institution by Norway's first Act on Day Care Institutions in 1975. The Act linked the barnehage to the family, Christian values and the Norwegian State Church. The barnehage is regarded as a supplement to the home¹. The Act has undergone several revisions, and in 1995 it was stated that the pedagogical leaders of the barnehage should be certified pre-school teachers².

The Ministry of Children and Family Affairs is responsible for the legislation of Norwegian Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)³. The over-all responsibility for the barnehage includes organizing and development of economic funding, administrative management, policy development, supervision, juridical frames, and licensing.

The Ministry of Education and Research is responsible for administering and implementing the national educational policy and thereby providing the barnehage with qualified and authorized pre-school teachers.

Consequently, an essential challenge for the quality of the Norwegian system is the division of management between the two ministries according to Norway's vision on lifelong learning⁴ from "cradle to grave". In the professional and political debate on how to improve quality in lifelong learning the specific Norwegian model relates early childhood education to both the family and to schooling.

¹ In the text seen as the Norwegian social, welfare and educational framework for the barnehage.

² Pre-schoolteachers have a university degree with 3 years tertiary level training from a university college. However, there is a lack of educated staff, approximately about 15 %.

³ OECD (1998) Country note on ECEC in Norway. The term ECEC is referring to different family based, private and public day care institutions. Today about 40 % of the Norwegian pre-schools are run privately

⁴ The concept reflects the learner's needs, motivation, active involvement and that learning is life-important.

There is a debate within the field about transferring the overall responsibility for the barnehage from Ministry of Children and Family Affairs to the Ministry of Education and Research⁵. Recently the debate is focusing on children's development of cognitive skills and social abilities in a perspective of lifelong learning. At the same time discussing an overall view of the concept of playful learning enabling children coherent and meaningful transitions from barnehage to school⁶.

In a background report on lifelong learning in Norway to the OECD (1999), the approach is that lifelong learning is more of a perspective than a new educational system, it is system-wide, it embraces education and training needed by all in all phases of a life span. The agenda on lifelong learning is widely and politically accomplished, but not implemented in the Norwegian system.

The term and view lifelong learning from “cradle to grave” implies and discusses that motivation for learning needs to be instilled early on, and learning needs to continue beyond initial education and training. This addresses a debate regarding both formal and informal points of educational views, which includes a concept for all children irrespective of their ethnic, family, economic or social background.

The main principle in lifelong learning is to ensure children equal possibilities and options in pedagogical quality, within welfare programs and educational programs. In other words, in trying to develop a new way of thinking about early childhood education by combining the traditional school (formal) and the pre-school tradition (informal), named the best from both approaches, we might end up with something that is neither barnehage nor school.

Historically, the ideal for the barnehage was caring related to the “good” home. All institutions are supposed to work according to a national Framework Plan, a model which is

⁵ The former Minister of Children and Family Affairs stated in a White Paper ‘1999-2000’ that “the barnehage is the foundation for the educational system”, while the present Minister in a speech March 2002 states that “the barnehage is *not* a part of the educational system”.

⁶ The OECD rapport “Starting Strong” (2001) is pointing out eight key elements for a successful ECEC policy, paying attention and relating ECEC to a strong partnership with the formal education system

a regulation within the Act⁷. According to the debate on strengthening Norway's early childhood model the Framework Plan highlights five subject areas⁸: society, religion and ethics; aesthetic subjects; nature, technology and environment; language, literacy, and communication; physical activity and health. The plan leaves room for various interpretations of how the five subject areas should be understood and used in planning and how they should be evaluated.

The initiative of integrating barnehage into education in a perspective of lifelong learning creates various challenges and opportunities. Lifelong learning raises not only political but also professional questions. Early childhood is not only viewed as a preparation for the next stage of education but as a distinctive period of essential value where children are living out their lives, by caring, playing and learning. The intention of the Framework Plan is to secure a holistic development pointing out both experiences of the learners, contents and outcomes, and also securing the quality of the barnehage by defining issues of quality in a broader view, including caring, playing, learning. The Plan is addressing that the barnehage is supposed to be educational orientated through an annual plan, which is established in close co-operation with the staff and the parents involved.

The development of a national curriculum for the barnehage reflects society's awareness of the importance of the early years for lifelong learning. The Framework Plan points out intentions, reflects values and direct demands for educational work in the barnehage, which all point to the fact that the first official and structured learning environment the child meets is the barnehage. In this context, barnehage is being viewed as society's first institution to offer systematic lifelong learning, academically and socially. The Plan states: "The principle of lifelong learning is deeply seen as a moral request for lifelong self-renewal". In this sense lifelong learning is a problematic concept, because it can be interpreted both as a process and as a result of this processes. An understanding that lifelong learning is more a perspective than an educational system referring to both family and schooling, may actualise the question if early childhood should be dealt with by Ministry of Education and Research.

⁷ "Framework Plan for Day Care Institutions" was implemented in January 1996. The plan is curriculum based similar to curriculum in school.

⁸ The five subjects represent a wide area of learning. All children shall acquire experiences and knowledge and develop skills in these areas in everyday life, in play and social interaction. The plan points to the importance and impact of play, creativity, joy in all learning areas, both formally and informally.

Moreover, the Ministry of Education and Research has set down a committee to work out different alternatives for increasing quality in school. At the same time the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs has settled a three-year program to improve quality issues within the barnehage. It is a major challenge that the two ministries are working to develop quality in both sectors without co-ordinating the programs.

Norwegian authorities have been pursuing two strategies to improve learning opportunities for young children:

The first being a cash benefit option that makes it easier for parents to care for young children at home.

The second being that the authorities are seeking to provide a guarantee and the capacity for all parents and children to choose an institutional setting (ECEC).

The increasing political and professional debate deals with this twin strategy approach: Is this the best way to ensure both quality and learning opportunities for children? The cash benefit option links early childhood to family policy. The debate treats the paradoxical in paying parents to let the children out of a systematic educational and pedagogical context in order to provide care within the family⁹. An important and emerging debate is also how to finance the cash benefit option, providing full coverage and still work with overall quality plans related to the contents of the barnehage. In respect of these concerns my view is that a twin strategy do not satisfy the need of the children, their parents, and the pre-school teachers.

In various discussions focus is how to improve quality looking upon both barnehage and school as complementary arenas for learning. This in order to formalize and establish meaningful transitions from family to barnehage and school. Organizing both informal as well as formal fields of learning might improve quality and co-operation to satisfy the needs of the children, their parents and teachers in both barnehage and school.

⁹ OECD (2001) states that the positive results for the children may be meagre.

In Norway there are major challenges in funding the barnehage sector providing full coverage¹⁰. This is perhaps a result of a twin strategy and the fact that the cash benefit option still links ECEC to home and not to the educational system. This is mainly a political problem which is ideological and historically founded.

All these discussions tend to point out that early childhood should be dealt with under one department within a framework of lifelong learning. It is my view that a coherent and structured political management for the children creates significant possibilities for the whole field, related to promoting both social welfare and cognitive development. The main issue is concerned with ECEC in which lifelong learning occurs related to initial education and care under one department in the Ministry of Education and Research.

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¹⁰ There is an ongoing compromise in the Parliament about maximum prices, full access and individual rights for all children to choose barnehage. Individual rights may have an impact about the reality on lifelong learning.

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