

Transition to Primary School in Norway: Some Political Issues, some Educational Challenges and some Unresolved Problems

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Abstract

The chapter develops a historical perspective on starting school in Norway. With focus on both the political aspects and the pedagogical ones, children's transition from kindergarten to school is described. In Norway, the political discussions about the age for starting school have been connected together with other reforms in school; among them are decentralisation and the duration of schooling.

From experiment to political solutions

The age for starting school has been on the political agenda for more than two hundred years in Norway. Professor Peder Haug (1992) writes in his thesis that this issue was a matter of controversy already when the first school law was passed in 1739. At that time the question under discussion was whether five, six or seven years of age should be the school starting age. With the decision of 7 years of age, Norwegian children got a late starting point compared with most other European countries. Due to Norwegian topographical and geographical conditions, a distributed population, political regulations for schools and other social rulings, the young children had quite a long walk to school, in more than one meaning of the word. This road has been a central issue of debate over the years, from the First law of Primary Schools in 1739 up to the late part of the 1990s.

The distributions of primary schools in Norway indicate even today that every small island and village is supposed to have "their own school". The communities are built on the idea that in a decentralised society the school is the centre of activity. But even if schools are decentralised, people's patterns of living are even more so. Therefore, it was looked upon as not good for children younger than seven to be sent to a boarding school in the centre of the community. Boarding Schools as state provided schools were not uncommon in rural districts up to the 1980s. From the age of seven, the children were sent by boat or bus on Sunday evening and did not return to their homes until Friday evening.

To the question of schooling for the under seven year olds, the united efforts for kindergartens (in Norwegian *barnehage*) formed a movement from the early 1950s. This movement was organised by the Norwegian Housewife Association (NH) and other local organisations and wanted to look upon the *barnehage* as an institution of education, not to be compared with Day Care Centres (in Norwegian *daghjem*) which is a full time day care provision. One of the questions of concern was to see the link between the early childhood education and the primary education in schools. The day care system was more of a support for the families having two parents working or studying, or single mothers who needed full day care service. In the early seventies some wanted to give 6 year-olds support in education, and established pre-schools within the school buildings. This was only a short-time provision free of charge, but there were few parents except the ones who worked at home who could accept this offer. In this mingle of different day care/kindergarten/pre school provision there was a need for co-ordination. Therefore a project called “4-9 years-olds” was started in six communities from Tana in the north to Stavanger in the south of Norway (KUD/FAD, 1984). There were three main goals in the project: a) to gain experiences in mixed aged groups for children between the ages 4-9, b) develop services across municipal administration, and c) develop different and increasing provision for children near their home environment. These three goals provided different provisions. An integrated model for schools, kindergarten and after school care (in Norwegian *fritidshjem*) was the most common institution that was established.

The experiences varied in different localities, but all institutions of mixed groups of children reported a predominantly positive effect (KUD/FAD, 1984: 49). In these groups the teachers reported less use of disciplinary actions in class and greater variation in activities. The experiences of the six municipalities in the “4-9 year-olds project” spread slowly to other communities in the beginning of the 1980s as the provisions totally for the age group 0-7 at the same time was growing. However, there was not more than about 20 % of this age group that attended any form of day care service (Haug, 1992: 46). These figures were difficult for the government to cope with, when so many parents wanted some kind of day care support for their children. At the same time, a new political wind blew over Norway as well as the rest of Europe influenced by Margaret Thatcher’s England, and the question of lowering the age of school starters was once more established on the political agenda.

Is school best for the 6 year-olds?

One of the arguments concerning the lowering of school age had to do with the provision of kindergartens and day care services for younger children (Haug, 1992: 46). If the 6 year-olds were moved to school, that would improve kindergarten availability, because the percentage of 6-year-olds in these institutions was as high as 48%. Another argument was connected with the price of full day care service, which most parents wanted for their children at that age. If a part of the day were spent in compulsory primary school, there would probably be a lower price for day care service for the rest of the day. The third argument for lowering the age of schooling, was the fact that Norway was one of the countries in Europe where children waited longest to start school.

With this last argument, there appeared a link with the availability of reading, writing and arithmetic for young children. Therefore a new discussion about the age of schooling started in political circles and the media in the beginning of 1980s (St.melding nr 62 (1982-83)). Some questions constituted a core of this. The turning point was related to the 6 year-olds' need for education. Is it best for them to be at school, in a pre- school, in a kindergarten or in full day-care service – or at home? Another turning point was related to the duration of schooling? If the six year-olds started school, were they supposed to add another year to the total duration of their schooling?

