

Curriculum in preschool Adjustment or a possible liberation?

Stig Broström Institut for Uddannelse og Pædagogik (DPU), Aarhus, Denmark

Abstract: In early childhood education and care there has been a tendency in recent years to narrow down the educational practice to an introduction to school with a strong emphasis on literacy and math. It is essential that early childhood education and care researchers and practitioners analyse and reflect on this tendency and consider developing an alternative approach: critical early childhood education. On the basis of a critical theory of society, a theory of recognition (Honneth, 1995), a Bildung oriented critical-constructive Didaktik^a (Klafki, 1995, 1998) and various childhood approaches (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2001, 2007), this article will present an outline of critical preschool education.

Keywords: Educational standardization; Capitalism critique; Critical educational practice

E-mail: stbr@dpu.dk

Peer-reviewed article: Sent to reviewers March 2012, Accepted June 2012, Preprinted 18 October 2012

a. The German term Didaktik is not the equivalent of the English term didactics. The concept of Didaktik goes beyond both didactics and the term curriculum by focusing on both democratic aims and content with a liberation perspective. A theoretical discussion on this issue is elaborated in Hopmann & Riquarts (1995).

AIMS AND METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The study investigates the role of public management in early childhood education and care and outlines an autonomous and critical pedagogy that goes beyond the increasing political management. The ambition is not to develop a new theory, but to improve existing theories and discourses in new combinations in order to create a possible theoretical foundation for such a critical approach.

The methodology used to structure this theoretical piece of work is a logical step-by-step description starting with the problem: the fact that early childhood education and care is increasingly focusing on adjustment to school, using narrow goals and objectives, pre-programmed methods and tests. In short, early childhood education seems to be becoming increasingly school oriented (Norwegian: 'skolsk'; Danish: 'skolificeret'). This problem is challenged by a

number of theoretical contributions and ideas about critical preschool education, which may form the basis for a new point of departure. To conclude, I discuss the sustainability of this solution.

BACKGROUND AND CURRENT TRENDS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE – THE PROBLEM

In the OECD papers *Starting Strong*, two distinct approaches to early childhood education and care are identified (OECD, 2001, 2006): the early education approach and the social pedagogy approach. The early education approach generally results in a more centralizing and academic strategy towards curriculum, content and methodology, while the social pedagogy tradition remains more local, child-centred and holistic. The Nordic preschool belongs to the social

pedagogy understanding and has not previously been described by concepts like teaching, learning and curriculum but rather by concepts like care, relation, activity and development.

Nordic preschool educators generally have a strong conviction that early childhood education should be something quite different from formal education at school. Nordic early childhood education has its roots in the theories of Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Froebel and was influenced and reformulated by a critical progressive wave in the early 20th century. Together, these approaches provide a background that embraces concepts such as play, child-centeredness, self-directed activity, self-development and holistic development (Broström, 2003).

In such a child-oriented approach there is a risk of the preschool affording the child so much freedom that learning and development may be compromised in some way. For that reason the Nordic model was discussed and reformed during the last decades of the 20th century in order to ensure equal opportunities and a comprehensive development for all children.

Consequently, the Nordic countries, like most of the European countries, have devised and implemented preschool curricula (Broström & Wagner, 2003). Since the birth of the Danish curriculum in 2004 (Socialministeriet, 2004) an increasing number of management tools have been implemented, such as educational standards, language tests, quality rapports and in 2011, evaluation of the educational activities. We are thus seeing a reformulation and streamlining of early childhood education and care (Finansministeriet, 2009).

The tendency towards narrowing down educational practice and reducing preschool to an introduction to school with strong emphasis on literacy and math is currently seen in most modern neo-liberal countries.

Thus early childhood education and care is under pressure, as is expressed in, for example, the Lisbon Treaty (2000). In *Starting Strong 2* (OECD, 2006), which is based on Eurostat (2000), it is documented that a number of countries

... in general introduce structured learning areas to young children from the ages of 4 to 6 years. The preferred domains of knowledge proposed are: nature and the environment; emergent literacy and numeracy; general knowledge; scientific concepts and reasoning.

The learning areas that receive most focus in official curricula are emergent literacy and numeracy.

The educational changes are based on *economic* interests, and the relevant political statements have a great impact on national initiatives involving distinct formulations of goals and objectives that are closely connected to a number of simplified methods connected with pre-described tests. So in many European countries including Denmark, the following tendencies can be observed:

- an increasing use of standards and manuals
- a use of narrow intermediate aims and indicators to measure children's achievements
- a variety of evaluation and test methods
- the implementation of quality reports, which make preschool teachers and day care professionals responsible for their work (so-called accountability)

Though documents like *Starting Strong 2* (OECD, 2006) warn against such a narrowing of the notion of early childhood care and education, we see an emerging tendency to focus on "readiness for school", learning standards and the use of narrow goals and objectives followed by tests. So there is a clear risk of a dominating influence from school, which can lead to the implementation of fast and effective subject learning and the use of methods based on evidence, the so-called "what works".

This meets resistance and critique from preschool teachers, researchers and educational associations, among others the World Organization for Early Childhood Education, OMEP (Organisation Mondiale pour l'Éducation Préscolaire), which passed a resolution in Gothenburg in 2011 on children's right and joy to learn through play:

Today, because of political and financial problems, most governments are overemphasizing the swift development of literacy and numeracy skills for our children when they start school. This results in dramatically restricting the holistic approach to early childhood education. This situation is destroying the basis and the sense of early childhood education. This results in the loss of crucial values, creativity, imagination, openmindedness, expressive arts, thus deeply affecting the right and

the joy to learn through play. A continuing boosting of such tendencies will colonize the soul of the early childhood education and care tradition, and for that reason we have to reconstruct a critical early childhood education. (OMEP, 2011)

The above resolution expresses a general concern about changes in early childhood education and care that involve implementing school oriented activities in early years. As an alternative the organization calls for a critical approach. The term 'critical early childhood education' is relatively open, but refers to a number of critical approaches, including critical theory, which was formulated by the so-called Frankfurt School or Institute for Social Research and which aims at liberating people from societal compulsion and suppression. Freire (1971, 1972) and Giroux (1987, 1988, 1997, 2000) belong to the second generation of the Frankfurt School and have strong influence on educational theory and practice.

