

EARLY YEARS TRANSITION PROGRAMME

TRANSITION FROM PRE-SCHOOL TO SCHOOL: EMPHASIZING EARLY LITERACY

The education of the child shall be directed to...
the development of the child's personality,
talents and mental and physical abilities
to their fullest potential.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)



COMMENTS AND REFLECTIONS BY RESEARCHERS FROM EIGHT EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

CHAPTER 4

Observing, Supporting and Challenging Children's Learning

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4.1 Abstract

New theories have led us to focus on children's perspectives when observing, supporting and challenging their learning in the education processes of the early years. A competent child who can make sense of the world around him/her will then appear. The distinction between child perspectives and children's perspectives, as well as a conception of development as increased discernment has become central in Early Childhood Education. This chapter also illustrates examples on how the teacher is trying to provide opportunities for the child to develop his/her knowledge and how the child responds to these opportunities. In the tradition of Vygotsky (1978) and development pedagogy (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2007) development is seen as driven by pedagogical actions. Communication and interaction become key-factors and important tools for the teacher.

4.2 Introduction

Today it is generally accepted within ECE that the learning paradigm has changed dramatically. This may be ascribed to research findings and the development of theories within the fields of childhood sociology (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998), childhood psychology (Hundeide, 2006; Sommer, 2005b;a), and early childhood education (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999; Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008). The change mainly concerns viewing children as competent and resourceful social individuals with the right to be listened to and respected. This has led to focusing on children's perspectives when observing, supporting and challenging children's learning. It also means that children's knowledge and skills cannot be evaluated and related to a specific level of development. Some reasons for this are:

- A changed perspective of knowledge, from knowledge as a question of quantity (knowing more or less) to knowledge as a question of quality, which means the ability to cooperate with others in new ways or to develop a more nuanced understanding of something.
- To acknowledge meaning-making as a social process that is communicative by nature.
- To recognize knowledge as subjective and as a process of discerning aspects of phenomena of relevance to different activities.
- Difficulties children experience in tests are more often of a communicative nature than a cognitive nature, which means that children and adults have different perspectives, and that children do not have a fair chance to express their knowledge.
- Instead, the understanding of the teacher and the understanding of the child have to be negotiated and coordinated. (Pramling Samuelsson & Pramling, 2009, p. 38)

4.3 Children's perspectives

Since child perspectives and children's perspectives are often mixed in different theories, we want to say a few words about the differences between these terms. If we take the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child as a starting point, there is support for both perspectives.

First, let us look at *child perspectives*, which imply taking into consideration what is best for each child. Based on our knowledge of children in general as well as of the particular child, we adults claim that something is best for the child under specific circumstances. This can be seen as child centeredness, a notion frequently used in ECE. What is it then that we observe, from this point of view? How do we support or challenge children? I would guess we do not challenge children, but provide opportunities for learning, believing that they will learn something. Children learn by doing when they are mature enough.

In contrast to this, *children's perspectives* imply that the children themselves are active and express their views (orally or non-verbally), for example, when creating a literacy environment in pre-school. In this way, children's wishes, ideas and perspectives contribute to the shaping of the environment. They may want to create a specific story-telling room etc. Children's ways of experiencing their surroundings will then be important in the pedagogical context, enabling the teacher both to understand the child's world and to influence and challenge each child.

In order to be able to understand the children's world, adults are required to listen to the children (Rinaldi, 2009) and to join them in dialogues and interactions (Pramling Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2003). As a teacher, you have to first ask yourself how children make sense of different aspects of the world around them. Then the child needs to be challenged to take new steps in the learning process. On the one hand, it is self-evident that teachers need to listen to children in ECE, on the other hand, research shows that the time teachers spend listening to children and having dialogues with them is only 50 % of the time of communication (Siraj-Blatchford, 2007). A prerequisite for becoming involved in dialogues with young children is the skill to listen to them and make them feel that you want to listen to their ideas (Doverborg & Pramling Samuelsson, 2000). This requires an effort from the teacher, as the act of listening and interpreting demands that he or she has experience of taking the children's perspectives. When a teacher takes the child's perspective, he or she is made aware of the child's understanding, as the child's meaning-making is expressed in the child's perspective (Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson, &

Hundeide, 2009). In other words, being able to take children's perspectives is a vital professional skill that teachers within ECE need to develop.

