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Seeking for ‘good pedagogical practice’ in promoting play in day care centres

Abstract

This presentation aims at stimulating the discussion on research methods and pedagogical practices concerning children’s play through an explorative study on interaction, social relationships and joint learning in day care centres. The study, which was part of a broader EU project, was carried out by the method of focussed discussions in two centres, together with a team of three teachers in each. In the discussions the teams reflected on the data (e.g., observations, videos, sociogrammes) collected in their day care groups. The reflections took place from the viewpoints of peer interaction, play and learning, and pedagogical aspects in peer based learning. This presentation deals only with the data regarding interaction and play, seeking answers to the following questions: In what ways are the children related to each other in play? What kind of learning situations are present in play? What is the role of the teachers in these situations? Broadly seen, the objective of the discussions was to find out ‘good practice’ which manifests joy and togetherness, and which leads to social inclusion and personal growth of each participant.

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Introduction

This presentation aims at stimulating the discussion on research methods and pedagogical practices regarding children’s play in day care centres. The material for the presentation is taken from an explorative case study, which was the Finnish contribution to a broader European Union project

“Relational Approaches in Early Education: Enhancing Social Inclusion, Personal Growth and Learning” (see Kutnick et al. 2006a, b).

Main research questions of the project

The project is based on co-constructive and socio-cultural theories on learning and development, as well as on earlier research, e.g., on peer-based and collaborative learning, inclusive education, social competence, friendship, and play. The *general research questions* to be answered in the project were

- what is the range and quality of peer-peer interactions in early education settings and what is their learning potential?
- what is the role of the teacher in organising and supporting or excluding these interactions?

- what is the ‘good pedagogical practice’ which leads to social inclusion, attractive (joint) learning and personal growth?

Answers to these questions were sought by putting great emphasis on participation and relationships between children and teachers, and between children among each other. Connected to these main questions the *special focus of this presentation* is:

- in what ways are the children related to each other in play?
- what kind of learning situations are present in play?
- what is the role of the teachers in these situations?

Subjects of the project

The target groups were early years teachers and their four-to five-year old pupils in the six countries (England, Finland, Greece, Italy, Spain and Sweden). Two early childhood education settings in every country participated in the study. In Finland they were two day care groups, “the Kittens” from Setting 1 and “the Teddies” from Setting 2.

Methods and data of the project

The project consisted of two main phases:

- 1) Survey phase (mainly quantitative procedure), the first year
- 2) Intervention phase (mainly qualitative procedure), the second year.

Methods of the Survey phase (Spring 2005)

Methodological consideration was given to design means that would identify the classroom (called ‘day care groups’ in Finland) and interpersonal context surrounding the early education experience of children, focusing on amount and type of child-teacher and peer-peer interactions. To establish both amounts and types of child and teacher activity, six instruments were developed and utilised:

- *country-based narratives* concerning the settings, and outlined the curriculum guidelines for country and individual settings, providing details on typical day in the setting
- *teacher interviews* were undertaken in each setting. In Finland and Sweden team-interviews were used in all the settings
- *classroom mapping* of teacher-led and child-led activities in the settings
- *sociogrammes* were collated in each setting using child and teacher nominations regarding play and (where possible) work
- *reflective rating* (by a Likert type “Rating Scale”) of social inclusion regarding learning contexts, activities and tasks, role of adults and peer interactions
- *observation of children* (by the focus child method).

Methods of the Intervention phase (Autumn 2005 - Spring 2006), in Finland: "Developmental Research"

In early childhood education, the Finnish day care centres follow the traditional Nordic integrated and constructivist model, the characteristics of which are:

- a broad central guideline stressing inclusion and democratic values, with local development of curriculum (based on national curriculum guidelines, which, however, do not have a norm status)
- focus on broad developmental goals and living together in a learning community of educators and peers, including the idea of 'the competent child'
- broad orientations rather than prescribed outcomes: e.g., play, music, arts, project work, interaction with peers and nature
- individual goals for each child are set with unobtrusive, developmental assessment
- culturally valued 'topics of learning' privileged (learning of integrated wholes instead of learning of subjects), taking children's interests into account
- a growing focus on individual language and oral competence with much 'play reading' and 'play writing' (see Bennett 2006).

