

DOING PRE-SCHOOL: KNOWLEDGE UTILIZATION AND DISCURSIVE PATTERNS DURING PRE-SCHOOL PLANNING MEETINGS

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to study knowledge utilization and discursive patterns during pre-school planning meetings on stage. The study is designed as a qualitative case study based on tape recordings of five planning meetings and three video documented activities. Three pre-school teachers and three researchers participated. In the analysis, Foucault's work on discursive practices is used as theoretical framework. The study highlights knowledge used and cited in the local negotiations. The conclusions are that the knowledge used is based on both professional knowledge related to children's learning and development, and local knowledge of children and their abilities, conditions and personalities. The professional knowledge appears as rather implicit and it is primarily the local knowledge of children and their individual needs and circumstances that is most clearly expressed. Dominant discursive patterns are formulated as the staff make themselves responsible for making the pre-school activity not school-like for the maturing child. On the front stage arena the teachers' tasks primarily appears as a desire to maintain the pre-school content in accordance with pre-school ideology that also controls how they see the children's learning in pre-school in another perspective than student learning in a school context.

Key words: *discourse, knowledge utilization, planning meetings, pre-school work.*

Introduction

Educational work in pre-school has, in Sweden as well as in other countries, high standards of quality and content. Translating such requirements into action is the pre-school teacher's task. How this is done, i.e. how the pre-school work is carried out, shape and are shaped by dominant discursive patterns (Foucault, 1980, 1982, 1993) concerning what pre-schoolteachers work is about. This article reports on a study of pre-school work, as it appears when the staffs discusses and plan the pre-school activity in co-operation with three researchers. It concerns the knowledge used in the conversation and what discourses operating in the talk. The discussions during such planning meetings mean that the teachers through linguistic acts are "doing" pre-school, i.e. they participate in discursive practices in which pre-school and pre-school work is constituted.

Background and Aim

This study is completed in a time of increasing marketization of the public sector in Sweden. Such increased market adjustment of pre-school has meant that parents now have improved opportunities to choose which pre-school their children should be placed in, and to greater demand from the individual pre-school for better economic conditions in the local business. This has led to increased demands for individual pre-school profiling and marketing. In addition, it has also resulted in a necessity to present an activity that is perceived as attractive and sought for by parents, and to deliver a requested service rather than to support their work in professional knowledge bases on how to best support children's development and learning. These adjustments to both market and customers (i.e. children and parents) are important conditions for the staff to take into account (see e.g. Hjort, 2005; Aili, Ljung-Djärf & Tullgren, in press).

The study is also completed in a time of changing conditions of the Swedish pre-school program which in recent years is given a clearer and partially changed mandate related to children's learning and development. The pre-school curriculum (Ministry of Education and Science, 1998) and its draft revision (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2010) pointed out an increased focus on content issues and clearer teaching assignments.

Historically, pre-school has been awarded full value, where a path of development and education has often been included, but school preparatory learning rarely emphasized (Brembeck, Johansson, & Kampmann, 2004; Holmlund, 1996; Persson, 1996). The trend towards an increased focus on learning and school preparation goals is challenging; as previously mentioned, this is a new tradition placing new demands on staff skills and competences. However, it has not been clear which skills will form the basis for the appointed change. Fields of knowledge that may be relevant include different ways of perceiving; children (Hultqvist, 1990, 2000), children's learning and development (e.g. Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2002), pre-school work (e.g. Ljung-Djärf, 2004; Tullgren, 2004), play as an educational tool (e.g. Ljung-Djärf & Tullgren, in press), as well as ways of defining quality work in pre-school (e.g. Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2009). Such, partly contradictory, field of knowledge, as described above, make different tasks and arguments appear as more or less important and relevant. Such discursive changes, and the uncertainty about what knowledge is needed, have meant that what has traditionally been considered as the point of departure in pre-school activity has been challenged (Dahlberg & Lenz Taguchi, 1994). One important question is how the staff of the pre-school manages modern challenges and changing conditions during their pre-school work. This can be studied in different ways concerning e.g. both what happens when the staff actually work with the children but also, as in this study, when they are talking about their work.