The first point formed a profound debate in the educational society with teachers, teachers unions, parents and different pedagogical “wings”. Among these the Pre School Teachers Union, The Housewife Association and The Rudolph Steiner movement were in agreement on one issue, namely that the 6 year-olds were not to go to school. But outside this single aspect, they were not united. The pre school teachers wanted the 6 year-old to remain in kindergarten, and used arguments concerning “full time education and care”. Haug (1992: 49) argues that this was closely linked to the question of the content. The Housewife Association and Rudolf Steiner Movement formed an opposition to this opinion. They wanted the parents to determine whether a short-time pre school or home care was the best solution.

In the political parties there was also disagreement regarding these questions. When the parliamentary bill (St.melding nr. 62, 1982-83) was presented, there were two almost equal political wings in Parliament. The Labour party, together with other “left” and Centrum parties (AP,SV,KRF and SP) formed one wing. The Conservatives (H and FRP) formed the

opposite wing. The Labour alliance was against lowering the age of starting school and the others were in favour. The Right Wing looked to Europe and compared Norway with the countries inside the European Union (EU). Even if the ideal at that time for the Left wing was comprehensive teaching, continuity between age groups in education and co-operation between institutions, they knew there was a movement of resistance in parliament for the same views. Therefore they formed a commission to pursue this question. The recommendation from this commission called “*Cooperation kindergarten-School*” (FAD/KUD, 1984) formed the point of departure for “Experiment with pedagogical provision for the 6 year-olds” (1986-90). This was supposed to be a voluntary educational programme offering the communities three models of organisation: The first model was a full-time programme placed under the umbrella of the kindergartens or the day care centres. The second model was a short-time pre-school placed in the hands of the school system. The third model was collaboration between the kindergartens and the schools, in an alternative meaning of provision. The joint concern between the models was a new curriculum, especially developed for the experiment to issue a common platform for the content of the education in all institutions (*Rammeplan for Forsøk med pedagogisk tilbud til 6-åringer*).

The educational programme of experiments (Haug, 1992) started in the autumn of 1986 and continued until the spring of 1990. Altogether there were 42 councils involved in the experiment from many parts of Norway. The groups and numbers of children were increasing every year from 409 children in 1987 to 1525 in 1990 (Haug, 1992:51). This was due to local conditions and also to the fact that the experiment spread from one school district to the next. About 100 kindergartens and 90 schools were involved. It has been argued that this is so far the biggest pedagogical experiment ever undertaken in Norway (Haug, 1992).

The Project Plan (KUD/FAD, 1986) presented six goals for the experiment. These goals had focus on experiences and information on different models of provision. First, it would put an effort into co-operation between schools and different institutions for day care and pre-schooling. Secondly, it would try out models and calculate the cost benefit with different models. Then the goal was to put quality into education and stimulate innovation and in-service training for teachers and school leaders. Haug (1992: 53) writes that there was a problem with the intention and goals throughout the experiment. The goals were neither static nor sufficiently detailed throughout the four years of the experiment. This is often the case when different political interests are put together to resolve a case or problem. Instead of

agreeing on a narrow set of goals, the experiment was carried out with three different models and with lots of competing interests in the different goals scheduled above. Further on, Haug writes (1992: 56) that the experimental secretariat (3 persons) wanted to tune down the classic experimental design. They presented it as “*a pedagogical development*” that might build up expertise, develop and bring into process the education of the 6 year-olds.

Throughout the first two years of the experiment, this was the way the experiments spread and new groups or classes became involved. But in the autumn of 1988 (Germeten, 1999a: 48) the minister of Education in the Labour Party government, Mary Kvidal, revealed that her party had decided to launch a change of policy on the question of starting school. The Labour party would propose a new reform for all education from the cradle to the grave, including the age of starting school. With the Labour Party on the same side as the Conservatives (H+ FRP) there would be a majority for lowering the age of starting school in Parliament. The experiment therefore came to a sort of “termination” one year before it was completed and evaluated (Haug, 1994). When the experiment then stopped in 1990, the experiences and “results” of the experiment were not so important to the politicians any more. Soon after, Parliament changed the law of kindergarten (in Norwegian *barnehageloven*) and thus there became an opening for pre schools at schools for the 6-year olds as a preparation for the reform that was planned to come. The headmaster at the school could be the head of the pre schools as well. A lot of money was invested in building and restoration of schools. In addition to this, subsidies from the government were given to support the establishment of after school leisure time care (in Norwegian *skolefritidsordninger/SFO*). All together this made many communities and schools able to give provision for nearly 100% of the 6-year-olds from 1990 onwards.