These characteristics were also evident in the two Finnish day care centres; they also built the general framework for the Finnish intervention, called "Developmental Research".

The intervention was conducted by the researchers (director and research assistant) and carried out in the day care centres. Teachers in Finnish day care centres work in teams, each team taking collective care of one children's group. Thus, the Developmental Research was organised to be implemented in teams (three teachers in both teams).

The Developmental Research comprised of six meetings for each setting. In two meetings (one in autumn 2005 and one in spring 2006) the teams of both settings were present. Both researchers (director and research assistant) were present in the meetings. The meetings were based on *focussed discussions*, in which the teams reviewed and reflected on the survey data (interviews, group mappings, rating scales, sociogrammes, and observations and videos) collected in the former phases of the project in spring 2005, thus applying the *method of stimulated recall*. For the meetings, the teachers also studied the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education and Care (2005) thoroughly, as well as documented some examples of their pedagogical practices and experiences of today, which were discussed and utilized as material for reflection.

Reflections took place concerning relationships, interaction and joint learning. Of special interest were relational aspects of peer learning, for instance, in what ways the children related to each other, what kind of peer-based learning situations were presents in the settings, the role of the teachers in these situations and what kind of routines and everyday activities there were which promoted or prevented peer-based learning. The meetings were audio taped and the tapes were transcribed in all essentials (in total 105 pages of text) for analyses. All the analyses were qualitative and descriptive by nature.

In spring 2006 some additional data were collected by interviewing one parent from Setting 1 (the mother of a boy, who had belonged to "The Kittens" in spring 2005) and three girls, who had belonged to "The Kittens" in spring 2005. The aim of these (semi-structured) interviews was to include family and children perspectives on relationships, interaction and joint learning into the project. Including the parents into the project was also consistent with the emphasis of "educational partnership" between teachers and parents in Finnish early education. The interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim (in total 21 pages of text concerning the parent, and 5 pages concerning the children) for analyses. The analyses were qualitative and descriptive. However, this data will not be discussed in this presentation.

Evaluation of the project by teachers took place in the meetings as part of the focussed discussions. The teachers also completed the Rating Scale (i.e. the scale used by the research assistant as part of the survey in spring 2005) to self-assess the learning context, activities and tasks, peer interaction and relations and adult role in their settings (recalling the situation in spring 2005), as well as to assess the trustfulness (reliability and validity) of the study. Furthermore, the teachers completed a separate questionnaire (developed by the researchers) about the impact of the Developmental Research on their educational thinking, attitudes and practices. Consistent with all the data collected, the focus of the questionnaire was on relationships, interaction and joint learning. Filling the questionnaires took place individually.

Purpose and aims of the Developmental Research

Broadly seen, the purpose of the Developmental Research was to develop the pedagogical work of the teams as well as of the individual members of the teams (see, e.g. Engeström 1987, 2005, of ‘Expansive Learning’ and ‘Developmental Work Research’; van Oers, Janssen-Vos, Pompert & Schiferli 2003 of ‘Developmental Education’) - in accordance with the educational model described above. More exactly, the aims of the Developmental Research were:

- to share and co-construct knowledge for joint and individual use
- to gain new understanding of relational aspects of learning
- to become more conscious of the values and objectives of education
- to discuss pedagogical practices needed to be changed
- to find out the ‘good pedagogical practice’ which manifests joy, sense of community and togetherness, and which leads to social inclusion, attractive (joint) learning and personal growth of each participant.