With partly a similar background and interest of knowledge two other planning meetings were analyzed in a pilot study¹ (Aili, Ljung-Djärf & Tullgren, in press). The pilot study focused on what the pre-school staff consider themselves to be responsible for, what knowledge they use in managing the work and what they express as the direct object of their work. The empirical material consisted on tape recordings of two planning meetings with two separate teams. The survey showed that during the discussions no particular use of theoretical or abstract, so-called professional knowledge (Abbot, 1988), such as scientific based knowledge of children and their development and learning, could be identified. Instead, the staff preferred to use so-called local knowledge, based on their experiences with specified people and usually what works for everyone to be happy. To provide service to the parents appeared as an important goal for the educational work, although it may be contrary to the professional agenda, such as the educational work with children.

¹ The pilot study was partly conducted with support from The Swedish Research Council (Ljung-Djärf, 2007).

By using Goffman's theory of team performance to discuss this sort of accounting in professional settings, the staff participating in the pilot study is understood as doing and performing back stage. This means that they are in a place or in a situation where alternative interpretations and inconsistencies can be tested and negotiated in a form not intended to reach the society outside their own group. In the present study, the intention is to illuminate the area by presenting an analysis of the work of pre-school staff during planning meetings that may be considered as front stage (Goffman, 1959/1990). The aim is to study knowledge utilization and discursive patterns during pre-school planning meetings frontstage. The intention is to be able to say something about what pre-school teachers express as the object of their work when planning in co-operation with professionals outside their own professional group.

Pre-school planning meetings are organized as individual work but also as cooperation with all or part/s of the team. Common planning time is used for meetings with various degrees of formality in the structure of pre-determined agendas. The choice of planning meetings as an arena for the study assumes that it is, during such meetings, offered both time and space to work with colleagues and put words into action. During the meetings, activities are organized, responsibilities are shared and the educational work is subject to interpretation and negotiation. The research questions are:

- What knowledge does pre-school teacher use in the discussion during planning meetings?
- What discursive patterns of pre-school work appear in these discussions?

Theoretical Optics

The analysis is based on a discourse analytical perspective found on Foucault's work and thinking concerning discourse and knowledge relations (Foucault, 1982; 1993). In Foucault's sense, discourse is defined as "throughout the practise which produces a sense kind of opinion "the entire exercise that result in a certain kind of statement" (Foucault 1993, p. 57). These discourses are related to (scientific) knowledge production. It is the knowledge considered as true that would form the discourses, and it is through knowledge that power production is possible (Foucault, 1980). When discourses arise they lead to mechanisms controlling individuals and make some ways of talking and acting correct, true and good, while other ways are considered as false, untrue and reprehensible (Foucault, 1993). The perspective is chosen to illustrate the superior discourses, as well as underlying competing discourses, about children and pre-school work as expressed during planning meetings. The thoughts and acts of the pre-school staff are, in other words, grounded in the discourses and the teachers actions are related to them. With the support of the chosen approach, pre-school work is studied as a discursive practice, where different areas of knowledge are created and used.

Foucault as an Analytic Tool in Studies of Education and Educationists

Foucault's work has been used as an analytic tool in a number of studies in recent years. The perspective focuses on discursive practices, as shaped by and shaping the identity of its participants, and appears to be useful when concerning the professionals' work in educational settings. For example, his work concerning disciplinary technologies has been used as a tool in studies of the discourse of education that has justified the construction of children legitimizing ongoing ways of regulating their lives through the institutions of education (Cannella, 1999), to analyse pre-school teachers' ways of governing the children while they are at play (Tullgren, 2004), or teachers' ways of governing children's behaviour in the classroom (Permer & Permer, 2002).

In other studies the focus is on dominating discursive patterns as governing teacher's ways of acting. Ailwood (2003), for example, shows that discourse of play serves as a significant nodal point in the discursive relations of Australian early childhood education. The conclusion of this study is that play even can be understood as a governmental technology in early childhood education settings. Similar patterns are to be found in other countries, e.g. Sweden (Tullgren, 2004) and Norway (Dyblie Nilsen, 2000).