On the basis of the above description, the problem can be stated as follows: the increasing management and political control of preschools is resulting in adult initiated activities focused on a narrow preparation for school with less space for activities instigated by children themselves, like play and other spontaneous activities. A consequence of this efficiency is a limitation of both children's and preschool teachers' influence, which Biesta (2007, 2011) calls a democratic deficit.

A LEGITIMATE BASIS FOR A DEMOCRATIC AND CRITICAL PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

A call for critical early childhood education and care that emphasizes democracy, children's participation and influence in no way contradicts the general aims of the overall political documents. While preschools are forced to make their practice more effective and strive to develop narrow skills and competencies, primarily language skills, political rhetoric calls for a democratic dimension. Thus although efforts to create an effective preschool education are dominant there is a legitimate basis for creating a democratic and critical preschool education. Such a democratic dimension is emphasized in the aims for children's learning and development in all of the Nordic countries, including the Danish preschool:

Day care (preschool/børnehave) must give children the opportunity to participate in decision making and joint responsibility and to develop an understanding of democracy, and contribute to children's autonomy and abilities to participate in binding social communities, (Retsinformation, 2007). [Authors translation].

However, there are many ways to define and understand the term democracy and to draw consequences for education in the early years. In order to meet the challenge (or at least confront the problem) of early schooling with a narrow focus on literacy and numeracy two early childhood education and care approaches will be presented: on the one hand, a 'German Bildung oriented approach', expressed by the German scholar Wolfgang Klafki, (1996, 1998) and implemented in a Danish context by Broström (2004, 2006a, 2006b), and on the other hand, a preschool democratic practice and theory based on various versions of 'childhood psychology and sociology', expressed by Dahlberg, Moss & Pence (2007), Taguchi (2010), and implemented in a Danish context by Anders Skriver Jensen (2012). On this basis I will introduce a draft of critical preschool education.

A CRITICAL THEORY OF SOCIETY

Does such a critical approach have any chance of surviving? According to Francis Fukuyama (1992), the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration or demise of Soviet communism demonstrate *the end of History* and the ultimate triumph of Western liberal democracy and the unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism. Fukuyama is right as regards the two historical occurrences, but the myth of the 'end of history' is a false form of universalism (Giroux, 2000, p. 40; McLaren, 1999). Though consumerism seems to wipe out political involvement, we also see counter-offensives and a critical counterbalance. But modern capitalism produces an ideology of neo-liberalism that describes the market and the representative democracy as healthy and objective truths. Therefore there is a need for modern criticism of capitalism that emphasizes the democratic dimension.

The American professor Michael Hardt and the Italian philosopher Antonio Negri express a critical analysis of modern capitalism (Hardt &

Negri, 2006, 2000) and call for a global direct democracy, which among other things comprises a political claim for *the right to citizenship of the world* (Hardt & Negri, 2000). This means seeing oneself as a political subject, a human being who takes responsibility and participates in finding solutions to local and global problems. In agreement with the United Nations *Convention of the Rights of the Child*, children must be active participants and their cooperation must characterize the daily life in preschool (United Nations, 1989).

A fulfilment of this claim implies that citizens are recognized for their actions. Thus individuals and groups of people are active subjects. They will be listened to, taken seriously, and they will have influence; in other words, they will be recognized.

Recognition

According to the German philosopher Axel Honneth (1995), human beings have an anthropological and ontological need for recognition. Without recognition the individual is not able to develop a personal identity. Recognition is a precondition for individuals' self-realization and for a good life. For that reason a democratic society has to offer its citizens a fundamental recognition, which is expressed via three spheres and forms of recognition: love, rights and solidarity (Honneth, 1995).

In the *private sphere*, symmetrical relations such as *love* and friendship provide basic self-confidence, a kind of emotional recognition. Love is a sphere of recognition and love between subjects is experienced as a mutual emotional need. In early childhood education and care attachment theories expressed by, for example, Bowlby (1988) and Stern (1985) have been used to elaborate this dimension. Also the Norwegian scholar Berit Bae (2005) has elaborated and applied the concept of recognition to preschool practice. Emotional recognition leads to secure attachment, basic confidence and with that, *physical integrity*.

In the *sphere of legal relations*, individuals use their *legal universal rights*, for example, freedom of expression. Experiencing oneself as an active member of society, a recognized autonomous acting subject, results in *self-respect* and self-esteem. In preschool this is seen when the child uses his legal rights to be seen and heard, to participate and to influence, as promised in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* of the

United Nations (1989). When such rights are realized the individual gains *social integrity*.

In the *sphere of community of values*, in cultural, political and working communities, individuals strive to become integrated members of a shared solidarity. When the subject is recognized as a special person, *self-esteem* will develop. In preschool such communities are seen in children's play, in their mutual relations and in their shared exploration of the world. Here children get a form of '*honour*' *dignity* (Honneth, 1995, p. 129). However, if a child is expelled from the community, if he repeatedly hears "you are not allowed to take part", he will lose his self-esteem.

Adults and children have a fundamental right to and need for recognition on all three levels: emotional, legal and social. If individuals do not experience recognition, they will not get emotional attention, cognitive respect and social esteem and there will be a risk that they will lose a positive self-relation.