Procedure of the Developmental Research

In both settings the Developmental Research was carried out in the same way. Each teacher team and the researchers met four times separately (meetings 1, 3, 4 and 5), and two meetings (meetings 2 and 6) were arranged to comprise both teams, i.e. all the teachers. The meetings took place in the day care centres, and the duration of each meeting was about two hours:

Meeting 1 (Autumn 2005)

- Discussion and reflection based on video tapes of children playing and working together with or without teachers (in the meeting the teacher team and the researchers watched a sample of video tapes from spring 2005)
- Focus on concerns about relationships, interaction and learning together
- Focus on good experiences and good practices

Meeting 2 (Autumn 2005, joint meeting of both teams)

- Discussion and reflection based on video tapes from the other setting
- Before the meeting the teams had watched excerpts of each other’s video tapes
- Focus on concerns about relationships, interaction and learning together
- Focus on good experiences and good practices
- Exchanging experiences about the municipally conducted “Small Group Pedagogy” started in autumn 2005

Meeting 3 (Autumn 2005)

- Discussion and reflection based on the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education and Care (2005)
- Before the meeting the teachers had studied thoroughly these guidelines from the viewpoint of the thematic of the project
- Focus on the relation between the guidelines and the educational practice

Meeting 4 (Spring 2006)

- Discussion and reflection based on the National Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education and Care (a continuation, see above)
- Setting an observation assignment to the teachers (Good examples of “Children learning and working together”)

Meeting 5 (Spring 2006)

- Discussion and reflection based on the observations carried out by the teachers (see meeting 4) and on the survey data collected by the research assistant in spring 2005
- Focus on concerns about relationships, interaction and learning together
- Focus on good experiences and good practices
- Completing and discussing the Rating Scale (used by the research assistant as part of the survey in spring 2005)

Meeting 6 (Spring 2006, joint meeting of both teams)

- Discussion and exchanging views and ideas about good practices as well as about joint and peer-based learning to be aimed at in the future in both settings
- Joint evaluation of the impact of the Developmental Research
- Joint evaluation of the method of the Developmental Research.

Role of the researchers in the Developmental Research

All the meetings took place in a peaceful, informal and confidential atmosphere. Throughout the project, the overall intention of the researchers was to avoid any top-down approach, but rather highlight sharing and partnership with the teachers. However, like every intervention, the Developmental Research carried out in this project included some special functions assigned to the researchers. These were:

- organizing the meetings (contents and form)
- leading the discussions (e.g., prompting, questioning, commenting, recalling, revoicing)
- discussing the matter in question with the teachers and giving support when needed or asked for
- acting as scientific experts
- audiotaping the meetings, transcribing the tapes and analyzing the material (applying the idea of “teachers as participants in research”).

This presentation

This presentation deals with the Finnish data regarding children’s play, focussing on

- role of play in the settings
- interaction and relationships between children in play

- role of the teachers in play
- teachers' concerns regarding play
- teachers' thoughts and experiences of play and 'good pedagogical practice' in promoting play.

Survey phase: Some findings regarding play

The main findings regarding the aspects mentioned above are shortly listed here:

Role of play in the settings

- children's activity priority is play (teacher interviews)
- almost two thirds of observed activities are children-led, mainly play (classroom mappings, observations)
- special games aiming at collaboration are highlighted and carried out (teacher interviews, observations)

Interaction and relationships between children in play

- there are good relationships between children (teacher interviews, observations)
- no child is permanently excluded in play (teacher interview, observations)
- children are mainly playing in groups of same sex and same age (teacher interview, classroom mappings, observations)
- conflicts between children can be easily resolved (teacher interview, observations)

Role of the teachers in play

- scaffolding, tutoring, supporting, but mainly observing (classroom mappings, observations), and carrying out drama projects in Setting 1 (teacher interview, observations).

Developmental Research: Teachers' concerns regarding play

There were some concerns regarding play (according to interviews in the survey phase and discussions during the meetings). One of them dealt with physical aspects of the environment. The teachers of Setting 1 were not pleased with the amount of the rooms (only two own rooms for 17 children and some shared rooms) and their location (the group rooms beside a long, lively corridor). Lack of peaceful surrounding might have a negative influence on children's relationships and the possibility of undisturbed interaction in pairs or small groups.