The long and winding road through Parliament

Even if the Labour Party had decided to move to the Right in this question, there was still an opposition inside and outside of Parliament against the reform. Therefore the rest of the reform was presented and put to the vote in Parliament gradually step by step. The minister of Education and Research at that time, Gudmund Hernes, presented two proposals for Parliament throughout 1993-94. In two proposals, St.melding nr. 40 (1993-94) and St.melding nr. 29 (1994-95), the government argued that the reform for 6 year olds was part of a bigger reform programme within education and care for children and families. The reform was due to be launched in 1997, therefore the name Reform97.

The first question put to Parliament was about the age to start school. As foreseen, this question had a narrow majority, but was approved by parties that disagreed on other issues about the reform, such as the length of compulsory schooling. The Conservatives and FRP voted for 9 years as previously, while the Labour Party and the rest wanted to add one year extra to the total schooling duration. In the following year the question of the length of schooling alone was put to Parliament for a decision. Ten years of compulsory schooling was then passed, and the reform came into effect. The 6 year-olds were supposed to start first year in Primary school in 1997 and end their schooling after ten years of compulsory education. This model was a political compromise between “left and right”, and became a model somewhat distanced from the discussions, and later on decisions, in the other Nordic countries.

In spring of 1995 the third and last turn with the rest of the Reform97 was presented through the proposal of a new national curriculum, L97 (KUF, 1995; KUF, 1996). Here it was stated that new pedagogical principles would be implemented, such as *theme* based education and project methodology, working crosswise in subjects, accommodative teaching and adjustment to children’s earlier experience and knowledge. For the youngest children, Lower Primary School, from 1st - 4th grade, the organisation in *themes* should take about 50 - 60% of the time (L97, 1996: 83). Play was also introduced as an important part of the school day for children. Play should be a part of the education as well as in the After School Leisure Time (SFO). In summary, the first grade for the 6 year olds was formulated as a compromise between the political efforts to avoid schooling and the efforts that were pro schooling. In political papers, the first year was called *Pre School/1st Grade*. Naming it like this was a signal that it was supposed to be a mixture of kindergarten and school. Another compromise addressed the teachers set to teach the 6-year-olds. Primary school teachers and pre school teachers were by law appraised equally to teach in the first grade, and thus pre school methodology was introduced into the school. Play as a principle is referred to many times in the new curriculum L97, for example as an introduction to the theme based organisation. It is given emphasis in all activities in the Lower Primary, especially in the first grade. Play is also mentioned in the curriculum of selected subjects such as native Norwegian language (*norsk*), music and physical education (*kroppsøving*). The example here is from the curriculum L97 (translation S. Germeten 2003):

“Play is a way of living for the youngest children and an important method for learning. The teaching in Lower Primary shall provide opportunities for play and stimulate learning through play” (L97: 114).

The connection between play and learning and the responsibility of the teachers to provide opportunities for play in school is here strongly emphasised. In the curriculum, play is also connected to creativity and experimental methods. Learning opportunities for children are the most important aspect and variations of methods are formulated to lead to learning. In this way play is stated as a two-sided coin. First, play has a value in itself by being a way of experiencing the world for children; secondly it is an activity and method for learning.

Reform97 was formulated as a *school reform* with the new younger age for starting school and the length of compulsory schooling. It was formulated as a *reform for children* with new opportunities to play in school. It was also said to be a *culture reform* emphasising music, art and handicraft as important subjects in school. In this aspect the schools also were to be cultural centres in the communities. The fourth part of the Reform 97 was the *family reform*, giving families better possibilities for supervision of children after school in what is called SFO. Better co-operation between parents and the school was formulated as a goal, stimulating an improved legitimacy for parents and children as a part of school democracy.

When Reform 97 was launched in advance of the first term in the school year 1997-98, the resolutions had been through a political slalom. No single part of the Reform97 had the same majority backing in Parliament, and none of the political parties could say they had won the issue. The Labour Party, at that time in office, was satisfied with the resolution concerning the 6 year-olds as a part of a planned educational reform. One of the aspects here was that the percentage of kindergarten and day care services were substantially raised with a stroke of the pen. When the 6 year-olds now entered school, another political issue was partly resolved, namely the provision for day care service for those under 6.