Adults in society and children in preschool strive for such recognition. However, does the modern liberal democratic society offer citizens recognition on all three levels? The answer is yes and no. On a formal and rhetorical level, through the support of family life, the convention on human rights and the social idea of giving people places to meet, society provides the basis for achieving all three forms of recognition. However, in all spheres we see a great deal of disrespect. In primary relations we see superficial relationships and at worst, abuse and rape. In terms of legal relations, it is not only individuals who experience disrespect in the form of the loss of civil rights; whole groups of people are discriminated, for example, people with other ethnic backgrounds than the majority. Also in the community of values, moral injustices emerge through daily insults and lack of integration; we see a continuum from not being greeted to being expelled from the community.

When citizens in society and preschool do not experience recognition one has to devise an alternative practice to gain recognition. Some of these resistance cultures live their own life, while others are continuously in opposition to society, sometimes erupting into violent actions.

Thus everyday life in preschool has to fulfil children's needs for all three types of recognition. Thus the individual child must be involved in symmetrical relations to preschool teachers and other children, he also needs to act as an ac-

tive subject, to get positive feedback from the other children and finally, to be an accepted member of the group in which he plays an important role; in other words, he cannot only be a tolerated member of the children's community.

A fight for democratic meeting places

A possible basis for recognition is a society that includes citizens, is open to participation and gives citizens a voice; in short, a democratic society that provides *democratic meeting places*. Although citizens in Western democracies have the freedom to meet and to engage in dialogues, criticism and collective actions, for most people, active participation as a political subject takes place in the form of an active consumer (McChensky, in Giroux, 2000).

However, a democracy does not primarily need consumers but political subjects who focus on changes that benefit the community (Giroux, 1988). The individual, legal and social recognitions have the very best possibilities of being realized when citizens have many democratic meeting places where they can exchange feelings and ideas and elaborate possible changes, thus exercising their right of citizenship in the world (Hard and Negri, 2000).

A central part of a critical preschool education is to optimise and democratize children's everyday lives, to see preschool as a democratic meeting place. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2007) define a meeting place as a place where the active citizen can practise democracy via participation in collective actions. In the German born American social philosopher Hanna Arendt's words, a democratic meeting place is:

A concrete set of learning conditions where people come together to speak, to dialogue, to share their stories, and to struggle together within social relations that strengthen rather than weaken the possibility for active citizenship (Arendt in Giroux, 1997, p. 106)

The struggle for and practice of democracy does not start in adulthood, but must be expressed already in the early years. Early childhood education must not only be a question of how to learn most effectively and how to make up an effective transition to school in order to achieve school readiness. With reference Henry Giroux:

Education should not only empower students by giving them the knowledge and skills they

need to be able to function in the larger society as critical agents, but also educate them for the transformative action in the interest of creating a truly democratic society (Giroux, 1988, xxxiii).

Thus early childhood education and care must also be seen as a tool in the struggle for a radical democracy. Life in preschool is characterized by activities that contain elements of democracy. For example, when children plan their games they have dialogues, they listen to each other, they reach a compromise with each other and they create mutual goal directed actions. In some respects their communication is in agreement with the idea of the theory of communicative action of the German critical philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1984, 1987). For example, because the children really want to play they often reach compromises and make use of a non-controlling communication and strive to let the best argument count.

The general societal understanding described above paves the way for the formulation of a possible critical preschool education.

A FUTURE EDUCATIONAL APPROACH

There are various ways to transform the big ideal of democracy into everyday life in preschool. However, a German Bildung oriented approach (Klafki, 1995, 1998) points out two necessary dimensions and tasks in order to go beyond a traditional adjustment. The first is reflecting on the educational aims to formulate the long perspective: future people in future society, or what the German tradition calls the Bildung ideal (Klafki, 1996). This implies an endeavour to bring democracy and participation to the forefront in daily life. The second is formulating aspects of an educational content that is in close connection with the overall aims; in other words, the involvement of so-called critical themes.

A democratic Bildung ideal

According to the first dimension, the aims or *the Bildung ideal*, it is not difficult to create a legitimating basis for a critical and emancipatory education. In the Lisbon Treaty (2000) eight key competencies for lifelong learning are expressed, and social and civic competencies are mentioned in order to "equip individuals to engage in active and democratic participation". This is in

agreement with the Nordic countries, where democracy is seen as a central value and ability children need to be familiar with.

The aims emphasize participation, action and democracy and provide a distinction from adjustment and a foundation to legitimate a political transformative education. Moreover, the aims can be interpreted to see children as thoughtful active participants in a democratic process and not only as well-adjusted onlookers. In practice preschool teachers listen to the children, challenge them to reflect and to express their thoughts and actions and to take initiatives themselves. This is exactly what is mentioned in the United Nations *Conventions on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989). First and foremost, democracy is characterized by people's possibility to participate in social actions.

Bildung and education for democracy go beyond the actual situation; they are oriented towards the future and have a global perspective. A democratic person is a political subject with knowledge and skills and most importantly, with a desire to make use of these in a transformative practice. A democratic person defined in this way fits into the concept of action competence (Schnack, 2003). The critical dimension is apparent in action competence as the individual uses his knowledge for "participation in decision making and joint responsibility" as it is formulated in the Danish act.

Wolfgang Klafki's (1996, 1995) approach, "critical-constructive Didaktik", defines the critical dimension:

This adjective applies to an interest in knowledge insofar as the concept of Didaktik is oriented to the goal of guiding all children and adolescents to greater capacity for self-determination, co-determination and solidarity (Klafki, 1995, p. 191)

Like Klafki (1995, p. 192) I admit that democratic society today in many regards (in spite of public aims and goals) prevents real democratic education in school and pre-school. For example, the growing interest in and requirement of testing children's knowledge and skills is an obstacle. The concept 'constructive' signals that - in spite of hindrances from the surroundings and also the fact that young children need to appropriate the culture before real critical thinking and action can be expressed - the teacher has to "suggest models for possible practice, to pro-

duce well-founded concepts for reformed or reforming practice, for human, democratic school and instruction (Klafki, 1995, p. 192)."

