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Identification of the close relations between social educators and 0 - 3-year-old citizens in a Danish day nursery

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Introduction

We need to go back to the autumn of 1997 to identify the background for this project. At that time, Elisabeth Cramer, head of the Rosenkilde day nursery in Slagelse, Denmark, contacted our research consultant at Hindholm social educator's college, Søren Hegstrup. Elisabeth had been reading my thesis about *'Kvalitet i daginstitutioner - en vurdering og diskussion af den institutionelle orden, samt dennes betydning for den relationelle kvalitets mulighed.'* (*'Quality in day care centres - an evaluation and discussion of the institutional order and its effects on the possibilities of relational quality'*) - Institut for Pædagogik, University of Copenhagen, June 1996. The staff at the day nursery had felt inspired by the thesis, and in their work practices recognised some of the institutional conflicts which my thesis had attempted to thematise and analyse from a theoretical point of view.

At the same time, the day nursery's staff were inspired by the ongoing debate about relationships between children and adults in modern day care centres, and wanted their internal work procedures to acquire an increased awareness of relationships, as well as creating more favourable conditions for the development of relationships between children and adults within the institution. Therefore, in January 1998 I asked the college for time to work as an advisor on an experimental research project at the Rosenkilde day nursery.

The project has now been running for a year. An excellent collaboration has been established between the day nursery and the social educator's college, building - *inter alia* - on a shared vision of, and interest in, creating the best possible conditions of life for small children in the institutional arena - as well as mutual confidence and respect. So far, the project has been scheduled to continue for another year with further time allocated for advisory services.

This report is therefore to be considered only as a preliminary mid-term report on a project which is still under implementation, and which is not expected to conclude until June 2000. The report contains descriptions of:

- the day nursery

- the advisory role

- the project

- the working method

- the project's theoretical framework

- a preliminary description of the course of the project

The Rosenkilde day nursery

The Rosenkilde day nursery is an independent institution running under collective agreements with the municipality of Slagelse. It was established in 1970 and has a nominal capacity of 32 children aged 0-3 years. The children are distributed between 3 group rooms for 10, 10, and 12 children respectively. The groups of children are age-integrated. The day nursery's staff includes one head, one deputy head, six social educators and three assistants.

The nursery's mission statement emphasises the following:

- In the relations with the children, our aim is to create an atmosphere of security where the staff ensure that the needs and development of the individual child, as well as those of the group, are cared and catered for
- Regular, familiar rituals and routines create a sense of security among children. We therefore emphasise the importance of performing these familiar routines every day, such as morning assemblies in the group rooms, lunch, sleeping time - rituals linked to these activities, etc.
- The day nursery should be a place where the pedagogical staff base their work on the children's requirements, always leaving room for spontaneity.
- We attach great importance to the ideas that emerge spontaneously when the children are playing, or as a result of other activities, and we are happy to let such ideas prevail over planned activities.
- Pedagogical work should strengthen the children's self-perception and belief in themselves.
- All staff members have the ambition of developing professionally, so that we can have an open-minded attitude towards both the children and the other members of the staff.

The above are excerpts from a large, coherent mission statement which are highlighted here to illustrate the link between some of the institution's overall objectives and the contents and idea of the research project.

The following breakdown of a working day at the day nursery provides an impression of the institution's everyday life:

6.00 - 8.00	Reception of the children in one of the group rooms
6.45 - 7.30	Breakfast served until 7.30
8.00	The children are distributed between the group rooms
9.00	Assembly (where the children are served milk)
9.30 - 11.00	Activities
11.00 -	Lunch
12.30 - 15.00:	In this period, the children can get an after-lunch nap, depending on each child's needs
14.45-	Afternoon meal: fruit, rolls, porridge, etc.
16.00-	All the children are gathered in one group room
19.00-	The institution closes

The staff have regular breaks, such as when the children are sleeping.