The Reform of 1997

The initial aims of “The experiment with provision for 6 year olds” (1986-90) was to improve the relation between kindergartens and schools. This was maintained when the goals were extended and changed (Haug, 1992: 69). Although the “results” of the experiment did not influence the political decisions on the matter, there were more than 1500 teachers who

gained teaching experience that eventually came from the bottom up to the surface of the discussion. Fortunately, the discussions did have influence on the content of the New National Curriculum (L97). When the content for the 6 year olds in school were described, there was an expression saying that the subject matter should build on the tradition of both the school and the kindergarten. Haug writes that the central project administration in 1987 formulated the experimental tasks as followed: “*to take the best from the curriculum of both the kindergarten and from the school, adapt this to the pedagogy of the kindergarten and formulate a new curriculum.*” (Haug, 1992: 69). This saying about “*the best of..*” followed the written text about the content of teaching the 6 year-olds from the mid 1980s until the new curriculum L97 was presented. In L97 the expression “*the best of*”...was replaced with “*the tradition from*” Still, teachers kept this myth about “the best” alive by repeating it to themselves in class, in school, in in-service training courses, in academic papers written on education etc. There is no research confirming this, but the expression still pops up in the media or from teachers now and then. The question connected to both statements has to do with what is tradition. And, how can we identify one or two different pedagogical traditions? Is the tradition connected with the institution alone or with the teachers working there?

In the political rhetoric about the issue of the six year-olds, it can appear as if the last perspective is dominating. By bringing the pre school teachers into school, the tradition of the kindergarten would be guaranteed (KUF, 1993). The tradition itself should then be connected with personal skills and the education of pre schoolteachers, and not as a quality of the institution itself. Included in this argument is the aspect of tradition as something that can be divided into several parts, and even then be *one* tradition. Germeten (2002: 87) is critical to this point of perspective on traditions and also critical to the rhetoric expression. In her PhD-thesis named “*Limits of teaching?*” the historical roots of the statements are examined. First of all, like *cultures* (Hylland Eriksen, 1993:15) the traditions of school and kindergarten have been based on different historical ideas and status (Haug, 1992; 1996). Secondly, the teachers working in these respective institutions have different educational backgrounds and do not speak the same pedagogical language (Rosenqvist, 2000). Rosenqvist presents the example of *teaching and learning* as aims in school versus *play and care* in kindergarten. All together this forms the teachers’ perception of what is the “best” way of working with children, including things accepted as “natural” and “right”, and excluding other issues as “unnatural” and “wrong”. This taken-for granted aspect of life and work *is* the tradition (Germeten, 2002: 90).

With traditions come the rituals for recognising the traditions. Some of these rituals are connected with words on how we speak of our work. When we talk of *pupils, desks, inspection* and *homework*, we think of school activities and school traditions. When we classify the same with *children, tables and chairs, grown-ups* and *tasks to do*, we do not automatically connect this to school. It could be connected with things from the home sphere or from kindergarten or day care institutions. Naming is in this way both inclusive and exclusive, and binds up the meaning of tradition (Gore, 1998).

Germeten (2002: 87 ff) refers to Michel Foucault and his view of tradition as pre consumed continuity. This leads us to think in *unities* (Foucault, 1972) correlating every new impression to what we know beforehand. One of these aspects is to think in *dichotomies* that basically mean to think in ways of *either-or*. In this way one comes close to thinking of schools and kindergarten as two different institutions and putting them in two different positions, polarised on one dimension. What is accepted as a quality of the school has its opposite in the kindergarten, and vice versa. The provision is *either* voluntary (such as kindergarten) *or* obligatory (such as school). The organising of time and space is *either* divided into lessons and leisure time (in schools) *or* has a comprehensive rhythm of the day (in kindergarten). The aim of the provision is *either* “teaching and learning” (in school) *or* “play and care” (in kindergarten). The way of working is *either* individual oriented (as in kindergarten) *or* group oriented (as in schools), recognised *either* by freedom (in kindergarten) *or* control (in school) (Germeten, 1990; 1995; 2002). Expressing these opposites presents us with no obvious opportunity to think of the similarities between kindergartens and schools. However, discourses in education are not stable or rigid. Over time the discourses change and different qualities and perspectives do circulate. In the latter aspect, there is an opening for the *both-and-perspective* covering *both* organisation *and* regulations of *both* schools *and* kindergartens.

