

Abstract: The construction of “the competent child” and early childhood care: Values education among the youngest children in a nursery school

The phenomenon I focus on in this article is the construction of “the competent child”, which has developed from both psychology and later the sociology of childhood and has influenced the Swedish Childhood Education. One purpose of this paper is to investigate the pedagogical signs in this construction of “the competent child” and to contribute to the discussion of the influence of a new understanding of children in a nursery practice. In addition to the theoretical part of the article, I present analysed material from a limited case study. I have chosen a Reggio Emilia-inspired nursery, with its emphasis on democracy and view of children as competent and active, to shed light on the connections between this view and a values education. I also aim to problematise this paradigm of childhood. The methods used in the present study are field notes and video recordings. Material from my case study illustrates how values education is expressed in a child care practice.

Keywords: Childhood, participation, pre-school, Reggio Emilia, the competent child, toddlers, values education.

Annika Månsson, Senior Lecturer, Malmö University
annika.mansson@mah.se

The construction of “the competent child” and early childhood care: Values education among the youngest children in a nursery school

Annika Månsson

Childhood as a social position

The focus of this article is the youngest children and the child care practice and it is based on a lecture held at the Cice conference (Children’s Identity and Citizenship in Europe) in Malmö 2007. At first I thought that the two concepts, toddlers and citizenship, were not compatible. Most of the historical tradition connected to democracy and citizenship has been entangled with power, gender, ethnicity and age. Public life has been organised by men and for men. Women and children have had a subordinate position with connections to the private sphere of life. Public life has been a male coded culture and a word like citizenship is historically impregnated with male power (Davidoff, 2001). I have thought about the incompatibility of toddlers and citizenship and believe that it is important to study the possibilities, if any, for participation and agency among the youngest children in an institutional practice.

Swedish pre-school involves nurseries with children aged 1-3 years. These institutions have been organised and equipped based on the discourse of the small child in need of care and nursing. This view has led to home-like pedagogical environments with an emphasis on nursing and a sense of security. Experimenting and exploration have been given little consideration in the nursery (Nordin-Hultman, 2004).

In this paper I want to discuss and problematise the construction of the competent child in different perspectives focusing on the youngest children in pre-school. The “the competent child” is not a precise concept but it seems to share some characteristics of current childhood (Ellegaard, 2004). It has been strong, especially in the Nordic countries e.g Sommer, 2005 and has often been used in popular language and has been influential in children’s institutions. The term “the competent child” may be seen as opposite to earlier representations of the child as needy and not yet fully competent. One of the characteristics that Ellegaard mentions is “that children are seen as social actors participating in the formation of their social reality instead of

merely objects of adult socialisation” (p 178). A study is presently carried out at a nursery inspired by the Reggio Emilia philosophy which focuses on democracy, investigative pedagogy and a view of children as being active and competent. It is an exploratory study with the purpose of testing some research questions and getting material for identifying some new problems. “The competent child” can be identified using observations made at this nursery. Studies that focus on toddlers’ participation in educational contexts are rare in a Swedish context; mostly they involve older children (Folkesson & Emilson, 2006). Sciences that define children and childhood are of importance to the construction of this phase of life. Age is connected to institutionalised lives; the organization of these lives is based on age and has consequences regarding social position (Krekula, Närvänen & Näsman, 2005). Broadly speaking e.g. developmental psychology with sequences of stages has had an influence on research on children and has formed a great deal of pedagogical principles. As a consequence, the child “in needs” has been emphasized and sometimes described in static terms like “a child should be able to count to three at a certain age” (Vallberg-Roth & Månsson, 2006). Age as a power structure is one of the ideas that characterize the hypothetical relationship between adults and children in institutions such as pre-school and school. In sociological research, the youngest children in particular, have been marginalised because of their subordinate position in societies (Corsaro, 2005; Prout & James, 2006; Qvortrup, 1994).