In the introduction, contemporary changes in relation to the Swedish pre-school were described from the aspirations towards professionalization of early childhood staff. Such changes are described as ongoing in other countries such as Australia (Ailwood, 2003), the United Kingdom (Huff Sisson, 2009; Lloyd & Hallet, 2010) and Denmark (Hjort, 2005). Lloyd and Hallet (2010) contend that early childhood educationists can be characterized by their commitment to young children, and that political efforts in the direction of increased professionalization must take into account the pre-school staffs' opinions of their professional identity, i.e. knowledge, skills and beliefs of their practitioners.

Methodology of Research

Design and Empirical Data

The project is designed as a qualitative case study based on tape recordings of five planning meetings with three representatives of three different pre-school teams from one pre-school and three researchers. The purpose of the meetings was to discuss, follow up and plan a common project concerning children's understanding of the mathematic concepts *more* and *most*.² The project as a whole involved all teachers in the three pre-school units. All the meetings were video- and taperecorded and were carried out in a room at the pre-school. The meetings were of three types: First, there were two joint planning meetings with the three teachers, one from each pre-school unit, and two researchers from the project. The meetings had no fixed agenda, but issues raised mainly involved evaluating and planning the on-going project, and they continued for 45 respectively 75 minutes. Second, there were three sessions in which one teacher and three researchers from the project attended; each teacher attends once. In these meetings, video-documented interviews with children from their own pre-school program were watched and commented on. These meetings continued for about 30 minutes each.

Furthermore, three activities were video-recorded where pre-school children and their teachers discussed the same topic — *more* and *most*. In connection to these activities some planning discussions between the teacher and the researchers were taking place.

Data Analysis and the Researchers Role

The recordings were transcribed. The empirical material was scrutinised in a number of readings and re-readings. During this process of analysis, key categories, arguments and reasons concerning knowledge utilization and dominant discursive patterns were sought.

The researchers' role during this process is to interpret and understand the research question from a specific, theoretical, perspective. Each perspective is a tool to focus the issue in a certain way but leave others outside. The Foucault perspective, as chosen in this study, is used to highlight the knowledge use and referred to in the planning meeting discussions. This perspective will not help to uncover hidden meanings but to create a meaningful context (Potter, 1996).

² Data is collected within a learning study project in pre-school. These results are published in Holmqvist, Tullgren (2009); Holmqvist, Brante, Tullgren (2009); Holmqvist, Tullgren, Brante (2010).

Ethic Considerations

The project has consistently been based on common ethical approaches and consideration (Swedish Research Council, 2010). This has resulted in the information and written consent from the participating teachers, the use of fictive name of the participants' and a safe storage of the collected material.

Knowledge Utilization

The analysis has shown that the staff seems to be in a situation that requires taking both a professional knowledge base as well as a local knowledge base into account. The knowledge base referred to is in two areas: first, professional knowledge related to children's learning and development, and second, local knowledge of the children and their abilities, conditions and personalities and what usually works in relation to these children. In the conversation during the meetings observed, however, the professional knowledge appears as rather implicit and it is primarily the local knowledge of children and their individual needs and circumstances that is most clearly expressed.

Local Knowledge about the Children and What Usually Works With Them

When the teachers discuss the activities undertaken, local knowledge of children's individual personalities, abilities and conditions stand out as factors used to explain the learning outcome. Personality, for example, emerges in expressions referring to the children's insecurity, as the content is new, videotaping is new, the approach is so new etc. The teachers believe that this creates uncertainty for the children. They are spoken about as "she is cautious about new things" or "he is not accustomed doing like this here as we don't do such things very often". The children are also talked about in terms of maturation "He is more mature" or "Purely in terms of maturity she's good". Conditions are mainly talked about in terms of language and the child's family background "And then to be an immigrant, it may be difficult" or "She has a daddy from another country but she is fluent in Swedish". The children's ability is expressed in terms of concentration and cognitive ability, as for example "He is a bit distracted" or "He is our little professor".