4.4 Development as increased discernment

Within the field of development psychology, there are very few studies of development as such. Rather, tests have been conducted before and after a certain intervention or time, and when a change is recorded, it is taken for granted that the child has learnt something. From a pedagogical point of view, however, it is less interesting whether a child can answer a question correctly or not than to make children's reasoning visible, as an expression of development. Here is an opportunity to understand children's perspectives through the content they are learning about. The teacher must continuously ask him- or herself what the problem is from the child's perspective, or what the problem the child is trying to solve is (Hundeide, 2006). That is why children's perspectives are so central in pedagogy.

When learning as a process is being studied, we have to ask ourselves: 1) Which knowledge is the teacher (or other children) trying to develop the child's knowledge about? 2) How does the child respond in the specific learning situation? Perceived in this way, development is a social and communicative process. What a child can learn is related to the scaffolding he or she is provided with as a communicative frame or contract established between the participants (Hundeide, 2006). This leads to the most important question for the pedagogical practice—the teacher's role and how he or she provides children with opportunities to develop new insights. In order to achieve this, teachers must see to it that their work is guided by observations and documentation based on this perspective.

As stated earlier, in this project learning is a question of discerning something (Samuelsson & Pramling, 2008). Something must then appear as a "figure", that is, as something special. If we take an aspect of literacy, rhyme, as described in Pramling et al. (2009, pp. 130–131), we can see that children discern what rhyme is in three different ways:

These brief excerpts can also be seen as points in the development of the ability to rhyme. In the transcript, words in *italics* rhyme (in the original language if not always in the English translation), and words underlined are not actual but made-up words. Which different aspects of what constitutes a rhyme have the children discerned in the three verbal exchanges that follow? The teacher and a small group of children are sitting in a circle on the floor:

Teacher: Yes, anything else that rhymes then?

[...]

Fredrika: Shoe foot.

Teacher: Shoe foot, well, one could have the foot in a shoe, that's right, but not quite that it rhymes exactly.

Fredrika has not yet learned what a rhyme is. Instead of the sounding aspect, she attends to the meaning of the words, i. e. that they are associated with one another (shoe and foot). However, she has discerned one fundamental aspect of what makes a rhyme a rhyme. She connects two words, she does not point to the object referred to by the initial word. Hence, she has discerned that rhyme is a relation between words, not between word and world.

Teacher: Did you think about something, that when they..., in the verses, that it *swung* and *sung*.

Malin: It rhymes.

Teacher: Yes, *hear* and

Malin: *Ear*.

Teacher: Ear. It rhymes as you said, Malin, it does.

In addition to the aspect of rhyme discerned in the first excerpt, Malin has also discerned that rhyming builds upon the sound of the ending of words. It is interesting to note that she still uses words that are also related in meaning (hear and ear).

Partik: Blot, blo.

Teacher: Blo, *shoe* yes.

Sven: Eh, *cow*, plow.

Teacher: *Cow* flo.

Sven: *Gro* flo.

Teacher: And *gro* flo.

In this excerpt, the sound relationship between words has clearly been distinguished from the meaning relationship. The children make up nonsense words (sounds, not actual words). In this excerpt, they have discerned that rhyming is independent of meaning or sense. In sequence, these three excerpts illustrate a progression in the ability to rhyme that is present at the same time in the group of children. In this way, the concept of 'discernment' of 'critical features or aspects' of a 'learning object' [Marton & Tsui \(2004\)](#), i. e., the capability or insight the teacher wants to develop in children, can help clarify in detail what children need to find out, and what teachers can help children become aware of, in order to develop their ability to rhyme. Meta-communicative dialogues (Pramling, 1996), i. e. in which the children discuss their own learning with their teacher, could be used to establish the variation in the aspects discerned within the group of children at a point in time. This would make the children aware of what they do when they rhyme. This variety of understanding what rhymes are about and how they are used could be used as stepping-stones in a developmental pedagogy (see [Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008](#)).