The meaning of conceptions

“Statements about what a child is, do not just say something about the child, but also reflect the adult’s perspective on the child. Even if the perspective may be founded on many concrete experiences about children, there is also an interpretation screen influenced by cultural ideas, values and the view of humanity” (my translation) (Sommer, 2005 pp. 82-83). The author calls this interpretation screen “a childhood filter” (a.a. p. 83). Dahlberg and her colleagues (2003) believe that the educators’ ideas about the competent child yield productive traces in their work. Our conceptions of children and childhood become a determinative factor when defining a child’s social and ethical identity, their rights and the learning context that is offered to them (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 83). The pedagogical attitude, the interaction between the adults and the children and the choice of materials used can all be viewed as indications of a competent, learning child; that early on can be active and investigative, be listened to and make its own decisions. Walkerdine (1995) points out that it is fully possible to show a connection between different practices and the specific presumptions concerning for example learning and teaching. All of this can also be viewed as parts of a “values-education,” a

term that can contain actions of the practice and the influence in terms of values (Thornberg, 2004).

The competent child in research

“What is a child?”; a question of importance, both for the academy and the professional practice. There has, since the nineties, been more focus on the questions of and research on children and childhood within the social sciences, particularly within sociology, previously more focused on the adult world. “The competent child” has been discussed in both sociological and pedagogical/psychological research, particularly in the Nordic countries e.g. Sommer (2005) and Kampmann (2004), but to some extent internationally as well e.g. Alanen (2001), Mayall (2001) and child psychology, for example by Stern (1991), whose research is summarized in “The infant’s interpersonal world.” Through clinical studies and studies of children and families in the every day life, he gives a picture of the, in many ways, competent infant, a picture of great importance for the view on children in child psychology. The image of a child as being competent, learning and searching for meaning has become of significant consequence for the research on pre-school and children in pre-school.

“The competent child” is an influential construction that may be explored. The emphasis on the childhood as only a social construction can lead to reductionism, a notion later discussed by Prout (2000). The emphasis on a self-governed, self-regulating child can lead to expectations of the child as being able to handle too much on its own, to make tough decisions demanding adult responsibility. There are indications of adults tending to abdicate from their responsibility in some situations (Sommer, 2005). In the discussion of “the competent child” there is a tendency of making the relationship between children and adults symmetrical, meaning an equal relationship regarding decisions, matters of responsibility and authority. Sommer (2005, p 47) quoting Brembeck (2000, p. 11) maintains that the view of the child as competent has levelled out the relationship between children and adults: “The view of children as competent individuals also calls for adults to renounce their authority to some extent and be the child’s friend” (my translation). The quote shows a problematic connection between being a friend and taking an adult position. There is no entirely equal relationship between children and adults regarding competence and authority (Sommer, 2005). A fear of being authoritarian can sometimes lead to adults not using their greater experience and their authority in situations where children may be in need of support. An open relationship, participation in decision making and listening need not be obstructed by the use of adult authority.

How is the term “competence” to be understood? It can be defined in different ways. Sommer (2005) who has discussed the construction of the competent child, classifies the concept: It can be viewed as inherited skills, as already conquered skills and abilities, but also as potential future possibilities depending on situation and age among other things. I choose to view competence as potentials, to avoid the essential view on children, where the ability and the power to act are embedded as a natural instinct.

According to Ellegard (2004) among others, the term “the competent child” primarily can be viewed as a break against the previously prevailing, directly opposite representation of the child. He also states that it is far from everyone who embraces this image of the child and that still other, partly opposite, discourses about children, childhood and practices with a connection to children exist parallel to the competent child. One example is the developmental psychology with sequences of stages, especially Piaget’s (1977) theory on the development of the child. A study on individual development plans by Vallberg Roth and Månsson (2006) is an example of this discourse. The image of the child emerging in this study shows, as a predominant discourse, a self-regulating child out of context, often described in terms of developmental psychology.

In an article Woodhead (2006) questions the formulation of universal rights for children (UN’s declaration of human rights). He problematises the thesis on children’s needs and he argues that it is not possible to find general, universal needs regarding children, because children’s needs are related to their environment and culture and that “the competent children” have no say in the formulation of their own needs. He argues that the generalization of needs is founded in a biological view on children while needs are cultural constructions. I believe that the term should be contextualized and deconstructed, but the questioning of a number of universal rights for children can have great and unwanted consequences. It would mean, for example, that a child’s need for physical care and freedom from violence could not be generalized. To question the UN’s child convention could be counterproductive in countries where children’s rights are not being prioritised. Hence, children’s need for security and physical care should be treated as general and universal rights.

Mayall (2002), on the other hand, is of the opinion that children differ from adults in the way that childhood is to be seen as a period when children may need protection because of less maturity and strength and that it means unequal power relationships.