Regarding children's relationships, the teachers of both settings expressed concerns about some children preferring to play alone and about some dominant children. Another concern was directed to the fact that in free activities the children mainly compose same-sex groups. How to intervene in all these cases in a correct way? The teachers had tried to promote inclusion of children playing alone by consulting their parents. By so doing they had sought sensitive ways to integrate these children gradually into joint play. They had, for instance, composed groups of two children, in which the children were asked to talk about their experiences, toys or favourite activities with each other. Then they composed (also mixed-sex) groups of three or more children to do the same, and finally also the shy children became better acquainted with other children and found courage to interact with them. One of the means by which the teachers had tried to influence a dominant child was in individual or group discussions, reminding that every child has wishes and that the wishes of every child must be taken into account when playing or working together.

The teachers of Setting 1 discussed, for instance, the historical changes in play and the impact of media on play and play materials. According to the teachers, children do not or can not play 'traditional' role games in the way they did some years ago. Children practiced social skills less

than before, and the ability to feel empathy was decreased; the teachers were worried of the emotional development of children. The children did not play with traditional toys. They played with figures introduced by the media: According to the teachers, the media also determines both the toys children have and what they want to have. One problem stated by the teachers related to children's own toys: children brought their toys to the day care centre not to play with, but to show them to other children only. Sometimes a child just walked around with his or her toy without joining an ongoing game.

Developmental Research: Teachers' views of good practices in children-led play

To a great extent the *good practices in children-led activities* dealt with play. In accordance with the National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care (2005) the teachers considered play to be the most important and relevant activity of young children. It is through and in play that the children learn and develop. Thus, a good practice is to give the children plenty of time to play (in spring 2005, about 60 percent of the day care day was children's free activities in both settings).

Emphasis was given to role play and construction play, but especially in Setting 2 also to board and other rule games. All these games contributed to peer interaction and joint learning: they were, for instance, good contexts for developing relationships, establishing friendships, discussing controversies, and solving problems. Especially beneficial for the children, according to the teachers, was to play in big groups. As to the teachers, a good practice regarding play and other free activities of children was to observe the children actively, and by so doing also get to know them better. The better the teachers knew children, the better they could promote children's relations, interaction and joint learning also outside play context. An example of a discussion in a meeting of the Developmental Research is presented below:

Example 1: A constructive game of five children with Dublo bricks

Children are building a wall by using Dublos.

(...)

They bring some plastic animals in the game and take roles of the animals; the construction play turns into a role play with replicas.

(...)

Susanna in a faint voice to the group: "*I'm a tiger*". No one reacts.

Susanna in a firm voice to Mikko: "*Hi, Mikko, I'm a tiger.*"

Mikko to Susanna: "*Yes, because you have a striped shirt.*"

Mikko: "*Me too, also I can be a tiger.*"

Mikko and Susanna begin to scratch the wall.

Lea to Susanna: "*Me too, also I can be a tiger...also I can be a tiger, can't I?*"

Susanna to Lea: "*[It is] not possible to have two tigers, but only one tiger.*"

Jaana comes to Susanna and Lea, points them with her finger and says

with emphasis: "*There can be two tigers. You are a tiger and you are a tiger.*"

(...)

Reflections of the teachers when discussing the example 1:

What kind of thoughts did this situation arouse in you?

"*[As a group] they collaborated nicely...*"

"*And the girls and boys collaborated terribly well together.*"

(...)

“Susanna, who was such a quiet and shy girl last year...now she participated fully when announcing that ‘I’m a tiger’.”

“Usually, when she could have a role [in play and drama], she was rather brave.”

“But she did not always like to take part [in joint activities]...when we asked her, she often refused to accept the role.”

“She wanted to choose her role by herself, she did not want to have the role that we suggested or appointed.”

