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Early Childhood Education in Norway: Time as an indication for Pedagogical space?

Abstract

This paper is about discourses in teaching in Early Childhood Education, and the core question is if, and eventually how, time is disciplining and controlling the life of the classroom. What teachers do in classroom can be looked upon as constructing and deconstructing reality and knowledge for children and youths. The purpose of this study was therefore to inquire and examine different teachers in their work, to see how discourses were constituted, and to see how time influenced on the activities.

The arena presented is the classroom for the 6 year olds, the first grade in school in Norway. By a new law and a new national curriculum in 1997, the so-called Reform 97, the 6 year-olds were moved from kindergarten to school. Data presented in this paper is based on an evaluation research project carried out in 1998-99 (Germeten 1998, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c).

Why do I think that time is so important in school today? Curriculum, calendars, timetables, clocks, lessons and leisure time are all central words in school discourse. Pupils rush to and from school, in and out of classrooms, "on and off" subjects, as if time was scarce. Instantly we see that activities connected to time governs the day in the traditional school. Many of the observations in this evaluation also showed that governmentally of time was central in the disciplinary process (Foucault 1972, 1990, 1999).

Introducing the context

Reform 97, the new compulsory school reform in Norway came into force the 1st of July 1997. The new reform is very complex, and some of the major changes were that children now start school at 6, and that compulsory schooling is 10 years, in stead of 9. This is the first

time that the Norwegian government has extended the years of schooling with one extra year on the bottom, not on the top.

This crucial question about age of starting school had been debated for more than twenty years in Norway. There had also been an extensive educational experiment in the last 80thies to find out what was "best" for the 6-year-old: kindergarten or school. The evaluation of this experiment is widely documented by the Norwegian researcher Peder Haug (1992 and 1995). He pointed out that the choosing between kindergarten and school, was a choice of values. If kindergarten (*barnehage in Norwegian*) for the 6 years old was preferred, it was a choice of extended freedom for play and other self-willed and self-supported activities. It was also a signal for protection of the childhood and the "freedom of time" for the individual child. If school was chosen, as the outcome eventually was, it was a choice of a more academic approach to childhood, controlling the upbringing and children's learning.

One of the reasons, stated by the politicians in Norway, in choosing schools as the arena, was that all children would receive *education*, which means to make them to meet the challenges of the future (KUF 1996). *Education* was not looked upon as the main goals of the Norwegian kindergarten; care was the main goals of the kindergarten at that time. Another reason for the choice was that schooling was compulsory, the kindergarten was not. Therefore there was also an idea of equality and equity in the choice of lowering the school age for children in Norway.

The new curriculum (L97- KUF 1966) contains new syllabuses for all subjects. Especially, for the 1. – 4. Grades, there has been major changes. For the 6-year-olds, the new curriculum states that "*the new pedagogy*" should be based on the tradition of the Norwegian kindergarten and the traditions of the compulsory schools .To make this opportunity, pre-school¹ teachers were allowed to enter compulsory school, teaching the 6-year-olds. For this age group, the school day should be flexible with emphasis on play and other "playlike" methods; the curriculum stated (L97, s. 73). The contents of the education were supposed to be organised as *themes* in contrast to syllabuses. Working methods like project-oriented and teamwork were introduced from 1.grade, and there should be a gradually transition from themes to subjects and syllabuses.

¹ Pre-school teachers in Norway have to fulfil a special 3 years Teacher Education on university level

In the political debate in relation to Refom97, it was said that the “*freedom of play*” for 6-years-olds was at risk, and accordingly, *time* to play was discussed as an element of this.

The Reform97 have now lasted for 3 years, and there have been some evaluation programmes in Norway during that time. Amongst others are my own research (Germeten 1999a and 1999b) in addition to Lillemyr m.fl. 1999 and Trageton m.fl.1998.

In this paper I will present and discuss some aspects of play in Early Childhood Education in connection to *time*. Michel Foucault's perspectives on power-in-relation, disciplining the body and the self, inspired the theoretical framework of the project According to this, I would like to analyse the terms and the "inner rules" of teaching, its borders and limits, its standards and styles of reasoning. I found of that disciplining through *time* (and space) was one of the "inner rules" of teaching, appearing to be a strong indication for what the teachers considered as "pedagogical space" and "possible ways of teaching". To say it in terms of Foucault (1972, 1990 and 1999): Time is a *technology of discipline*.

Schooling as the object for control?

Observations

As for the empirical facts: In a part of the evaluation, I looked into five classrooms to observe, among many other subjects, the implementation of the new national curriculum (called L97). By observing closely the relationship between teacher and children, I also got the opportunity to make quantitative studies of *time* in this qualitative, anthropological study of what the teachers and pupils were doing in the classroom.

The first thing that struck me was that the organisation and content of the five schools were so distinctively different. The way the teachers had implemented the “*traditions from kindergarten and school*” referring to the national curriculum (L97 p. 73) were different in style, framing and using of *time and space*. Especially, *time* was the core elements of this.

Three schools, out of five, had a very distinctive border between outdoor and indoor activities. These three schools had organised most of the school days with “traditionally” lessons and

leisure time², but the pupils were more outdoor while schooling, than before the reform (Haug 1992 and 1995³). Mostly all first graders in Norway, from the Reform 97 and onwards, have one “outdoor-day” once a week and one "outdoor -lesson" every day (Germeten 1999a). So was the fact with the five schools in this evaluation project, too.