Children’s participation and agency

The importance of children's participation in the institutional practices is emphasized by many researchers besides Mayall and Alanen, e.g. Nutbrown (1996) and Pramling Samuelsson and Sheridan (2003). They discuss children's possibilities of participating as a value and a pedagogical question and the interdependence of these two dimensions. They refer to the UN's declaration of human rights and the preschool curriculum (Lpfö 98, Ministry of Education and Science), both documents stressing the importance of children's influence and participation. Nutbrown, furthermore, discusses the differences in perspectives between children's needs and children's rights.

Concepts like democracy and participation can be interpreted in different ways and must be seen as relative and strongly connected to adults' actions in relation to children. Communication is a key factor here and adults' way of thinking and communicating with children offer the opportunities and the frames of children's possibilities for participation (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2003).

In a research project, Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson (2001) studied two nursery groups named the "Banana" and the "Orange" during several meal times. Among others, two questions were asked: "Has the children's notion of their own competence increased?" and "What kind of learning is possible?." The observations revealed that the educators' attitude and behaviour were different in the two groups. In one of the nurseries, the "Banana," the educators believed in the ability of the children and confirmed their skills, which was not the case in the "Orange." One author's conclusion is: at the "Banana" the children seem to get experiences of being competent and worth listening to, i.e. that they are respected as children with rights, an important component in care as well as in learning (aa. p.99).

Folkesson and Emilson (2006) have studied nurseries problematising toddlers' participation and influence. Their results indicate that a child's participation changes depending on differences in the pedagogical practices. Toddlers' participation can be understood in different kinds of activities where teachers' control vary. Weak framing with less control and restrictions lead to more participation (framing is a concept elaborated by Bernstein and is used as a tool to analyse the form of the pedagogical situations concerning relations and communication).

Children's agency is bound by context and situation. The term context can be understood in many ways and has disparate theoretical starting points. In this article it is consistent with the view of Cicourel (1979) it is a term including both the institutional context and the action and interaction of people within "social practices" (Säljö, 2000). According to Alanen (2001) it is important to study individual children and their behaviour and participation in their own social context. Children relate to both people and things in their every day lives in different social practices. As these practices vary they give different meanings to childhood. Alanen uses the concept "Childing prac-

tises” (p 135). One author who has focused on the question of children’s agency in different contexts, and especially child-adult relationships, is Mayall (2002). He argues that psychology traditionally emphasized children as “becoming” in the sense “going to be” and childhood as a period of preparation, and he believes that sociologists today are seeking to challenge these notions. Mayall notices different possibilities for children’s agency and that the social setting is of importance. In school, children struggle for agency in a “future oriented regime” (p. 85) while at home the “here and now” agency is in focus. Mayall (2001) discusses the children’s competence and agency and its dependency on the social context. In his study, children describe different participant activities according to family life, for example conflict solving and decision-making. By contrast, the children’s talk about school experiences are commonly described in terms of their lack of agency (a.a.).

The pedagogical setting

The pedagogical environment is an important part of the Reggio Emilia Education. The importance of the pedagogical settings and the materials as part of children’s subjectivity construction is emphasized by Malaguzzi(1993), the founder of the Reggio Emilia philosophy, and it is illustrated by his expression “the environment as the third pedagogue” (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 76). Rinaldi is one of the Reggio-pedagogues and considers a good pedagogical environment as a part of children’s rights and points out the connections between the quality of the environment and the standard of learning. The part played by adults in the creation of these pedagogical rooms that make it possible for children to use their opportunities to learn and become competent is very important (Rinaldi, 2006). Mayall (2002) argues that the social setting has emerged as a crucial determinant of children’s experiences and that the school and the home enable different childhoods through the ideologies the adults involved in each setting hold about childhood.