Deconstructing the statements of “*the tradition from kindergarten and school*” like this shows how we have preconceptions of what we expect to see and find when we conduct research on pedagogical practises. We use a set of terms to explain what we see, and by this we “mislead” ourselves and others to look for what we saw. The traditions of schools and kindergarten will, from this perspective, have a lot of connotations included, and by this we will go on looking for the things we have already recognised. From this point of view, both before and after the

actual starting point of the reform the expressions “*from both traditions*” will create limits for our thinking when analysing or evaluating education connected to Reform97. We will look for more or less teacher controlled working methodology. We will look for a content as more or less based on play, and we will look for ways of working with children that are more or less active. When we look for the obvious, we find it. At the same time we may have closed our eyes for different aspects such as similarities between kindergarten and schools and the uncertainty in the *both-and* perspectives. A change as a result of an educational reform is therefore not always easy to discover (Elmore & al, 1996).

Research from 1990-1997

The Reform97 was formulated to be more than just starting school for 6-year-olds. As mentioned before, the introduction of the pre-school teaching into school was proposed in the New National Curriculum (L97). The pre school teachers brought a knowledge base on learning different from the primary school teachers (Eide & Winger, 1994). By working together, there was supposed to evolve a synergetic effect beyond the classroom of the 6 year-olds. However, when a reform is initiated by the government and implemented locally in schools, there is no guarantee for any effect at all. Institutional surroundings, local context, the leadership of schools and so on, are all factors that are strongly connected to how the schools function and whether they are able to change. In this both the professions and the institutions make the *tradition* of the school (Haug, 1996). This is a kind of autonomy or frame that make teachers create their work in the classroom. The local curriculum as experienced by the pupils is the ultimate “result” of a reform in school. Therefore the question raised is how long we must wait to see an effect in the classroom. Another question is what are we looking for? What is the result of the reform and for whom? (Elmore, 1996).

Both Haug (1996) and Germeten (1999a) argue that the reform of the 6 year-olds did not start in 1997 as the name of the reform indicates. It started in 1990, when schools were allowed to let the 6 year-olds in, and the headmaster could be the head of pre schools as well. With money invested in the school system to renovate and prepare for the coming reform, the school traditions were “on the move” long before the actual reform was launched. This period was followed by research where some of these questions were evaluated.

Eide & Winger (1994) placed a focus on the pupils themselves, asking the 6-year-olds if they were “*looking forward to go to school?*» as was the title of their report. In this study they

interviewed two groups of children in pre schools at school, asking them about their pre school experiences, about their family life and their expectations to school. The children were very eager to talk about the differences between pre schools and schools. It was the *organisation* of the school day that made the difference, the day was split up differently in pre schools and schools. First of all, the children did not define themselves as school pupils, but children in pre schools. They thought that pre schools were a preparation for schools, and they were to learn how to behave at school (Eide & Winger, 1994: 96). The pre school teachers were using “signals” to train them, for instance when and where to go in and out of the building, when and where to eat and when to go home. The teachers usually linked these signals to a bell. Secondly, the children talked about the differences between the activities allowed in pre schools and schools, for instance the pattern of play and other non-school activities. The pre school children were allowed to play more and decide more what to do themselves. They were also trained to sit still and work with textbooks. What they learned was not so obvious during the pre school period.

Altogether, the children responded that the organisation of the day was centred on play. Homework and textbooks were not so popular. Regarding school the children had rigid imaginations of a frozen tradition. School was important for learning and not for play, and it was useful to learn to read and write and important to have “*homework, leisure-time and gymnastics*” (Eide & Winger, 1994: 114). The schools were also associated with rules and regulations like raising ones hands, marching in and out of class and the fact that play was not allowed inside classroom. School was something they *had to do*. The compulsory part of it was obvious for the children.

A larger study of the pre school provision at school was initiated by the department of Education and Research and carried out by Prof. Haug and his associates (Haug, 1996). This study had a focus on the activities in school and the after school leisure time (SFO) and was a time effect study. Different regions in Norway, both cities and rural parts, were participating. Hundreds of teacher students made observations of 645 six year- olds in school during one day. They were supervised by their teachers from university/college. The observations were made every 10 minutes in an observation form mapping the trails of the 6 year-olds inside and outside the school building (Haug, 1996: appendix). All the data from the forms were entered into a computer programme and statistics were made from the data. In this study Haug made the expression “*The big lockup*”, naming the principle of teaching of 6 year-olds. The main