(...)

What do you think, what did the children learn in this situation?”

“To be together and to negotiate, they negotiated, for instance, who is the tiger, but also the role of a big sister...”(not in the transcription above)

“And no one of the children was something like a boss, no-one ordered or directed the others, they were quite equal.”

“And it was, however, such a group that normally did not play together, but in this situation they did it.”

(...)

-> Further questions by the researchers regarding the teachers’ thoughts and practices, e.g. in organizing and facilitating play in similar situations, from the viewpoint of individual children and the children groups.

Developmental Research: Teachers’ views of good practices in teacher-led activities

As *good practices in teacher-led activities* both teacher teams emphasized whole group discussions (also regarding play and toys), long-term projects (including play, playful activities and drama), excursions and learning in everyday context (e.g., learning in play). The teachers also stressed joint singing as a good practice: especially in Setting 1 this was considered to be necessary for the feeling of togetherness and the sense of community in the children’s group. As good practices the teachers of Setting 1 mentioned the frequent use of drama: it brought many kinds of pleasure and allowed, for instance, shy or silent children to take part in a joint endeavour. An example of a discussion in a meeting of the Developmental Research is presented below:

Example 2: Monday morning welcomes

11 children sit on the bench. They have toys taken along from home (to play later with). The teacher sits in front of them. She plays the guitar and the children sing with her: *“Joel is here today, Joel is here today...”* The song goes on until every child has been mentioned in it. After that the teacher asks the children individually, one after the other, if the child would like to come and sit on a chair beside her and tell about his or her toy and about the weekend just passed.

(...)

Teacher: *“And who would like to be the next to come and tell?”*

Aaro: *“I’d like.”* Aaro has a toy spider and a car in his hand.

Teacher invites Aaro in a delighted voice to come to tell his news.

(...)

Teacher: *“Would you tell us about the car, where is it from?”*

Aaro: *“From Stockholm.”*

Teacher: *“Who brought it to you?”*

Aaro: *“My daddy.”*

(...)

Teacher: "How nice, Aaro, that you showed us [the toys]."

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One week later, it is again the morning meeting. Children tell each other about their toys and the weekend passed.

Aaro: "Hi, I also have something to tell, I want to tell you that..."

Reflections of the teachers when discussing the example 2:

"I think it was good last year that we had the special toy day when the children showed and told each other about their toys...although it took a lot of time. But every child could show his or her toy, to be in front of the other children and tell them, what the toy was, from where it was, and to introduce it to the others just in the way that helped also the shy children to appear to the others."

"...[as it was], they first told about the toy in pairs or in small groups...and later in front of the whole group."

"And the toy encouraged them, when the child came [in front of the others], the toy was something like a transferring object, it protected the child so that he or she could tell about it to the whole group."

"The children's group of last year was very talkative, they chatted a lot."

"On Mondays we even had a feeling that we never come to play... they told about the weekend and when one child said something, the others had associations...But I noticed that the children who were very timid in the autumn, began also to speak with the other children, it was really good for them."

(...)

-> Further questions by the researchers regarding the teachers' thoughts and practices, e.g. in encouraging children to participate in joint play.

Developmental Research: Teachers' views of good practices regarding organization of work, educational climate and general philosophy

According to the teachers, good practices regarding the overall organization of work, the educational climate and the general philosophy of the day care centres included clear daily schedules and the balance between different activities and between activities and rest during the day care day (in Setting 1) and creating quiet, unhurried atmosphere (in Setting 2). Good practices included a peaceful environment, positive personal care and attention to each child, taking into consideration children's initiatives and wishes, respect, as well as joy and humour. Of crucial importance the teachers of both settings pointed out working in teams, and in both cases this meant working in well-functioning teams. The teams contributed to consistent pedagogy and had a positive influence on atmosphere and on children by serving as a model of friendly relationships and good interaction. In addition to working in teams, educational partnership with parents was considered to be a good practice in both settings.