The way of organising space and materials in the Swedish pre-school (nursery) according to a strong cultural pattern is called a “home discourse” by Nordin Hultman (2004, p. 111) in her thesis “Pedagogical settings and children’s subjectification” (my translation) comparing Swedish Childhood institutions and their pedagogical environments with British ones. Inspired by Foucault (1980) Nordin Hultman writes, about the links between space and power and that the power of space is part of the ascribing of people’s identity and subject formation. Foucault (1980) has in his research emphasised the organisation of space in social practises like school, prisons and hospitals as conditions for subjectification. This “home discourse” has a long history in Swedish pre-school. The Barträdgård (Kindergarten) had “the good home” as an ideal with Fröbel inspiration, something that both Tallberg

Broman (1991) and Vallberg-Roth (1998) describe in their historical research. The home represented the kindergarten (Vallberg-Roth, 1998, p. 119). It has a strong symbolising function and communicates an agenda of a home supplementary function and expectations of the way children at a certain age should act. This can lead to an absence of challenges and experimentation. The environment could instead communicate a message of a variation of activities. Rooms are not only physical but they also express expectations of the relationships of the persons in the rooms and the relationship between them as well as the conditions for identity formation. Markström (2005), who studies normalisation processes in pre-schools, points out that the frames and conditions of the pre-school are dictated by society and within those frames the institutional order is negotiated and created by educators as well as children.

The philosophy of Reggio Emilia and the experiences of the pedagogical work there have caused a development and have challenged the current pre-school pedagogical tradition. The Reggio Emilia inspired pedagogy is described as a pedagogy where the ability to listen to children, to be able to be inspired by children and learn from them is important (Rodari, 1988; Rinaldi, 2006).

A values educational way of working

Ideas of democracy have always played an important role in Swedish pre-schools as well as in the other Nordic countries (Brembeck, Johansson & Kampmann, 2004). These ideas have been part of a bigger society related democracy project that still has influence over the everyday life of the institutions (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2003). Moss (2006) points out that, institutions for children can be a platform for democratic work and that the childhood and the pedagogical work are very important in expanding democracy in complex post industrial societies.

In this paper I use the term values education in accordance with Thornberg and Colnerud (2003). Values education is the term used in the Anglo-Saxon countries and includes pedagogical programs, methods, interventions and interaction. Thornberg and Colnerud believe that values education in their texts refer to two overlapping fields. The first one is: Pedagogical interventions and methods, which intend to stimulate and affect individuals or groups to construct, understand or critically reflect on values and norms. The second one is: Activities, situations, relationships or processes that include some sort of learning in relation to values and norms through individuals' and groups' constructing, interpretations, incorporation or questioning of values and norms. Consequently the term values education does not only include educational methods but also conscious and unconscious

activities and processes as well as relevant learning. Thornberg (2004) discusses the different values of the term and reasons about explicit and implicit value pedagogy. He points out that, besides the official goals and directions for the value pedagogical work in pre-school and school which are formulated in separate curricular texts at different levels, there is also a hidden value pedagogical practice in school. The comparison can be made with the term “the hidden curriculum,” discussed among others by Halstead (1996) and Broady (1991). Halsted uses the terms explicit and implicit values education and believes that teachers themselves are role models and constitute a part of this “hidden curriculum.”

With implicit values I assume that the educators have internalised models for behaviour and organisation that are built on values of the pre-school education and its goals. In my opinion, their values educational work is explicit as well, based on explicit goal descriptions on different levels. Related questions concerning play in pre-school are discussed by Gannerud and Rönnerman (2006) in a report “Contents and meaning in teachers work in pre-school and school” (my translation).

Thus, the aim of this study is to investigate the meaning of pedagogical choices and the significance of the pedagogical setting for children’s participation in pre-school.

Hopefully my study can contribute by adding some new knowledge to the discussion of toddlers’ opportunities for participation in an institutional context, like a nursery, despite their early age, and to discuss the construction of the competent child in relation to a values education.

A case study

This article is based on a case study, carried out in several short periods during one and a half year at a strategically chosen pre-school nursery. My choice of pre-school is based on the fact that the pre-school applies an investigative way of working and is influenced by the pedagogical way of thinking, inspired by the Reggio Emilia philosophy with its strong emphasis on children’s agency and participation.

The reason to stay for a long time making observations at one and the same nursery, is to get the opportunity to study actions and interactions in an ordinary day to day context in order to be able to make interpretations which can result in patterns and variation (Patton, 1991). To focus on the meaning of social practises implies a methodological position: “It is not just about studying what children do or say that they do. It is also about discussing these practices and the consequences for the children” (Halldén, 2003, p. 17).

The fieldwork observations emanate from one nursery in the pre-school with a staff of five educators and 26 children 1-3 years of age, 11 girls and 15 boys. Four years ago the pre-school merged two nurseries, which accounts for the large number of children. Every group has its own part of the nursery at meal times. Apart from that, the rooms of the merged departments have been organised to suit different activities. During a two year period a variety of situations has been video-taped on several occasions (15 hours of video recordings) and field notes primarily with a focus on the interaction between toddlers and educators and between toddlers and the pedagogical environment. Different situations, like daily activities as meals but also circle times and planned group activities, have been registered.