part of the day was organised as in-doors with teachers leading the activities in classrooms. This confirmed the myth of school as in-door activity with little freedom for the children. The organisation of the time and space in the classroom did also have an effect on the activities. When the classroom looked like a kindergarten room, more play and free activities took place. Vice versa, when a classroom was furnished only with desks and a blackboard, it did not invite to play. As much as twenty percent of the school day was occupied with regular activities like dressing and undressing, toilet visits, meals and going in and out of classrooms. None of these activities were visible in the teacher's plans or in the curriculum. This could be the reason for the frustration the teachers presented in interviews conducted after the surveys. Time was scarce, and there were so many things to do, according to the teachers; therefore the children were not supposed to revert to verbal or motional activities (referred in Lillemyr, 1999:21). As a result, Haug (1986) wrote that if the aim was to change the organisation and the content of the school days, this "classical" pattern of school days must be challenged.

Following up the first stage of the reform

When the reform finally was launched in 1997 with the new curriculum, it was looked upon as a prestigious project, and accordingly many communities wanted evaluation of the implementation process. Oslo was one of the first communities to do so. The project "*On the way to a new school in Oslo*" (Germeten, 1999a; 1999b), started with a study of all teachers teaching 6 year-olds in Oslo the first year of the reform. These teachers were presented with a questionnaire with 50 questions about the reform. There were questions covering teacher background and experience of work, questions about the new curriculum and the content of school, questions of the process of implementation and leadership of the school, and questions about their preferences in teaching. Because this study was carried out with the approval of the headmasters, all involved teachers were given one hour time off their work to respond to the questionnaire. Therefore the response rate was high. From 98 schools, 88 questionnaires were completed.

The information from the background of these teachers revealed a minority of male teachers in the first grade, nearly 90 % were female. Nearly 2/3 of the teachers had pre school education and had been working in the kindergarten for many years before entering school as the Reform97 commenced. The last 1/3 was primary school teachers, some of them young and without prior experience. The pre school teachers stated that they were going to circulate within the first grade, and the primary school teachers planned to follow their classes to the

next grade. With so many teachers remaining in first grade, this showed a lack of continuity within the Lower Primary in spite of what was a formulated aim in L97. From the questionnaires, it was not possible to deduce any differences between pre school and primary teachers in the aspect of organising the day for the 6 year-olds and their way of teaching. This was how the teachers wanted to present themselves in writing. Therefore the next stage of the study was carried out as a field study in five classes (named A-E) in the first grade. The same research questions constituted the framework of this approach too, this time using observations, text analysis and interviews as the chosen methodology. The five schools in Oslo were chosen from size, geography, the number of students and the differences in background of the children present. This connection relates to different parts of the city having varying minority and majority of immigrants, hence varying language groups. This was one of many variables.

First of all the observed teaching of 6 year olds were organised differently in different schools. Two schools (A & D) were regulated much like what we call “ordinary old fashioned” school organisations with 3/4 of an hour lessons inside the classroom and 15 minutes outdoor as a break or interval. Inside there were classrooms for both school activities and activities connected to the kindergarten tradition, like play, but in the run of one week play was hardly recognised. The framing of time was rigid and the teachers were leading, sorting and distributing the activities inside the classroom. At school A, the days always started with a gathering in a circle with the children sitting on chairs (in Norwegian *samlingsstund*). Twenty-seven kids with nine different language backgrounds were strictly managed by the teacher throughout 50 minutes of dialogue. She could not manage do this without help from her two assistant teachers who were placed between some children that could not sit still. The teacher at school A had pre school teacher education and said in the interview that this gathering was her way of bringing the kindergarten tradition into school, thinking that this was a good way to teach 6 year olds. At school D the teacher was a primary teacher and she was organising her day just like school A. Also at this school the framework was close and the school regulations strict (Bernstein, 1987). This was due to the way time and space regulated the *content* of the lessons as well as its distribution. In this case it was not the teachers’ educational background that formed the way of thinking what was “best” for the 6 year-olds. The rhythm of the day formed the activities as well as the content in them. Both teachers said in interview that it was best for the 6 year-olds to learn the rhythm of the school as soon as possible.