The role of the advisor - the institution and the co-operation

Previously there would have been an advisor, and there would have been an institution: representatives of two different worlds with different points of departure. Meetings, discussions and dialogue are very important elements in coming together, and mutual understanding develops slowly. It takes time to hear each other out, and the meeting of different opinions and understandings requires time and space. Co-operation takes time, as do the initial preparations. Both are preconditions which make possible the existence of the research project, because the project is all about creating changes and variations in the perception of the pedagogical practices; in one's perception of oneself; in the perception of the child; in the perception of what is meaningful to a child and in the perception of colleagues, etc.

The role of the advisor should not be that of a superior, admonitory, abstract or academic figure; rather it should be one in which the advisor makes himself/herself available as a reflecting individual, bringing an amount of life experience, knowledge and insight along which can be put at the institution's disposal, in a genuine co-operation.

The advisor has been invited to visit the institution and its social educators, who possess a great deal of knowledge and experience through their everyday practices. The social educators perform very demanding work, which requires many professional and personal skills and qualifications. They are in a position to know what a child regards as a good and meaningful day. In all their practical, daily pedagogical work they commit themselves, their creativity, practical knowledge and skills to cater as best they can for the small child and its need to grow, be understood and recognised as an individual in their own right.

However, not all pedagogical intentions work well in practice. Often, the pedagogical efforts and intentions become mixed with other things, such as habitual propensities and systemic rationality, which can be described as unconscious habits - routine, mechanical or instrumental propensities which may be regarded as being related to aspects of time, power, efficiency and usefulness.

This is not because social educators are insufficiently skilled, but rather because they are subject to certain structural phenomena in their daily work. For example, in the institutional arena, pedagogical work is subject to several mutually conflicting forces which include both closeness, empathy, relationships, warmth, authenticity, *joie-de-vivre*, accommodating children's need for increased liberty of action, softening of authorities, but at the same time equally includes aspects of control, power, manipulation and discipline. Certain types of logic emerge in the everyday structures, habits, routines and regulations in the group rooms and within the institution itself. One could therefore say that the culture of the institution reflects the ambiguity which is ultimately related to the conflicts in modern society.

The institutional conflicts are not constant: they are conditions that may be changed and developed. But this requires an increased amount of attention, analysis and dialogue about the existing daily practices. Only through critical reflection of one's own practices, allowing invisible routines and habits to be revealed, can one set up border-transcending learning processes and thus make it possible to change established practices.

It could thus be argued that one of the skills needed by today's social educators is that of reflection, aimed at the conflicts to which they, their colleagues and the children are all subjected.

Project description

During my initial visits to the institution in September and October 1998, we exchanged views on the research work. The pivotal element for the staff was closeness and nearness, 'how we talk to and with the children', and the relations between adults and children.

At a staff meeting on 29 October 1998, we agreed on a preliminary formulation of the actual project description, and on how to start up the work process. My own role included the task of formulating in writing what I felt had been expressed at the staff meetings, sending this to the staff, and subsequently receiving their feedback, either person-to-person or via the phone, in order to set this into written agreements which were clear for all to read. We agreed that the research process should alternate between gathering experience, processing experience and making presentations of a more theoretical nature to help everybody reflect upon and analyse the practices, and the change of practices. We agreed that data on experience should be gathered by all members of staff, recording in writing their daily work experiences relating to situations of practice with:

- Good relationships between children and staff
- Situations or interactions where the relationship is lost or does not exist
- Conditions which have caused wonder or raised concern.

(The concepts used in this work, relationships and interactions, will be explained later)
The staff asked me to create two standard forms to simplify the recording of experiences from their daily work. These forms focused on the points above, and had ample space for describing and recording different anything of relevance.

We agreed that it was important to include descriptions of the situation or context of the experience recorded, such as:
- The time of day (lunchtime, in the wardrobe dressing, etc.).
- The number of children/staff present.
- Possibly, what had taken place before the experience (the child had just arrived, I had just had my break, etc.).
- Other aspects considered important for the situational context.

The reason for this was to investigate the emergence of relationships/interactions in relation to space, time, habits, principles and attitudes.