The main question of the study is: is it possible to distinguish traces of children's initiatives made in a nursery practice with small children, according to the educators' conceptions of children as competent? Another question is: what might participation be on a concrete level in an institutional practice? What are the possibilities for the children to participate and to take an active part in the pedagogical setting?

The analysis of the material has been directed towards the nursery as an institutional social practice and what appears in the actions of the children. The material has been grouped in themes on the basis of educators' arrangement of situations with opportunities for children's participation. The choice of the video sections and other observations are made with support of the method "Critical incident" (Erickson, 1986). Situations of interest are those where the children participate in the pedagogical institutional practice. One way of understanding toddler participation during the analysis of the material was to look for answers to questions like: What is the role of the teachers? What are the possibilities for the children to be active and take initiatives? What opportunities of agency and meaning making are offered by the pedagogical environment?

The analysis of the collected material from the case study is based on the implicit value message of the practice, i.e. about the possibilities for the children to participate and to be active. I therefore propose that the offers and the possibilities for participation and agency in the pedagogical environment can be seen as a part of a values education, an opinion I share with e.g. Colnerud (2004) and Thornberg (2004).

The following section of the article is the analysed material from my study and one ambition is to keep close to the observations and put forward examples of toddler participation in different situations.

Possibilities for children's participation at a Reggio Emilia inspired nursery

In this section I would like to explain the institutional order created by the educators, based on an idea about children's ability and agency. The educators have organised a large room with opportunities to play games of construction, building and experimenting. In the nursery there is a library with books visible and accessible on a shelf at child height and also a room for painting.

I have been able to make observations of situations where the children get different offers through the pedagogical environment that seems to indicate to the children what can be explored, investigated and worked with. There are easels always ready to use and also paint in small jars, made of glass so that the colours show, with brushes in them. Despite the early age of the children, the educators use different technical teaching aids, like overhead projectors and computers located in a way that make it possible for the children's spontaneous use. The following observation examples are related to the question of children's interaction with the pedagogical environment.

Jakob (2 years old) looks at the easels and walks towards one of them and starts taking a brush. One educator comes and puts on an apron. Jakob stands at an easel and starts painting. He first uses a dark green paint. He is about to change to light green. He puts the brush down in the light green jar. Takes a look and moves it back to the dark green jar. He then takes the light green colour and keeps on painting, concentrating for a long period of time on the light green paint.

One of the educators commented that, when the children are given opportunities to take their own initiatives and be investigative in the nursery environment, e.g. by the placing of materials at child height, she notices how the children develop abilities she did not initially notice. The educators make it possible for the children to take initiative by keeping materials available constantly.

In a space between the hallway and a room sits an older sandpit on legs, a pedagogical detail, commonly used during earlier pre-school periods. In this sandpit the educators have placed a lot of different wild animals made of plastic and clay. On the wall behind the sandpit hangs a piece of fabric with similar animals of the same shape and colour.

When I pass the sandpit, one of the first days, a little boy is stood in front of it and is looking intensely at the animals in the sand and then at the ones on the wall. He looks at me and points to an elephant on the wall and then to a very similar plastic one in the sand and smiles at me.

One possible interpretation could be that the boy is intrigued by the similarity between the animals on the wall and in the sand. The environment seems to captivate the children and inspire them to examine and explore its design, often focusing on similarity and differences (Hultman, 2004). The following observation is an example from the pedagogical environment and the effect of art on the walls in children's height:

The educator sits with the children on the floor and they look in a book of arts and a picture of Magritte with a blue jug on it. Little Klara, 1 ½ years old, becomes eager and points at the wall in front of them and says: "The same, the same!" The educator looks surprised at Klara and she continues saying: "The same." The educator looks at the wall and sees a picture with a similar jug although smaller and in another colour. The educator does not know the name of the artist and looks at the picture where it is printed Magritte.

The children are stimulated by the pedagogical environment. They get various impressions and notice similarities as well as differences and make new discoveries.