Elsewhere (Broström, 2006a, 2006b) I have elaborated and related the concept of Bildung and Critical-Constructive Didaktik to preschool education. However, from my point of view the term Bildung can be defined through the following three criteria, which at the same time are concordant with the tradition of early childhood education and care: 1) Children's own activity, and dialogue with each other; 2) A feeling of obligation and commitment; and 3) Participation, action and democracy.

The educational content

The second dimension and task necessary to go beyond traditional adjustment is the formulation of a 'critical' content of the described Bildung ideal. Thus the preschool teacher has to reflect the educational content. As mentioned, a "critical-constructive Didaktik" necessitates the formulation of topics, problems and categories that give children necessary knowledge and at the same time let them learn how to handle everyday life here and now and society in the long term. For this purpose, Klafki's approach to category Bildung can be used as a starting point (Klafki, 1998). According to this approach, preschool teachers and children have to select knowledge and categories through which the world will become available to the children and at the same time, the children will become available to the world. For that reason Klafki (1998) uses the term double opening. The preschool teacher's selection of such categories is pivotal, as is also seen in Paulo Freire's (1972) theory of the concept of 'themes of generative character'.

Thus children should be presented with content that points ahead and helps to make the world transparent. Children should be equipped to solve the problems of the world they will live in the future. For that reason children should experience some of the fundamental problems of the present time.

Educational content should be considered on the basis of an analysis of modern society and a reflection on the future. The future should be seen in a dual perspective. On the one hand, it can be described through the threatening tendencies of a high-risk society (Giddens, 1990), and on the other hand, it can be understood in the light of new visionary possibilities in a global world. Anthony Giddens (1990) describes the threatening tenden-

cies as a mutual relation between growth in the totalitarianism power, nuclear power conflicts, global war, ecological breakdown and a collapse of the mechanisms of economic development. Correspondingly, Klafki (1994) discusses the relation between society and decisions on educational content. He outlines a number of core problems or epoch typical problems: war and peace, the North-South conflict, nationalism, ecological problems and sustainability, social disparity and finally, the dangers and possibilities of new management and communications media.

Every day such core problems are visible in preschool and we can observe how children cope with these in their own ways. For example, children play and ask questions based on what they see on television about the war in Afghanistan, the Palestinian conflict or a specific terrorism event, which influences their thinking and feelings, and for that reason they need adults to help them to come to terms with these questions.

Preschool teachers undoubtedly have the possibility of defining and selecting such problems and perspectives as educational content. For example, some children in a Danish preschool scared their friends telling them the drinking water was poisoned and dangerous to drink. The truth behind the story was the fact that in the neighbouring municipality there had been problems with the drinking water. This gave rise to educational activities focused on pollution. In another preschool two five-year old boys were having a discussion over lunch. When Oskar started to eat his open-faced salami sandwich, a boy with another ethnic background than Danish burst out: “ – Yuck, that food is unclean, why do you eat food like that? My father says that is really disgusting.” Oskar replied quickly: “ – Don’t talk about my food.” And then he turned to the boy on his left, saying: “ – I like this, and my father and I eat it at home with fried onion, yum!” In this situation the preschool teacher could choose to ask the boys not to say mean things about each other’s food and thereby avoid a possible conflict. But she gave the boys the possibility to explore each other’s cultures, norms and values. In other words, the boys entered into the theme of nationalism, the east-west conflict etc. They each gained their own experiences, and over the subsequent days the preschool teacher supported the children’s appropriation and construction of knowledge and norms.

The above examples illustrate that it is not difficult to incorporate a number of epoch typical core problems in appropriate preschool activities to help children deal with current and future problems.

Such societal risks and possibilities give rise to major new issues and tasks for education (Klafki, 1994) and here there is an opportunity to challenge the early childhood education and care system. If preschool teachers continuously drawn on epoch typical problems there is a possibility to go beyond the development of a preschool education to a smooth transition to school characterized by adjustment.

Thus to challenge the tendency to make preschool too school oriented, I suggest moving towards a democratization of children’s everyday lives by helping them understand the major themes of our time.

The Bildung approach meets critique

However, one might criticize the Bildung approach for focusing too heavily on the Bildung ideal and content rather than the process. Though ¹Bildung refers to the process in which the child contributes to its own learning, development and Bildung, there is still a state of dependence on the educator. Actually there is a paradox. Through an asymmetric relation the educator strives to develop a masterful and independent person. The paradox is neutralized through two phases: in the first phase the educator opens the door to the culture and gives the child new possibilities. In Hans Skjervheim’s (1992) words this is expressed through a *natural* and *actual asymmetric relation*. The next phase, the phase of Bildung, is characterized by another type of relation in which the subject strives to liberate herself from the educator’s guidance in order to gain independence and her own thinking and will.

Thus there is a need for a sceptical view of the preschool teacher’s active role and guidance towards Bildung and liberation. Although the Bildung approach emphasizes the idea of children as participants and subjects with their own rights and responsibilities, there is a need to express a much more radical view. A view that understands children as competent individuals and is open to children’s right to make independent decisions and that does not direct children’s

1. The concept Bildung holds three dimensions: process, a content and a result (aim).

learning and development towards specific aims goals and objectives. Modern childhood theories give voice to these ideas.

In the following I will introduce another approach which might also be seen as a positive way to go beyond preschool education characterized by quality assessment and school readiness.

Childhood approaches

Over the last decade early childhood education and care has been influenced by four inter-related theoretical childhood frameworks: (a) childhood sociology, (b) childhood psychology, (c) children as participants and (d) children's perspective. In short, the first framework, childhood sociology, rejects existing (old) knowledge about children and argues that children create their own lives in a specific context of history and circumstances. Similarly, childhood psychology rejects "old" psychological ideas, especially developmental psychology, and claims that children do not need to go through socialization because they are born competent persons. The third perspective, "children as participants," refers to a general view, formed in many different disciplines and theories, of children as active members of their own culture and society, with both the right and the capacity to influence their own lives. In short, children are seen as active participants in a democratic society. Finally, the fourth framework, the children's perspective, advocates taking children and their perspective of their own world seriously.