In our project development is a question of discerning aspects of languages. Here the child's perspective will once again become visible, as the aspect discerned is the meaning the children express. Thus, learning is a process of discernment shaped in children's talking or acting around the content they are supposed to be learning about.

Let us look at one more example of literacy related to making poetry, something young children can get very fond of. Pramling claims that one of the challenges children face when introduced to poetic language is what similes mean in this context, particularly unconventional similes as found in much poetry. The following excerpt exemplifies some of the utterances made by the children (three-year-olds) when giving suggestions about what to include in a collaborative poem (from [Pramling, 2009](#), p. 385)

An elephant is like a large elephant

A stone is like a crisp-shell [Swedish: knäckskal]

In the first case, like does not fill any function. In order for something to be 'as' or 'like' something else, the two 'things' related in this way need to be different things. In the second

line, the child manages this relationship. It is also notable that in line two, one of the children constructs a neologism (i. e., creates a new word) in *knäckskal*. This word-combination is highly ambiguous and not directly translatable. The word *knäck* can mean 'crisp' and 'crack(ed)' but it is also the name of a traditional toffee (consisting of syrup, sugar and cream) made at Christmas time. The translation chosen preserves the important sounding qualities of the expression if not the connotative ones. It is also possible that this neologism is due to the child having misheard and/or is mispronouncing the similar word *snäckskal* [snail shell]. Another example of the difficulty of simile from the data is 'a lizard is like a green lizard' (said by a three- year-old). Rather than directly introducing similes, young children could be encouraged to tell how something appears and sounds to them and what it does. How a particular feature of something can be made visible by comparing it to something else could be introduced at a later stage in the learning of poetry.

We have now seen two examples from the field of literacy, where children's perspectives, their experience of the world around them, have become visible through observations. In this perspective, it is not only a question of observing with the senses of seeing, hearing and smelling, but also of observing the child's body language and noting what he or she expresses verbally. It is also vital to interpret these observations with an open mind.

4.5 Discussion

In this article we have mainly focused on teacher's possibilities of observing, supporting and challenging children's perspectives as cornerstones in the development of children's understanding of different aspects of the world around them. In the tradition of Vygotsky (1978) as well as in development pedagogy (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2007), development is driven by pedagogical actions. Instead of seeing development as a question of maturity, Pramling Samuelsson and Asplund Carlsson discern development in the interaction between the child and other children or the teacher.

An important tool for teachers to use is asking questions. This is important, not only for getting access to the child's reasoning, but also for supporting and challenging the child's learning. This is an unusual way of thinking compared with traditional school practice, in which teachers often ask questions to find out if the child knows something or not. Dahlberg and Lenz Taguchi (1994) have shown that the traditional school approach is as usual in pre-school as in school. What then are the key factors in the approach we are talking about here? One key factor is the teacher's knowledge about the content children are supposed to be learning about. In our project, it is literacy (Gustafsson & Mellgren, 2005). A second one is the perspective of learning as creation of meaning and discernment. A third one is related to communication, interaction and dialogues with children. A fourth is the ability to observe, interpret and use this knowledge in everyday life with children.

In pedagogy in which the intention is to make children literate, the teacher must know what notions, features, ideas, children need to develop an understanding about, and challenge children in this direction through directing their attention towards these aspects (Sheridan, Pramling Samuelsson, & Johansson, 2009).

Content in literacy, apart from language practice and rich vocabulary, can comprise symbols of various kinds, awareness of language, the function of written text, ways of using the language (narration,

descriptions or argumentations), as well as being able to listen, ask questions and express one's own ideas. As we saw earlier, the content can also refer to specific aspects as in rhymes and poetry, the surface of which we have only skimmed. However, whatever the content, the rule must be that any interaction in this area must take place at the crossroads between the teacher's intention and each child's perspective.

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