What was changed through the Developmental Research?

Due to the way the intervention was carried out in Finland, the teachers reported on the changes in their own educational thinking, attitudes and practices when working in their current children's groups. This reflection took place in the meetings as part of the focussed discussions and by means of the questionnaire.

When assessing the *impact of the Developmental Research* (on a 4-point scale, score 4 being ‘a lot of influence’) the scores were high (mean 3.2), especially regarding the influence on the teachers’ educational thinking and attitudes. The teachers had more than before begun to:

- deliberate and evaluate their educational work (mean 3.7)
- recognize important aspects in children’s joint learning, relationships and interaction (mean 3.3)
- become conscious of the educational values and goals of their teams (mean 3.7)
- deliberate children’s learning, relationships and interaction (mean 3.3)
- deliberate their roles as teachers and tutors of the group (mean 3.1).
- recognize good and less good practices in the pedagogy of themselves or their teams (mean 3.1).

As to pedagogical practice, the scores given by the teachers were slightly lower than those given to the issues of educational thinking and attitudes. The teachers estimated that through the Developmental Research they had more than before begun to:

- observe children’s joint learning, relationships and interaction (mean 3.1)
- divide children into small groups in teacher-led activities (mean 3.0)
- support children to work in groups in free activities (mean 3.0), and that they had
- changed their way to tutor children’s joint learning (mean 2.5).

In the last joint meeting of the Developmental Research the teachers discussed and shared their experiences of what they had learned and what was changed during and through the project, especially the Developmental Research, regarding the thematic of the project. The teachers stated that the project reminded them of the important viewpoint of relationships, interaction and joint learning: they had noticed that “little” things in education are “big” things. They also reported that they had started to think more over their own practices and activities, and begun to question their actions more than before. Further, they felt that they had become more convinced of the fact that good, confidential and warm relationships, between children and between children and teachers, are an essential starting point to all kinds of learning - learning in play and learning in adult-led activities.

Evaluation of the Developmental Research by the teachers

In addition to the impact of the Developmental Research on the educational thinking, attitudes and practices of the teachers regarding relationships, interaction and joint learning, the teachers were asked about more general impacts of the intervention in their work. This took place as part of the focussed discussions during the last meeting and by the questionnaire after the intervention.

In the last joint meeting of both teams, the teachers stated that the project had allowed them time to discuss their work in the team, which, as they pointed out, they had never done in such an intensive way. They also felt that their work had been supported and strengthened by each other and by the researchers. They told that they developed more understanding of how they had been doing their work, what they had been doing and where they are going to.

The individual experiences, views and comments (through the questionnaire) were much the same as those the collectively produced above. One of the most important benefits of the project was, according to one teacher, “the peaceful, undisturbed time to deliberate important questions connected to our educational work and especially those connected to children”. The intervention also contributed, for instance, to the development of their thinking when discussing together and

listening to the experiences of other members of the team. Moreover, through the intervention the teachers had received encouragement and new ideas to their own work.

The meaningful elements in the Developmental Research were, in addition to the discussions in the own team, the meetings with the team from the other setting: “Persons outside our own group can see our children and our environment in a different way”. It was also meaningful to watch the videos of children’s play and to see how children are able to encourage and help each other, ‘being valuable individuals’, as one teacher put it. And finally, the wish of the teachers was “a longer project”.

Final words

The ‘innovation’ of the Finnish intervention is its method, the Developmental Research, which was based on focussed discussions and stimulated recall in small teacher teams. The method can easily be applied to everyday life of early education settings (“learning in and through work”) in order to develop pedagogical practices in the group, e.g. in promoting children’s play. The method can also be utilized as an appropriate teacher in-service training model. Through focussed discussions and stimulated recall the practices may become more meaningful and sensitive regarding the children, as they are based on growing consciousness of values and objectives of education. Further, the method contributes to understanding of strengths and weaknesses of the former practices and helps to set challenges to the future. This was what also the teachers emphasized.

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