In the field of *childhood sociology* numerous sociologists have described various changes in the structure and content of childhood in modern societies (Brannen & O'Brien, 1995; Corsaro, 1997; Honing, 1999; James, Jenks & Prout, 1998; James & Proud eds, 1990; Qvortrup, Bardy, Srgitta & Wintersberger, 1994). These emerging sociological perspectives provide an important context for the growing interest in children's perspectives in education and educational research, as well as for increasing recognition of children's roles and value in modern society. The importance of children's views and voices has become a central theme in recent childhood sociology.

Contemporary childhood sociology challenges the assumption that social and societal conditions dominate children's socialization (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998). Instead, proponents of the new childhood paradigm argue for the study of childhood, children's relations and children's

culture *in their own right*, rather than as a consequence of external social forces and influences. Proponents of this perspective see children as whole and complete persons with their own status, needs and rights, and not as incomplete versions of the adults they will become.

Childhood psychology (Sommer, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 1988) criticize the fact that developmental psychology focuses on a "what the child is becoming" or "what the child is lacking at this age" approach. In contrast, childhood psychology focuses on characteristics and attributes of children in all domains from an additive rather than a deficit perspective. In short, childhood psychology does not view newborn children as either isolated from the surrounding world or born relatively unskilled; on the contrary, childhood psychology operates from the perspective that children are born with communicative competencies and interdependent minds (i.e., they are aware that they are dependent on others and that others are dependent on them). Thus, the phrase "the competent child" has gained wide acceptance; Trevarthen (1998), for example, represents this perspective.

The idea of the child as an active participant is logical in the new understanding of childhood. The described sociological as well as psychological perspectives provide important contexts for the growing interest in children's perspectives in education and educational research, as well as for the increasing general recognition of children's roles and value in modern society. The phrase 'children as active participants' emphasizes children as subjects, not objects, and as social agents (Jensen & Schnack, 1997; Jørgensen & Kampmann, 2000). This approach both reflects and contributes to changing perspectives on the nature of childhood and children themselves, especially with regard to children's competences as active participants in their own development and important contributors to society. Taken together, modern perspectives on childhood, coupled with growing faith in children's competences and views of children as "human beings" rather than "human beings" (Qvortrup, Bardy, Srgitta & Wintersberger, 1994), create potential and pathways for children to participate in society with a status that is roughly equivalent to the status of adults.

The fourth dimension of children's perspectives can be understood as an umbrella term incorporating a variety of interrelated concepts and philosophical stances (Qvarsell, 2003; Som-

mer, Pramling Samuelsson & Hundeide, 2010). Early childhood literature sometimes uses wording that appears at first glance to be more exact, such as ‘child perspective’ or ‘perspective of the child’ or ‘children’s perspectives’. For example, the term ‘children’s perspectives’, by its very linguistic construction, acknowledges that children have a perspective, that this perspective may differ decidedly from adults’ perspectives, and that individual children may have differing perspectives from each other. As further examples, some writers might say that the child ombudsman takes ‘a child perspective’, but then use the term ‘child’s perspective’ (with an apostrophe) to describe situations in which children themselves take a more active role as participants in education or in research.

The fundamental concept underlying the ‘children’s perspective’ orientation is that children are competent, have rights and should be viewed as contributing members of a democratic society. Children are not preparing to be competent or to earn rights or to contribute. They are already capable of active participation and competent use of their rights and agency.

The ‘children’s perspective’ concept incorporates general societal views on children and on child-related policies, as well as educators’ and researchers’ views on children and childhood and, most importantly, children’s own views.

All of the above-mentioned dimensions of childhood sociology and psychology, including the idea of the participating child and ‘the child’s perspective’, can be seen as a backdrop for an educational approach that, compared with the *Bildung* tradition, is more open to children’s power and influence, including democratic influence. From this, one general educational principle can be drawn: giving children much more power, independence and influence on their own lives and education. In contrast to a (traditional) *Bildung* approach, which incorporates preconceived notions of educational aims and goals plus an educational content, the various childhood approaches are more open to children’s actual interest and motivation.

For example, the Reggio Emilia approach illustrates how a documented knowledge of children’s previous experiences and life experiences, referred to in Italy as the children’s ‘track’, can influence educational planning (Canevaro, 1988; Cecchin & Larsen, 2002). In the Reggio Emilia approach, educators consistently begin their planning and focus their reflection on the

children’s perspective, focusing on their knowledge of the particular children in their group, their interests, attitudes, friendships, home conditions and outside influences.

This is in close relation to the United Nations *Convention on Children’s Rights* (1989), which claims that children should have more than an indirect influence on educational planning and practice via the preschool teacher’s interpretation of children’s interests and current conditions. The convention emphasizes that children have a right to express their own views, to be listened to and to be actively involved in decisions that affect them. In other words, it is imperative that children have opportunities to practise the principles of democracy throughout their early childhood years.

In general the various childhood approaches are willing to look at practice and children without having an educational plan in advance. The educator believes in the strength of critical thinking, dialogue and experimentation. In contrast to traditional curriculum thinking, which draws on existing political documents on education (‘major politics’), childhood oriented approaches focus on local experimentation and participation (so-called ‘minor politics’) (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Jensen, in press).