Everyday competence through the children's active participation

The routine situations of everyday life (the daily run of things) such as meal time, is very time-consuming in nurseries. The organisation of these activities and the children's possible part in such social practices, as well as their understanding of these practices, may encourage them to participate (Sommer, 2005). The following observation from a meal time illustrates children's agency in spite of their young age. The educators sit at different tables together with three or four children.

Mia, a girl of two and a half years says: "I want more." An educator, Malin, at her table says: "You can go and get it at the other table. Mia goes to the other table and Ingrid, another educator asks her: "What do you want, couscous?" Mia nods and gets couscous and walks back to her table with her plate looking concentrated. When the children have eaten they all take their plates, knives and forks and walk to the sink and put it there.

After lunch one child often is asked to help to put out the mattresses for the rest time, which the following observation exemplifies:

Lunch time is just finished and the educator Jane asks the children who wants to help to put out the mattresses. Elin, two and a half years old answers: "Yes!". Elin drags one mattress behind her. Jane: "You can put it on Miriam's place. Where shall it be?". Elin puts it on the right place and takes a pillow and puts it on the mattress. Jane: "And Konrad's, where shall that one be?". Elin puts Konrad's mattress on the right place and afterwards also her own.

In spite of her young age, Elin gets the opportunity to participate in arranging the rest time together with an adult.

Most things are placed at child level in the toilet area, for example the basins are at the children's height as are the mirrors. The children are encouraged to actively participate in activities like changing of nappies and washing. On one occasion an educator (Anna) goes into the toilet room with a girl (Neda, 18 months) who needs a new nappy. In that room there is an adjustable nursing table.

The nursing table is at floor level. Neda lies down on it by herself. Anna pushes a button to make the nursing table elevate with Neda on it. Anna looks at Neda, smiles and talks to her while the nursing table slowly rises. Anna changes her nappy and washes her slowly while continuously talking to her. Neda is smiling. When the nappy has been changed Anna pushes the button to make the nursing table slowly descend back to floor level. When it stops at floor level Neda gets off. She turns to the button and pushes it to make the table rise again. She looks at Anna looking pleased.

On another occasion I watch Kia (22 months) who needs a new nappy in the toilet room with the educator called Monika. Kia gets down on the floor and starts to take off her nappy with some difficulty. Monika sits next to her on the floor and smiles encouragingly. Kia then gets up and picks up the used nappy from the floor, walks over to the nappy disposal unit, pushes down the pedal with her foot to open the lid and throws the nappy away. Kia concentrated very hard on the task and looks pleased when it is completed. Monika then helps her with a new nappy.

One possible interpretation of these observations is that the children are allowed to take an active part in the daily activities and be both dependent and competent and they are also examples of how care and learning meet. The care situations, like changing nappies, are allowed to take time during which

both interaction and learning take place. Neda has after a few times on the nursing table learned how to operate the elevation function, she pushes the button herself and stands watching the table rise.

Agency and participation in theme situations

The educators have an ambition to involve the children and make sure they get to be subjects in the nursery collective. This is accomplished in different ways. One of the themes at the nursery, "Where I live," starts with the participation of every child, in order to make the child visible as an individual. Every child is the centre of attention and is supposed to show the way to his or her home. The parents participate and can prepare the child for the task. Such an activity, as presented here, is part of the documentation of this theme from the nursery:

The educator Ingrid walks with the children Mia, Matilda, John and Tilde (all of them about three years old) John is the one who is directing the way today.

Ingrid: "Where do we walk now?" John: "Through the gate and then there" (points to the right). John: "Then you push a button and cross the street. It has come up there" (stains of asphalt). The children look closely at the stains. John: "That is the bicycle repair shop. That is where I fix my bike." John points to the parking meter: "I live over there by that." Ingrid: "What is it?" John: "It is where you park the car. You get a ticket for your car here" (John points to a slit in the meter). Someone comes out from the yard and says hello to John and lets us in.

The educators plan a situation where, on this specific occasion, John is the one who shall take the initiative and be the one who directs and leads the whole group. The subordination of the small child is deliberately exchanged in the position switch between child and adult and the relative asymmetry in the child-adult relationship is partly revoked. Situations, where the children can get the feeling of being capable of accomplishing a task are of great importance to the creation of subject (Nordin-Hultman, 2004).