Only two schools had been able to vary different activities with both open and restricted *framing*, indoors and outdoors. These schools gave the children more opportunities to play both in time and space, even though classrooms were not at all "playlike". In my evaluation, the ways classes were organised in *time* contribute more to the opportunities to play, than physical surroundings. The teachers of these two classes organised the structure of time more like a *kindergarten-like* rhythm of the day. In these schools, the children were given good opportunities to play indoors as well as outdoors. Although the physical framing was an ordinary classroom in both schools, giving little space to play, the teachers were aware of how *time* is "the helper" to make play possible. In a kindergarten-like day rhythm, all activities on the agenda take the time it is given. Play, in these schools, was not only a distinct method for learning; it was the glue that held different school activities together, as well as *the* main activity in classroom.

Analysis

The differences between the five schools in activities and time arrangements, along the observations, were connected to what the children were allowed/not allowed doing during the days. The daily programme, especially the pattern of organisation, gave influence on the activities and the children's opportunity to play both inside and outside the classroom. Organising the *time* was a key factor.

In three of the schools, the outdoor scene was the arena of play. Here the children were supposed to organise their own time, inside classroom was the teaching arena, and the teachers domain.⁴ In these schools, there was very little time and space for so called “free

² In Norway, a school-lesson is usually 3 quarters of an hour, and then 10 minutes break.

³ According to Haug in 1995, 80 % of children's activities were in-doors. In my study, all the five schools were approximately 50% out-doors.

⁴ I will go no further with the discussion on if or what children can learn from play, because that is not an issue in this paper. Undoubtedly play is important to children's learning, but it is the discipline in organisation of time in play that is in focus here

play” inside classroom. Outdoor, on the contrary, the children got the opportunity to choose activities, where to play within the limits of the schoolyard, with what and with whom. Outdoors, there was a loose framing of activities and play and with it: no visible aim of education. Including that, there were no visible classifications, comparing, corrections or control from the teachers. Or to say it with Foucault: *"The examination (...) transformed the economy of visibility into the exercise of power"* (Rabinow 1984, s. 199).

To examine and to control are techniques by which power holds the mechanism of objectification (Foucault, here in Rabinow 1984, s. 199). Like three of the schools in this project, there was very little play, almost nothing at all inside classroom. The activities for the 6 year-olds, inside the classrooms, consisted of teaching traditionally school activities like: exercising, using readymade textbooks, going over homework, questioning, and keeping the children strictly to the programme of the curriculum or the books. The result was that these *narrow* framing activities (read teaching) made a huge contrast to the *loose* framing activities out doors. Naturally, outdoor play gives different abilities than play in doors. The outdoor play is more physical accordingly to the room and space it is given. On the opposite, different kind of play do not occur outdoors because there are no possible “scene “for it. On the other hand, play inside classroom cannot develop with a narrow framing and a strict control. The observations in this evaluation project showed, among other things, that a lesson in 3/4 of an hour (or less than that⁵) gave the children few opportunities to choose activities like play. Another consequence of this way of constructing time was that the teachers decided what to do, they governed and controlled the "little" time that was left.

Summing up

Early Childhood Education can be looked upon as an interruption of the freedom of childhood. Small bodies are brought to school in order to be observed, controlled and forced into new relations with teachers and other children. This is what Foucault (1975, here in Rabinow 1984, s. 181) called *disciplining*. The aim is to produce subjected bodies, *docile bodies*, obedient to the church⁶, the society and the production. An important part of the schooling is how *time* is organised. Foucault said that the mystique of the everyday is joined

⁵ Some of the lessons lasted approximately 20 minutes because the 6-year-old, during winter time in Norway, need 5-10 minutes to dress and undress their winter clothes and boots, before the lesson can start.

⁶ Especially in Norway the school system and the church by law has a close connection

with the discipline of the minutes (Rabinow 1984, s. 184). The observations and supervisions of the smallest fragments of life and the body will provide the context of the schools. This tradition has followed the system of schooling since the origin of the educational institutions. Besides the formation of the school buildings, with corridors and classrooms like "*small cells*" (Rabinow 1984, s. 191), the structure of regularity in lessons and intervals, works and breaks, has dominated our thinking of what schooling is like.

In 1997, for the first time in Norway, 6 year-olds were transferred from a voluntarily kindergarten to compulsory schooling. One of the issues of concern was connected to children's opportunity to "freedom to play" and the time to play. The results showed that teachers to a large extent use *time* as a disciplining technology, according to Foucault. As a consequence of this: The teachers were holding the floor in the classrooms and were the "gate-keepers" letting children in or out of play. The teachers decided also when and where to start and stop activities, how to organise the structure of the day, who were allowed to speak or listen, play or sit still. And the question is then: What do this do with the children and their learning process? Summing up: Time as an indication for pedagogical space in teaching can be looked upon like this:

- School clocks ringing in and out of lessons (and not giving the activities the time it takes)
- Regulated timetables showing subjects of the lesson/day/week (and not letting the children's subjects of interest rule the days)
- Keeping in control the physical movements in classroom by doing collective "small" activities sitting at the tables or desks (in stead of letting the children as individuals move around, play and work where and in the way they choose)
- Teachers "holding the floor", framing the activities (and not giving the children opportunities to communicate and decide what, where and with whom to play or work)
- Teachers speaking and children listening (and not the other way round)
- Using readymade textbooks (in stead of making their own books and materials)

- Questioning lessons, exercises and homework (and not giving the children opportunities to tell what they have learned or show what they have done)
- Making stops and controlling schedules (in stead of giving an "open" framing of the day)
- Observing, registration and recording what children do (and not allowing yourself as a teacher constitute and co-construct the subject matters with the children)
- Keeping the children strictly to the programme of the curriculum or the books (in stead of using their perspectives to view the world)

From my point of view, one of the challenges for the Early Childhood Education is how to establish a net of communication between the children in stead of arranging all activities for them. To do this, will make changes in power of knowledge and relation in school and education, and the core question then, is how to convert the dominant *discourse* of what school is like.

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