The children are described on the basis of characteristics and abilities that belong to the individual child. This is about personality, abilities and conditions that are positioned outside of the responsibilities of the pre-school staff. These personal characteristics appear as limitations or conditions for the children's ability to learn. The starting point is a child who very much need to be protected and whose learning is primarily dependent on properties linked to the individual child, and not related to the teaching or the pre-school environment.

Professional Knowledge Related to Children's Learning and Development

To work with mathematical concepts and understanding occurs regularly in the pre-school work studied. The staff has also undergone special training in the field and the children are described as "quite accustomed to this, therefore, in math, you'll sit and reason and you we do this very often". Even if the staff do not describe themselves as rooted in an explicit learning or teaching theory, they nevertheless express some fundamental reasoning that is basic for organising and carrying through teaching in pre-school. When the teachers reason about their teaching, some discernible meaning-bearing starting points of particular importance appear when it comes to getting children to understand and develop knowledge around a particular content. Such starting points are that the children (1) *need to be challenged*. Teachers asking

questions or arranging appropriate learning situations challenge the children's understanding. They also (2) *need time to reflect*. The teachers express for example that "they are sitting and thinking from something to something else, and of course they have no possibility to process their thoughts because instead they work on 'it's how we usually do it'". It is also important not to hurry on and try to push too much content, or as one of the teacher say "it must not be stuffing". They also (3) *need to move around and use their bodies*. Sitting still must be combined with moving around. This is not just a need to move the body, but also a need to experience and learn with their whole body as a tool. Pedagogues also express that (4) *the content must be at the right level*. Here, it is sometimes difficult to meet all the children on the "right" level when there are large differences within a group. During planning the teachers also expressed that it is important that (5) *the activities do not take too much time*. "One can not hold on for a long time" because the risk is that the kids get tired and bored. To counter this, the time allocated between different elements is restricted. Finally, the teachers also expressed (6) *the importance and critical success of the teacher to capture and retain children's attention and interest*.

The starting points reported above have been interpreted as a reflection of the teachers' professional knowledge related to children's learning and development, as they express an idea of how learning and teaching in pre-schools should be implemented and what the base is. It is an expression of what teaching can be about in the Swedish pre-school. It is a way of organizing a teaching situation that meets the child and offers challenges on the "right" level, while also considering the children's "nature", such as movement, and that is too much may be offered. There is also a form of teaching based on the child and its supposed needs, and where content is emphasized to a lesser extent.

Dominant Discursive Patterns

The work of pre-school teachers during planning time means that they participate in discursive practices in which pre-school work is constituted. When arguing for their professional activities, ways of using certain knowledge appear to be central. Knowledge referred to and used during work, in this case when meeting other professionals, is shaped by and shapes the professional identity of education and educational work.

When the teachers are planning their work they, at the same time talk within and express the current discourses concerning pre-school and children. In this talk, two discursive patterns are found. The first is how a pre-school child could be more or less mature. The second concerns what pre-school stands for in relation to primary school and how those values are maintained.

A Maturing Child

When talking about the children's development and learning, the teachers seem to do what a psychological development discourse defines as the child develops in phases with increasing age and maturity. During planning the teachers talk about adjusting the activity to the children and their current developmental level. "What is hard is the uneven development [...] and it's so hard to catch those who may be at the bottom." The teachers stress the importance of giving the children the right challenges "You can challenge them a bit to nudge those who are sitting thinking of something". The teachers take the individual child as starting point and try to adjust the work according to what they perceive to be the child's developmental level. Here operates an individual discourse of a maturing child who is developing in stages and has to be addressed on its own level.

When teachers later on evaluate the project and reflect on children's learning, it is largely the child's maturity that is pointed out as crucial for what the child managed. A child could

be described as not yet mature enough “He can concentrate during circle time and stuff, so it’s not that, but I just do not believe there was interest and maturity, really”. In the same way, a child’s learning is explained with maturity. “He is also an accomplished, mature guy, he is. So I felt that he probably will cope with it.” This does not say anything about what and how the teachers decide on what maturity is but when the teachers try to explain why the child has or has not understood the content, they explain it as a matter of the individual child and his or her personality. They do not speak about the implementation of the pre-school activity or their own teaching as significant for the children’s learning.