The educator Jane is the leader of a group of four children aged two and two and a half: Lukas, Emelina, Elin and Miriam. They are experimenting starting out from the question of resemblance and difference and they are investigating shadows:

Jane: "Do you see what is on the floor?." "The children together: "Shadow." Jane: "It is the overhead." "The overhead" cries Lukas with a happy voice. Elin switched on the overhead projector. She cries: "I could!." Jane: "Yes you could." Emelina puts her hand on the overhead machine and looks at the wall where her hand is like a shadow. She cries: "Shadow." Jane: "Yes it is a shadow." The children then puts on some buttons and some sticks on the overhead machine. Emelina: "Look a stick!." Jane: "What sort of stick is that?" Emelina: "Such one that has Heléne."

The children are allowed to handle various technical equipment, like overhead projectors and computers, in different situations. Thereby giving them the possibility of achieving an early technical competence.

In order to nuance the findings a little I intend to mention situations when the children are not participating in the way as they are in the daily routines and in the planned thematic project situations. The adult guided situations, like the circle times, follow a rather rigid pattern of name training, singing, providing information about the day's activities and adults asking children questions. These circle times follow a traditional pattern with adult dominance and with few child initiatives. This can be compared to previous research by Rubinstein Reich (1993) and Månsson (2000). Both authors discuss the circle time structure compared to that of classroom interaction.

Age and power

In my analysis I have found that the children in this nursery can get the opportunity to be active and to participate in the daily activities like meal times, rest times and care situations partly because of the availability of the pedagogical environment and partly because of the educators' way of involving children in assisting in the routines of daily life. The representation of the child as potentially competent, as in the Reggio Emilia philosophy, is productive and is expressed by the educators' way of organising the pedagogical practice and interaction with the children. The children in my study who are from 1 and ½ to 3 years old (toddlers) have by tradition been treated as mostly dependent and needy. However, in my study, I have found various situations giving opportunities for children's agency and participation. Such a nursery practice, with active, exploring children in focus has not been the standard concerning the youngest children. Age can be viewed as being socially and culturally constructed. Different age groups get different responses because some physiological, cognitive and social processes are connected to chronological age. A big part of the positioning among the children is performed in dichotomy relationships such as child-adult; child and there-

fore not adult (Taguchi, 2000). “Age is connected to a institutionalised life course. These life courses include standards that define rights and obligations and anticipated activities...”

A pedagogical practice based on the concept of an active child, given a lot of opportunities to partake in the different practices of pre-school, gives the children more influence and opportunities for participation, which could be connected to aspects of power. The asymmetry between the adults and the children might partly be displaced when the children are allowed more space and a more active part in the pre-schools practices.

Children in pre-school all too often are put in situations in which they experience the feeling of failure (Hultman, 2004). However in this situation, the child is engaged in a situation of coping and, instead of experiencing shortcomings, is offered possibilities of success and is practicing competence.

Mayall (2002) discusses the adult-child relationship. He says that children often are viewed as weak and ignorant because they are looked upon as helpless and dependent on others. They are often not allowed to gather new experiences and new knowledge. Many children believe so strongly that they are perceived as ignorant and immature and that is how they are supposed to be, it is presumed that they should stay that way during their childhood.

The pedagogical environment signalling access and activity

In my analysis I can see that the educators’ way of organising the nursery environment, with furniture and different materials in the height of the children, indicates availability and possibilities to be active. The variety and the attraction of the material, with painting colours in different colours and pencils in eye height, construction material lying available on the floor, clay on a table and walls decorated with paintings in height of the children, stimulate them to take initiatives of their own, to be active and creative and to examine the environment. The connection between children’s possibilities of making choices and decisions for themselves and participation is a conclusion drawn by Folkesson and Emilson (2006) in a study on toddlers, “Children’s participation and teacher control.” The importance of the structures and the materials is related to agency. Children’s agency is to be understood as possibilities (or limitations) of actions as determined by the structures, which they are positioned within as children (Mayall, 2001). Thus, the educators make various discourses and practices visible through the use of the rooms, the routines and the materials exposed. Hultman (2004) believes that diversity in the pedagogical room is necessary if there is to be opportunities for differences to develop amongst the children. She makes comparisons with English

pre-schools finding a more challenging environment with a broader variation than in the Swedish pre-school. In my study I have, on the contrary, observed a pedagogical setting with variation and possibilities for agency inspired by the Reggio Emilia philosophy with its emphasis on the pedagogical environment and its meaning related to children's agency and participation (Rinaldi, 2006; Dahlberg, 2003).