Such a childhood oriented educational approach, which is strongly inspired by post-modern psychologists like Karen Barad and Gilles Deleuze, is expressed by Hillevi Lenz Taguchi (2010). She argues for a process oriented practice instead of a linear practice that describes in advance the educational goals, objectives and content formulated by the preschool teacher. In contrast, she wants an immanent, co-operative, intraactive and rhizomatic¹ practice, in which the child has power and agency. The terms immanent and rhizomatic indicate that the practice does not start at the end (with a predefined learning outcome); with reference to Deleuze, Taguchi (2010) states that it can start everywhere and often does so in the middle. Thus a rhizomatic process (deriving from rhizome) is not unified but moves in many directions. During the process children experience new dimensions that they can follow. That means that via

1. The post-modern psychologist terms immanent, intraactive and rhizomatic are introduced and brought to early childhood education by Taguchi (2010).

social interaction or co-operative activities children themselves create the process; they figure out what to do and how to do it. They themselves formulate the question of interest and they set free all possible actions. During the process they are involved not only in interactions with other children and preschool teachers, through which they learn (Vygotsky, 1978), but also in intra-actions, that is, they relate to or intra-act with objects, material (for example the substance of clay and paint), architecture, space and time, which also influence their learning.

Due to its very nature, the above approach does not provide clear principles and methods. Dahlberg and Moss (2005) focus on the idea of Utopia and utopian thinking to avoid repetition and standardization. The actual educational practice will emerge from the actual situation. However, through careful reading of Dahlberg and Moss (2005), Taguchi (2010) and Jensen (in press) it is possible to pinpoint some aspects of working with minor politics.

Incorporating the 'children's perspective' and Taguchi's idea of immanent, co-operative, intra-active and rhizomatic practice is, in some respects, related to a child-centred understanding, as well as to both constructivism and constructionism. The shift in curriculum theory from objectives and content as the starting point towards a central focus on learning as the child's subjective construction raises new questions for early childhood educators and places new demands upon the preschool teacher's role.

For instance, following the childhood approach, preschool teachers must be prepared to follow children's leads as they construct their own understandings. This requires preschool teachers to "think on their feet" rather than follow a pre-planned agenda for accomplishing learning goals the adults established in advance. An activity in the sandbox, which the preschool teacher originally imagined as a construction activity, may turn, at the children's inspiration and direction, to a scientific inquiry about bugs or an investigation of the differences between wet sand and dry sand.

Such an educational approach is more challenging for preschool teachers than simply following a step-by-step plan they have created in advance. Following the children's leads requires that preschool teachers are able to identify the academic content as it emerges along the way. In the sandbox example, for instance, the preschool teacher must follow the children as they

divert their discussion from construction to bugs.

DISCUSSION

The Bildung and childhood approaches can be seen as opposites and contradictions. However, one must ask: should they be seen as inconsistent or as consistent contradictions?

A Klafki oriented critical-constructive Bildung Didaktik takes as its starting point for a democratic education of young children the general aim of a more experienced person guiding a less experienced child from dependence to independence. In contrast, a Bildung approach focuses on Bildung oriented content of epoch typical problems, whereas a childhood approach strives to understand the child and the child's perspective and take these as its starting points. Broadly speaking, through teaching, the Bildung approach aims to challenge the child with the theme of democracy whereas the childhood approach first of all wants to support children as equals in an educational process they themselves have defined; a process which derives from their own perspective in order to give them a real possibility to practice a democratic process.

However, despite most childhood oriented scholars' and educators' appeal to let children follow their own leads and inspirations, some also express critical reflections. Thus the childhood researchers James, Jenks and Prout (1998) are among those who warn against problems that may arise if we overly cultivate the approach. They describe the 'tribal child' that may result from an exaggeration of children's cultural codes and competences, and an idealization of childhood as a totally isolated and autonomous universe without any likeness or relationship to the adults' world. To avoid isolation from the adult world, the preschool teacher must consciously reflect on the relationship between a children's perspective and an adult perspective, and consequently create a curriculum that integrates them both.

From my perspective we need to develop theoretical concepts, which are able to combine the concepts from the two other approaches mentioned and developmental research work (action research). This work can lead to either synthesis or mutual criticism, which can help researchers and practitioners to construct and reconstruct critical educational theories and practices (plural).

PROBLEM SOLVING

At the outset of this article I posed the following problem: the Nordic model of early childhood education, in which children have a say, is losing ground and we are seeing a move towards a form of early schooling. I described an increasing political management and control of early childhood education and care. However, in spite of the introduction of more school oriented content as well as evaluations and tests, I also called attention to the fact that the curriculum calls for the development of children's democratic competences and critical reflection. On the basis of this reality I proposed a solution: in the space between the move towards early schooling and external management of preschool education and society's formally political democratic educational aims, I argued for the possibility of formulating real democratic and liberating early childhood education.

I argued for constructing an early critical preschool education consisting of a number of educational approaches, which can be classified in two main groups:

A. With reference to Klafki's critical constructive Didaktik I argued for a democratic Bildung ideal: Self-determination, co-determination and solidarity plus the need to present children with so-called core problems or epoch typical problems. However, because the Bildung approach might lead to too much adult governing, I argued for the integration of some dimensions from different childhood approaches.

B. A general understanding of the child as competent and recognition of children's right to influence their own everyday life and culture. Preschool teachers have to take a child's perspective and support children to follow their own leads or 'tracks'. Thus preschool teachers should not only follow the ideas of major politics but also take minor politics as a point of departure. Inspired by post-modern psychologists, preschool teachers should not only follow the long-term Bildung ideal but also children's here-and-now-interests, which might point in many different directions (rhizomatic processes).

Possibilities and limitations

The proposed solution is relatively broad. Actually, one might argue that it is too broad because it consists of two approaches: a relatively clearly defined Bildung Didaktik and a relatively open and multi-faceted childhood approach. Both approaches are based on the idea of educating in

and for a true democracy; they both see children as active participants in society (at home, in the preschool setting and in the wider society) and they both want to support children's influence. They also have different orientations and priorities. Whereas the Bildung approach focuses on a critical and liberating content (e.g. epoch typical problems and themes) the different childhood approaches are more focused on children's own ideas and choices.