During the month of December the final project description was formulated, resulting in the following statement:

Experimental research project implemented in collaboration between the Rosenkilde day nursery, Slagelse, and Sisse Brendstrup of the Hindholm social educator's college

The content of the project
The central focus of the research work is the institution's 'care-giving culture', i.e. relationships, social exchanges, closeness, warmth, empathy, or the lack of these aspects in the everyday practices of the institution.

- The research project aims to increase the awareness of our own practices and to change and develop practices towards a care-giving culture which supports the emergence of closeness and empathy between the social educator and the child in everyday life.
- The research work will be based on the everyday practices of the staff and the description of their own work experiences.
- The purpose of gathering experience in this way is to outline the institution's culture, routines, habits and regulations (expressly formulated or implied), the so-called *institutional habitus* - both the things that we are aware of and the things that we are not consciously aware of.

Thus, the research work will take place in the cultural context constituted by the institution, where we will together try to establish critical, reflecting learning processes through observation and gathering of experience, through looking at ourselves (both our strong and weak points) and through thematising, visualising and analysing the institution's overall care-giving culture.

The project's working method

It was decided to implement the project in 5 stages:
- Gathering of experience
- Processing of experience - description of the institution's care-giving culture
- Theoretical presentations/feedback to thematise and review practices
- Formulation of the objectives for the developments and changes in the institution
- Evaluation stage

Thus, the research process will alternate between the gathering of experience and its processing, presentations of a more theoretical nature to review practices, and a review of changes and developments of the practices.

The starting point for the gathering of experience is the staff's own written material, focusing on:
- good relationships between the children and staff
- situations where the relationship is lost
- the situational contexts of the experiences recorded and the time of day at which they took place (e.g. lunch, in the wardrobe, how many adults/children were present, what had taken place before the experience, etc.).

We also intend to use video recordings of the educators' practices and actions with the children as a method of gathering experience, and afterwards review the hidden aspects revealed to us by this medium and hopefully turn them into valuable experience.
In processing the experience we shall take an overall view of the patterns of the care-giving culture which appear in the institution.

The theoretical presentations will aim to thematise the issues of the care-giving culture, such as: 'What are the characteristics of a relationship?' 'What are the conditions for the existence of closeness and relationships in the institutional context?' 'Why is it that the desired conditions, enabling care-giving and closeness, are not always present?' 'What can we do to improve our ability to "see" the children and become more aware of closeness and care-giving in everyday working life?' 'How can we move towards better pedagogical practices where closeness and warm relationships can become visible elements of everyday life?'

Following the experience-gathering stage, staff will formulate concrete objectives for developments and changes that should take place within the institution. Which aspects have we become aware of? Which conditions do we all want to change to make the social educator's relational care-giving competence more visible in the everyday practices of the institution?

The project will conclude with an evaluation stage to find out which notable changes have actually taken place. Parents will continuously be kept informed about the project, and the idea is to involve them directly in project stages 4 and 5, to ensure that parents' wishes for development and change are expressed and made visible. Within the day nursery we have so far been working with the first 3 stages of the project: the gathering of experience, the processing of experience and theoretical presentations to thematise and analyse practices. Stage 4 is taking place as part of the ongoing discussion and change process, and may differ from one group room and from one educator to the other. So far this has only sporadically led to clear and unambiguous objectives for change in relation to the entire institution.

Video recording of the pedagogical practices starts in autumn 1999. Some social educators, but not all, have a positive attitude towards making practices visible through video recordings.

Working processes until now

1. September - October - November 1998:
    Meetings with the institution, during which experience and expectations on the project were discussed, formulated and concretised.

2. January 1999:
    Introduction of different theoretical/practical concepts to clarify different parts of the project and put them into perspective.
    *   Intentional action, structural conditions, and the relational aspects of the pedagogical practices
    *   Relationships - Interactions (Winnicott 1990, Dencik 1988)
        What is characteristic of a relationship? What are the conditions for the existence of closeness and relationships in the institutional context, etc?