Involving the children in the daily routines and pedagogical themes

I have registered that, despite of the early age of the children (some of them just started walking), they get the opportunities and are able to be active in the meal time routines e.g. clearing the tables. They are also involved in putting out the mattresses at rest time and assisting in the toilet area. The organisation of these activities, letting the children take the time and encouraging them to take an active part, results in children's learning that they are a part of the everyday life and the daily run of things. The meal, with cooked food at least once a day, and with educators participating during mealtime, with pedagogical and caring aims is an old tradition in the Swedish pre-school (Johansson & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001; Månsson, 2000). The mealtime is associated with feelings, ethic and care but education and learning are evident aspects as well.

The conclusion of the study is that the matter of importance is the educators' beliefs in the children's abilities and skills. (Johansson & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001, p. 99). This result corresponds with the observations made in my study. The children are entrusted with different tasks and get encouraged to accomplish them. In Sommer's (2005) opinion the routines in everyday life that children participate in are fundamental to the acquiring of culture and are of importance to their development of competence.

In the thematic projects the children are allowed to take initiatives, to be active, solve problems and experiment. To work with problem solving has mostly been part of the natural sciences didactics in Swedish pre-school education. In the Reggio Emilia pre-schools however, the problem area can concern most of the everyday questions, which has so far been unusual in Swedish early childhood pedagogy (Lindahl, 2002).

“The competent child” and a values education

The examples in my material can be interpreted as an expression for a pedagogical practice, where children are allowed to take a position as potentially competent (Sommer, 2005). By this I mean that children do not have an in-

herited competence but that they have potentials for further developing different competences.

In a practice where children are allowed to and able to act, they can explore, experiment and investigate different possibilities that confirm or contrast their own notions and thoughts (Dunne, 2006). Dunne argues that this pedagogical attitude toward children's strength and potential is opposite to the one that turns children into consumers and teachers into intermediaries.

"The competent child" is an influential construction that should be discussed and that can lead to a reduction of the child as strong, non dependent and self-regulating. Mayall (2002), on the other hand, is of the opinion that children differ from adults in the way that childhood is to be seen as a period when children may need protection because of less maturity and strength and that it means unequal power relationships.

James and Prout (2006) have recently started to problematise the strong emphasis on the autonomous and competent child. It is said that when dealing with the question about children as competent you can be criticised of being essential. "The competent child" can be seen as a return to "the child as nature," which was the starting point for the critical scrutiny of developmental psychology.

This later view can lead back to the previous child paradigm "the child as nature," which was one of the starting points for the scrutiny of developmental psychology. I believe that the children in the nursery I have observed can take the position as dependent with access to adult nursing and care, but also as independent players with many offers in the pedagogical practice of the nursery. These aspects can be part of a discussion about the discourse concerning the competent child and the connection to questions of morality and how values education is expressed in a practice.

Dahlberg and her colleagues (2003) integrate a view of ethics of care in the learning process with a connection to citizenship and democracy. The link between care and learning is strong in the Swedish child-care system and it has a prominent role in the curriculum for pre-school (Lpfö 98). However, not much is said about care in terms of nursing and physical knowledge. Care is instead one of many ways in which the children learn and gather knowledge (Halldén, 2003; Lindgren, 2000).

This discussion about moral questions in relation to children is founded on a relational outlook, where interaction and dialogue as well as the educator's behaviour and attitude towards the children are of great importance.

Our construction of child and childhood is productive (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2003). By this the authors mean to say that there are many ways to understand child and childhood and we make choices in what we believe the child to be. These choices affect the pedagogical work done in the childhood institutions. This raises questions about how and in what ways adults are part of the construction of childhood and in what ways they offer the prerequi-

sites for the development of further competence that is potential and not a born quality.

The prevailing child/childhood discourse (the educators' conceptions of child and childhood) affects the relationships between children and staff at pre-schools, their organisation and choice of design and content. In my opinion, the providing of possibilities for children's participation and influence could be labelled "a values education."

Finally: this article is based on an exploring study in which I have intended to test some questions and also raise some new ones. The study is a starting point to a more extensive study at a number of pre-schools. The new questions raised in this study are, first: when and in which relationships do children use agency and competence and in which relationships do they not? and second: in what way is gender a part of this use of agency and participation in a pedagogical setting?

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