These differences can be understood as both advantages and disadvantages. Preschool teachers should be able to participate in a community with a rather open theoretical basis. If the theoretical ground is too exact and based on only a few theoretical references, the number of followers will decrease. A richer theoretical foundation will open up to a wider variety of experiments. In order to overcome the tendency towards a narrowing of preschool education in early childhood education we need a rich and multifaceted approach, which opens up for a number of different ideas and possibilities.

However, at the same time one can argue for the weakness of such an open approach. If we emphasize the contradictions and look at the unclear dimensions, such an open approach can confuse a preschool teacher team and steer them in opposite directions. This is true; but preschool education in theory and practice does not need unified and finished solutions. The narrow academic school oriented preschool practice with tests and quality assurance is growing. As an alternative we need manifold experiments in our quest to create a genuine critical preschool education.

CONCLUSION

I have argued for the existence of a legitimate basis for the development of critical preschool education, which is open to educational experiments and minor politics. I have argued for a double approach that encompasses both a German Bildung Didaktik and childhood sociology/psychology. These approaches have many variations and contradictions. Nonetheless, I have argued for the benefit of a multifaceted approach in creating a broad basis for a community of critical preschool teachers.

I look forward to the establishment of a community of preschool teachers, children and researchers, who together can experiment with the possibility of creating a critical democratic pre-

school education. I am positive but not naive. As my colleague Anders Skriver Jensen says: “Pedagogy remains free and decentralized, yet confined within frameworks of quantifiable outcomes” (Jensen, 2012). There is still a free rein, and educators have to fight for this and their right to use and express their professional competences.

REFERENCES

- Bae, B. (2005). Troubling the identity of a researcher: Methodological and ethical questions in cooperating with teacher-carers in Norway. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 6(3), 2005.
- Biesta, G. J. J. (2007). Why “what works” won’t work. *Educational Theory*, 57(1), 1–22.
- Biesta, G. J. J. (2011). *God uddannelse i målingens tidsalder: Etik, politik, demokrati*. Aarhus: Klim.
- Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base: Clinical applications of attachment theory*. London: Routledge.
- Brannen, J., & O’Brien, M. (1995). Review easy childhood and sociological gaze: Paradigm and paradoxes. *Sociology*, 29(4), 729–37.
- Broström, S. (2003). Transition from kindergarten to school in Denmark: Building bridges. In Broström, S. & Wagner, J.T. (Eds.). *Early childhood education in five Nordic countries: Perspectives on the transition from preschool to school*. Århus: Systime.
- Broström, S., & Wagner, J.T. (Ed.) (2003). *Early childhood education in five Nordic countries: Perspectives on the transition from preschool to school*. Århus: Systime.
- Broström, S. (2004). *Pædagogiske læreplaner: At arbejde med didaktik i børnehaven*. Århus: Systime.
- Broström, S. (2006a). Children’s Perspectives on Their Childhood Experiences. In *Nordic childhoods and early education: Philosophy, research, policy and practice in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden*. In Einarsdóttir, J. & Wagner, J.T. (Eds.). Greenwich, Connecticut: Information Age.
- Broström, S. (2006b). Curriculum in preschool. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 38(1), 65–77.
- Canevaro, A. (1988). Una struttura di connessione narrativa. In *Una scola uno sfondo*. Milano: Nicola.
- Cecchin, D., & Larsen, I. S. (2002). *Pædagogiske forbindelse: Kontinuitet mellem børnehave, skole og fritidsordninger* [Educational relations: Continuity between preschool, school and after school]. Copenhagen: BUPL.
- Corsaro, W.A. (1997). *The sociology of childhood*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- Dahlberg, G., & Moss, P. (2005). *Ethics and politics in early childhood education*. New York: Routledge Falmer.
- Dahlberg, G., Moss, P., & Pence, A. (2007). *Beyond quality in early childhood education and care: Languages of evaluation*. 2. ed. London: Routledge.
- EUROSTAT (2000). *Key data on education in europe, 1999–2000*. Luxembourg: European Commission.
- Finansministeriet. (2009). *Om project Faglige Kvalitetsoplysninger på dagtilbudsområdet* [On Project Quality Information in the Day-care Sector]. Retrieved from <http://www.fm.dk/Arbejdsomraadet/Offentlig%20modernisering/Kvalitet%20og%20styring/Faglige%20kvalitetsoplysninger/~media/Files/Offentlig%20modernisering/Kvalitetsreformen/Projektbeskrivelse%20paa%20dagtilbudsomraadet.ashx>
- Fukuyama, F. (1992). *The end of history and the last man*. New York: The Free Press.
- Freire, P. (1996). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New rev. ed. London: Penguin.
- Freire, P. (1974) *Education: the practice of freedom*. London: Writers and Readers Co-operative. (Also published in the United Kingdom as: *Education for critical consciousness*. London: Sheed & Ward, 1974).
- Freire, P. (1972). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Freire, P. (1971). *Cultural action for freedom*. 2. ed. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Educational Review, Center for the Study of Development and Social Change.
- Giddens, A. (1990). *The consequences of modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Giroux, H. A. (2000). *Impure acts: The practical politics of cultural studies*. New York, London: Routledge.
- Giroux, H. A. (1997). *Pedagogy and the politics of hope*. Colorado: Westview.
- Giroux, H. A. (1988). *Teachers as intellectuals: Towards a critical pedagogy of learning*. South Hadey, Massachusetts: Bergin and Garvey.
- Giroux, H. A. (1987). Citizenship, public philosophy and the struggle for democracy. In: *Educational Theory*, 37(2), 103–120.
- Habermas, J. (1984, and 1987). *The theory of communicative action*, Vol. 1 and 2. Boston: Baecon.
- Hardt, M. & Negri, A. (2000). *Empire*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Hardt, M. & Negri, A. (2006). *Multitude*. London: Penguin.