Making it not Like School

When planning learning approaches the teachers assume that children in pre-school settings have to learn in another way than children at school. They claim the right for the children to be free to move around and avoid instructions which may be too hard for them. When planning activities, the teachers stress time as an important factor. “Surely, we can not take too long / ... / But then you have to reduce it, we can not go on too long with the other two exercises. I feel that it is a little like stuffing them”.

When the teachers talk about the content of the children’s learning, they debate how subjects, for example mathematics, are dealt with in pre-school. The teachers discuss Maths and say that the subject is a regular feature of pre-school activities, but the name Mathematics is not used. “Why can we not say mathematics when that’s what we mean” they wonder. One teacher points out an important factor in keeping pre-school separated from school. As pre-school teachers are not supposed to teach traditional school, where you can find a right answer, it can cause confusion when the children want to know the right answer. When one of the teachers was conducting a lesson concerning *more* and *most*, she dealt with how she was supposed to handle the right answer among the children’s suggestions. She was interrupting herself and asked the researcher: “Shall I tell the correct answer? Sara said, ‘It is *most* here.’ And that’s actually right, for *most* it’s the quantity, it’s how many?” Sara was operating within a pre-school discourse where telling the right answer in a planned learning situation is not the right thing to do. In their discussion the teachers maintain the pre-school aspect in relation to what could be considered as more “school-like” instruction situations suggested by the researchers.

Discussion

The aim is to study knowledge utilization and discursive patterns during pre-school planning work front stage, i.e., to examine what subjects become topics of discussion and how various practical and ethical dilemmas are handled by the practitioners involved. The work done by the practitioners during such planning sessions entails that they “do preschool” by linguistic means, i.e., that they participate in discursive practices wherein the pre-school and pre-school work are constituted.

A previous pilot-study showed that during planning meetings back stage no particular use of professional knowledge appeared. Instead, the staff preferred to use and refer to local knowledge where satisfaction of children, parents and colleagues appeared as a dominant discursive frame. The study showed that satisfaction, in relation to parents, children as well as colleagues, was a dominant discourse forming the basis of staff discussion and debate (Aili, Ljung-Djärf & Tullgren, in press). This can be understood as an expression of the back stage meeting primarily being an opportunity where staff is engaged in confirming the common work, but also to test the boundaries of work and defining their own and others’ responsibilities — an opportunity to negotiate and agree on what is true and important. On the front stage arena, as described above, the task appears as somewhat different.

In summary, the knowledge used is based on both professional knowledge related to children's learning and development, and on local knowledge of children and their abilities, conditions and personalities and what usually works in relation to these children. The professional knowledge appears as rather implicit, and expressions related to the implementation of the pre-school activity or their own teaching as significant for the children's learning is rare. Instead, it is primarily the local knowledge of children and their individual maturity, needs and circumstances that is most clearly expressed. How can that be understood?

In relation to another professional group than their own, the staff has to express and maintain what is specific about preschool. Dominant discursive patterns are formulated as the staff holds themselves responsible for making the pre-school activity "not like school" customized for the maturing child. In the front stage situation the teachers' tasks primarily appear as a desire to maintain the pre-school content in accordance with pre-school tradition and ideology. This governs how the teachers perceive the children's learning in pre-school as different in relation to student learning in a school context. This is a discourse dominated by a caring mentality and children's play, where the children are allowed to be free and make the right choices by themselves (Emilson, 2008; Tullgren, 2004). The staff's approach are to carrying out their work within the discourse of play and its connections to children's learning and development in pre-school (Ailwood, 2003; Dyblie Nilsen, 2000; Ljung-Djärf & Tullgren, in press; Tullgren, 2004).

Conclusion

Analyzed from a Foucault perspective doing pre-school on the front stage planning meeting arena means that the pre-school teachers express a pre-school discourse where the maturing child should be free, feel pleasure and be protected from repressive education. This seem to create a pre-school professional with a mission to maintain the tradition even if this is not fully in line with policy decisions in the direction of an increased focus on content issues and clearer teaching assignments.

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