At school B & E the school days were organised differently from one day to the next, only some points were the same every day. These were the meal at approx. 11 o'clock, and the start and the ending of the day. In between, both schools had a flexible rhythm with a great deal of differentiated activities. Play was fundamental in both schools, but from different angles. In school B the play was the "glue" in all activities, the basic way of learning. Through negotiation with the teachers, this formed different days for all the children. The learning was an individual project, different for all. This "individual curriculum" made time and space for many activities, in spite of the ordinary classroom setting that was framing the activities. At school E, the 6 year-olds had only an ordinary classroom, too. In this setting the teachers put much effort into giving the children the opportunity to play, being flexible in time and space. Differently from school B, this class had a joint rhythm of the day with lots of activities in smaller groups. This made learning mediated in the way that all contributions in a group formed the common project. Summing up school B & E, they were alike in two perspectives. One was the framing by an ordinary classroom of approx. 60 square meters. The second was that there were two teachers in the classroom, both in charge. One pre school and one primary teacher constituted the *team*, giving no particular priority to any educational background. In this way, they said in the interview, they felt equal to discuss what they had learned in their different education backgrounds and felt free to form their own way of teaching in the new class of 6 year-olds. It was observed that they formed it differently. School B looked upon education and learning as an individual project for children, school E believed in mediated learning.

The last school in the study, school C, was different in all aspects above. At this school, there was no trained teacher at all, as is the case in some locations in Norway. The person in charge had been working in the short-time private pre school for the 6 year-olds for more than twenty years before Reform97. When the 6 year-olds were moved to the first grade, unfortunately there were no teachers available, and the leader of the pre school was offered this position. The teacher in charge organised the day of the new class like she had formed the provision for the 6 year-olds earlier. The rhythm of the day was like a kindergarten and the learning activities were like in a kindergarten. The focus of the day was "the task", that was a job or problem connected to the *theme of the week* that all the children had to make. In the week of observation and interview, the theme was "Christopher Columbus and the Indians in America". The tasks of the day were therefore connected to what (the teacher believed) was

the life of red Indians. The children were making masks of Indians heads with feathers and “war-paintings”; they made jewellery from stone-pearls and dolls with bright clothes and feathers. The project of learning was connected to *doing things*, not with a critical discussion on what we know and do not know about Indians in America. The knowledge was formed by fairy tales and cartoons with presentations of individual red Indians like Hiawatha and Pocahontas. What the children actually learned from this *theme*, Germeten (2002: 170) raised some critical questions to.

From the data collected from these five schools, the study concluded that the Reform97 was implemented very differently from one school to another. The mandate from the new curriculum, L97, to build the content of the new class of 6 year olds on “*the tradition from both school and kindergarten*” was fulfilled in many ways and not as one common recognisable pattern. There were different solutions, and the teachers had different opinions on what was the “right way” and “natural thing” to do. Two aspects were highlighted, and that had to do with the teachers’ educational background and the framing of the classroom. The first is that a pre school teacher in school is no guarantee of keeping the kindergarten tradition alive. The second is that individual teaching and play can both be taken well care of inside an ordinary, not very well equipped classroom. What formed the rules of the teachers’ discourse (Krüger, 1998:36) were the taken-for granted rules that ideologically constructed and governed their thinking of what was good teaching.

Some reflections looking into the 21st century

The scope of the field of study has revealed a few items of research from the past twenty years. One can argue that some perspectives are perhaps missing, some perspectives have not been researched, and some have probably been given too much attention. On framing this chapter, the chosen perspectives give important contributions to the history of the 6 year-olds in transition from kindergarten to school. A chronological timeline has been traced, and even this renders both advantages and disadvantages. In the event that the author had chosen to present the history in *themes*, another story would have evolved. For instance Ole Fredrik Lillemyr, Trondheim presents his story of the 6 year-olds in themes in his book about the epistemology of Reform 97 (Lillemyr, 1999). One of the themes left out in my chapter is the transition period from a minority child’s point of view. If the perspectives of children with handicap or children with parents from Asia or Africa had been in focus here, some additional aspects had been revealed. Even if Norway has formulation of an inclusive school in National

Curriculum, the practice has not always been “one school for all”. Difficulties with full access to school buildings, segregation and exclusion are still part of the realities in Norwegian schools.

The chapter is based on research connected to relatively few persons working in this field in Norway. Inclusion of developmental work undertaken by teachers and student teachers would have extended the basis for the findings in the paper. The experiences of this group in the take-off period of Reform97 have been significant for the implementation of the reform. Knowledge of what is “good practice” for the 6 year-olds will gradually disperse throughout the teaching disciplines, either by mouth or from books and publications. What will eventually survive of the formulated reform, as in all forms of implementation processes, is not yet apparent to the researcher.