3. February - March 1999:

- Staff record their 'experiences from their everyday work' in written descriptions which are passed to Sisse (the advisor in this context).
- Meetings with each group room's staff and common discussion on the processes of 'increased attention, recording, analysis and dialogue, changes'.
- The advisor highlights themes which appear repeatedly in the descriptions of everyday experiences given by the group room's staff.
- Discussion.
- Putting the material in perspective.

4. April 1999: Pedagogical Review Day
On this day, the entire institution follows up on issues which have been brought to our attention at the group room meetings, including the routines and habits we have identified. New concepts of work are introduced: recognising relationships, non-recognising relationships, and the defining power of adults (B. Bae 1996, 1992).

Figure 1: 'Care-giving culture in the day nursery' (Rosenkilde Day Nursery in Slagelse and Hindholm National Institute of Social Education)

Description of the research project: The institution's care-giving culture – relationships, social exchanges, closeness, warmth, empathy or lack of these	
Everyday practice of staff Description of their own experiences from everyday work	Preparation for development and change in practices Analysis and reflection on changes in practices; Increased awareness emerges and exists in parallel with the observation, description and 'revelation' of practices
Gathering of experience and processing Care-giving culture is 'revealed' by each group room individually and by the whole institution through: • Routines, habits, *institutional habitus*, regulations, norms, structure, etc. (profile of action) • Increased awareness of own practices.	
The institution is reviewed Practices are evaluated and discussed in relation to their possible contexts.	
Suggestions for change (new objectives) Suggestions for changing and developing the institution's practices/structure/schedules/ physical framework, etc.	Concrete research work Processes of change
Concrete changes and improvements of practices	

Notions of possible changes in the institution or changes which have already taken place are discussed and concretised. It has been agreed to prepare new standard forms for recording 'experiences from everyday work', which include recognising and non-recognising relationships. Figure 1 shows a table with an outline of the project course:

Theoretical inspiration

Even though we often know what the proper and appropriate pedagogical action is to take, actual living practices often turn out to be full of complex and tricky conflicts. In an attempt at describing practices from a conceptual point of view I have started by suggesting and introducing two working concepts which may be used in the discussion of the institution's care-giving culture: relationships and interactions[1].

I have defined relationships as follows:

- Emotive/emotional
- A two-way process.
- The special, unique, trusting bonds you create and are a part of.
- Being present, close, listening
- Should be related to an 'attentive competence'
- Being able to demonstrate empathy, to 'accommodate', to 'see' the child.
- Primarily something which cannot be seen or heard but rather felt.
- Social exchange and 'absorption'
- Meaningful interpretation of sensing/meaningful exchange with the world.
- Awareness of the importance which the experience may have

The formulation of the above definition was largely inspired by D.W. Winnicott (1990). Winnicott is an object relations theorist, focusing on the interaction between the individual and the 'significant other person'. In his description of the child's development he emphasises its interaction with its surroundings and their possibilities of supporting the child in its development. Inspired by, amongst others, the concepts of holding of Winnicott, handling, the reflective role of the surroundings, the potential arena, spaciousness, being able to 'see' a child (in the psychological sense), I have developed the above definitions of relationships.

I have defined interactions as follows:

- Consisting of brief admonitions, instructions, and reprimands
- Primarily a one-way process
- Where one sees but does not actively notice 'the other person'
- Lack of registration of the child's psychological presence or view of the experience.
- Countless interactions, brief, in the form of a few words (admonitions - 'Don't run in the hallway,' etc. or direct physical assistance - tying shoelaces, zipping a zipper, wiping after stools, wiping the nose, etc.)

- Formal, mechanical, instrumental
- Preoccupied by 'something else'. Attention, awareness often distracted

Often linked to:
- Time structure (regular daily structure)
- Regulations, routines, habits
- Rituals of structure and order

Here the definition of interactions should be seen in conjunction with the overall theoretical sources of inspiration for the project, Dencik (1988) and Ehn (1983). Both authors are operating within an analytical frame of reference, where the acts of the social educator are seen as embedded in historical, cultural and societal contexts. Ehn calls his research method a cultural analytical method, and Dencik refers to his research perspective as analytical interaction. Ehn and Dencik both analyse day care centres from an institution-critical point of view, which may be linked to civilisation-criticism (Aries 1982, Elias 1989, Frykman and Løfgren 1979). The theoretical basis of their research can be found in the critical theory of the Frankfurt school, as represented by Adorno, Horkheimer and Habermas - later followed by Negt, Kluge and Ziehe. Critical theory can be described as a liberating science rooted in Marxism and psychoanalysis.