- Honing, M.S. (1999). *Entwurf einer Theorie der Kindheit*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Honneth, A. (1995). *The struggle for recognition: The moral grammar of social conflicts*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Hopmann, S., & Riquarts, K., (Eds.). (1995). *Didaktik and/or Curriculum*. Kiel: IPN, Institut für die Pädagogik der Naturwissenschaften an der Universität Kiel.
- James, A., & Prout, A. (Eds.) (1990). *Constructing and reconstructing childhood: Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood*. London: Falmer.
- James, A., Jenks, C., & Prout, A. (1998). *Theorising Childhood*. Cambridge: Policy.
- Jensen, A. S. (2012). Didaktik i dagtilbud og indskoling: To modtræk til det målbare børneliv. *CURSIV*, (10), 31–46.
- Jensen, B. B., & Schnack, K. (1997). The action competence approach in environment education. *Environment Education Research*, 3(2), 163–178.
- Jørgensen, P.S., & Kampmann, J. (Eds.) (2000). *Børn som informanter*. [Children as informants]. Copenhagen: Børnerådet.
- Klafki, W. (1994). Schlüsselprobleme als inhaltlicher Kern Internationaler Erziehung. [Key problems as core content in international education]. Aus: Seibert, N & Serve, H.J. (Hrsg.). *Bildung und Erziehung. Multidisziplinäre Aspekte*. München: PimS-Verlag.
- Klafki, W. (1995). On the problem of teaching and learning contents from the standpoint of critical-constructive didaktik. In: Hopmann, S., & Riquarts (Eds.). *Didaktik and/or Curriculum*. Kiel: IPN. Institut für die Pädagogik der Naturwissenschaften an der Universität Kiel.
- Klafki, W. (1996). *Neu Studien zur Bildungstheorie und Didaktik*, [New Studies on Theory of Bildung and didaktik] 5. Auflage. Weinheim und Basel: Belz Verlag.
- Klafki, W. (1998). Characteristics of critical-constructive didaktik. In: Gudem, B.B., & Hopmann, S. *Didaktik and/or curriculum: An international dialogue*. American University Studies, Peter Lang.
- McLaren, P. (1999). Traumatizing capital: Oppositional pedagogies in the age of consent. In Manuel Castells et al. *Critical Education in the new information age*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.
- OECD (2001). *Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD.
- OECD (2006). *Starting Strong 2. Early Childhood Education and Care*. Paris: OECD.
- OMEP. (2010). *World declaration about the right and the joy to learn through play*. OMEP. Retrieved 02-02-2012 from http://www.omep.org.se/digitalAssets/1316/1316663_omep-world-declaration-2010-eng.pdf
- Qvarsell, B. (2003). Barns perspektiv och mänskliga rättigheter: Godhetsmaximering eller kunskabsbildning? [Child's perspective and human rights]. In Johansson, E. & Pramling Samuelsson, I. (Eds.) *Pædagogisk forskning i Sverige: "Barns perspektiv och barnperspektiv"* [Educational research in Sweden: Child's perspective and child perspective]. Göteborg Universitet, 8, 1–2, 101–113.
- Qvortrup, J., Bardy, M., Srgitta, G., & Wintersberger, H. (Eds.) (1994). *Childhood matters: Social theory, practice and politics*. Aldershot: Avebury.
- Retsinformation. (2007). Retsinformation. (2007). Dagtilbudsloven. [Act on day care services]. Retrieved 22.06.2012 from <https://www.retsinformation.dk/>
- Schnack, K. (2003). Action competence as an educational ideal. In: D. Trueit, W. E. Doll, H. Wang & W. F. Pinar (Eds.). *The internationalization of curriculum studies*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Skjervheim, H. (1992). Kritik af mistankens hermeneutik. Skjervheim: *Filosofi og dømmekraft*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- Socialministeriet. (2004). *Lov om ændring af lov om social service: Pædagogiske læreplaner for børn i dagtilbud til børn*. [Act on educational curricula]. København: Socialministeriet. www.sm.dk/laereplaner/
- Sommer, D. (2003a). *Barndomspsykologi: Udvikling i en senmoderne verden* [Childhood psychology in a modern world]. Copenhagen: Hans Reitzel.
- Sommer, D. (2003b). *Barndomspsykologiske facetter* [Dimensions of childhood psychology]. Århus: Systime Academic.
- Sommer, D. (2003c). Børnesyn i udviklingspsykologien: Er et børneperspektiv muligt? [View on children in developmental psychology. Is a child perspective possible?]. In E. Johansson & I. Pramling Samuelsson (Eds.) *Pædagogisk forskning i Sverige: "Barns perspektiv och barnperspektiv"* [Educational research in Sweden. Child's perspective and child perspective] (pp. 85–100). Göteborg: Göteborg Universitet
- Sommer, D. (1998). The reconstruction of childhood-implications for theory and practice. *European Journal of Social Work*, 1(3), 311–326. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13691459808413792>
- Sommer, D., Pramling Samuelsson, P., & Hundeide, D. (Eds.) (2010). *Child perspectives and children's perspectives in theory and practice*. New York: Springer.

- Stern, D. (1985). *The interpersonal world of the infant: A view from psychoanalysis and developmental psychology*. London: Karnac.
- Taguchi, H. L. (2010). *Going beyond the theory/practice divide in early childhood education: Introducing an intra-active pedagogy*. London and New York: Routledge.
- The Lisbon Treaty (2000). The Lisbon special European council: *Towards a Europe of innovation and knowledge*. Retrieved July 31, 2008 from: http://europa.eu/lisbon_treaty/full_text/index_en.htm
- Trevarthen, C. (1998). The concept and foundation of infant inter-subjectivity. In S. Bråten (Ed.). *Inter-subjective communication and emotion in early ontogeny*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- United Nations (1989). *Conventions of the rights of the child*. Retrieved November 2004 from: www.CRIN.org
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Edited by M. Cole et al. Cambridge and Massachusetts: Harvard University Press .