The research project as presented in this paper can be summarised in some major aspects. After a long, political debate of what was “best” for the 6 year-olds, Norway chose to make the reform without waiting for the result of “the experiments“ (Haug,1992). Therefore we can conclude that the decision was a political solution, not one that evolved from experiences in the teaching profession. It was hence a top-down decision. The politicians wanted the 6 year-olds to become “real” members of the school society, therefore the provision was made compulsory for all. It was no longer voluntary for parents to choose what was best for their own children as is the case in Sweden, but schooling was established as part of formal education from the age of 6. This short-time schooling for the 6 year-olds did not resolve the issues with after-schooling-care. This has been on the agenda since 1997, covering both the lack of provision like SFO and the cost of it. Parents in Norway have been organised in movements for better provision and for a ceiling on fees, and these discussions are ongoing.

Some of the findings described in this chapter show that the formulated goals of Reform97 concerning the 6 year-olds have been realised in many ways. Schools have chosen different strategies in the implementation process, and the teachers state that the “*tradition of the kindergarten*” has found its way into school. Some teachers connect this with the way of organising the school day in a more flexible way than before the reform. Other teachers have opened up for the possibility for children to play both inside and outside the classrooms. Yet other teachers tell how they differentiate the learning activities bringing in play, practical

tasks and experiments. But the question is if this is the result of the reform, or would it have happened anyway over time?

At the entrance of the twenty-first century there are still many unanswered questions concerning the age of starting school and the content of schooling for lower primary. After five years with the 6 year-olds in a ten year compulsory school system, the politicians are asking for better results the level of proficiency in reading, writing and arithmetic. Most of the research we have data on in these subjects is dated prior to 1997, which is before the reform. We are therefore looking forward to publications from “The evaluation of Reform97” (Norges Forskningsråd/The Norwegian Council of Research, 1999). Without waiting for the results, the present government (the coalition of Christian Democrats and the Conservatives & co) are putting new actions into old political issues about starting school, the length of compulsory schooling and the methods of teaching and learning. These initiatives are related to different political and pedagogical issues and can therefore be a challenge to predict the outcome of.

The first current political initiative is connected with the length of compulsory schooling. When the results of world-wide reading tests (PISA-study) revealed that the 9 year-olds in Norway did not score as well as expected, the present minister of Education and Research, Kristin Clemet, very quickly launched the idea of shortening the years of compulsory schooling. Her argument was that when children did not gain enough knowledge or skills from ten years of schooling, they might be better off with nine years as before. After fronting this in the media for a while, the idea was endorsed by the administration of Education in Oslo (*Skoleetaten*). Under the label of “developmental work” the school administration put into practice the project “Flexible start in school” (Germeten, 2002b). This project started with four schools in the spring 2003, and will eventually spread to all schools in Oslo within 2007. This is an example of how political issues are put into action as “developmental work” even before they go to Parliament.

Usually starting school in Norway is an event in the middle of August the year of the child’s sixth birthday. The flexibility in the project in Oslo is focused on parents being able to chose for their children the date for starting school. This means, when the child is six in the period January to June they can start whenever they like in the spring. If the children are six in August - December, they can start whenever they like in the autumn. This concept is further

combined with the principle of age-mixed groups and the assessment of children's knowledge and performance throughout Lower Primary. Starting school will then be an individual event with different time spans within 10 plus and 10 minus years. Both the "spring-children" and the "autumn-children" can eventually become "minus" or "plus" with 9 or 10 years of schooling depending on when and how they are assessed and evaluated to proceed. In the mixed age groups in Lower Primary there will be children from 5-10. In this way the flexibility becomes a new principle of compulsory schooling. Based on these developments one can be tempted to predict that in a few years time we revert to nine years compulsory and ten years voluntary schooling in Norway.

The second political issue is about change in teacher's education. This is visible in the new Bachelor and Master Degree programmes that link Norway to the European Educational Systems. For the same reasons as stated above with children's lack of reading skills, the next step was related to the teacher's skills in teaching the children to read and write. A new curriculum for Teacher Education was presented in the summer of 2002, with a strong focus on school subjects and basic skills in reading, writing and arithmetic. Especially, the latter is termed a new subject, in Norwegian *GLSM*, and will account for 10-credit points for all students in the first year of study. On closing this discussion, it is relevant to mention that the same minister of Education and Research has presented a novel idea of changing the National Curriculum from 1997 (L97) into a "new and better" one. This proposal will interfere with the discussion themes and premises that this chapter has been structured on. A renewed discussion is bound to evolve on what is best to do in education for 6 year-olds.

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