Ehn's cultural analysis does not deal with what is good for the children or how everyday procedures should be adapted to support the child's development. His approach is not normative, but instead operates at a symbolic level, where the day care institution is described from a cultural perspective - i.e. as a pattern of symbols, concepts, principles, rituals and ideas (such as 'a striving towards order and a struggle against chaos').

Dencik et al (1988) studied the interactions between children and staff in different Swedish institutions. Through observation the researchers reached the conclusion that children and staff in general had only limited contact with each other throughout the day. As a general rule this contact was of a short duration in the form of a few words, brief reprimands or direct physical assistance. The contact was described as predominantly characterised by supervision, reprimanding, correction, reminding and practical assistance. Dencik's interaction analysis offered support for my concept of interactions in the day care institution. However, I believe that the 'mechanical care-giving', discipline and control cannot be the only theoretical frame of reflection in relation to given day care institution practices (which would damage both the children and the educators). The concept of relationships with closeness and warmth should be added as another theoretical frame of reflection, as we must presume that everyday life can also be described as containing moments of meaningful relationships with available adults who put themselves at the child's disposal.

With these two concepts of relationships and of interactions we may attempt to capture the *conflicting conditions in the day care institution.* It is not possible to remove the *ambiguity*, but at least we can detect it, describe it, recognise it, cry or laugh at it, and (possibly) *through reflecting learning processes attempt to strengthen the life-world perspective and the efforts towards care-giving..*

Based on the theoretical concepts of interactions and relationships, the day nursery staff recorded experiences from their everyday work, which, by and large, could be categorised

under either of these concepts. The purpose was to clarify when, how, and why either of these forms of communication appears in day-to-day work, in an attempt to clarify, reflect upon and subsequently develop appropriate practices.

Later in the research project we worked with the concepts of the Norwegian psychologist Berit Bae, about adults' power in defining, and the recognising or not recognising forms of communication. By doing so, we attempted to expand and vary our concept of relationships, attempting to penetrate deeper into the different nuances of everyday life at the institution, in order to be able (from a different, yet coherent perspective of relationships) to capture the events, for better or for worse, which take place between the child and the adult - in the form of either recognition or lack of recognition.

Bae presents a number of characteristics of the recognising form of communication (cf., *inter alia*, Social Kritik no. 47 - 96). Bae was in turn inspired by Løvie Schibbye's dialectic theory of relationships, and has attempted to apply his concepts to pedagogical practices in day care institutions (Cf. 'Det interessante i det alminnelige', Bae 1996). The recognising form of communication is linked to the adult's relationship with the child, through understanding, acknowledgement, openness and self-reflection.

Understanding
To attempt to understand the child's intention and experience from the child's own perspective. To understand the intention and experience of oneself and the situation. This makes it possible for the adult to distinguish between his or her experience of the situation and that of the child.

Acknowledgement
Through an 'acknowledging' communication based on listening, the child realises that it has a right to have its own experience, its own thoughts and its own emotions. In order to listen we must give up the idea of 'controlling the other person'.

Openness
Might best be described as being 'open' towards what occupies the other person and having a willingness to follow the child's lead and intentions rather than using one's defining power to turn the communication towards what the adult believes is important.

Self-reflection and delimitation
Is being able to distinguish between what takes place within oneself and what takes place in others and to distinguish between one's own and others' perception of the situation.
Using these different concepts as a frame of reflection I have attempted to make it possible for everybody involved in the research project to enter a theoretical hall of mirrors, placing different concepts at our disposal in an attempt to clarify the *actions* which are part of reality - and which are often more or less hidden or invisible in everyday practices, routines, habits and attempts at self-understanding.

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