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Preschool Institutions in Socially Deprived Residential Areas

Social Pedagogical Development in Working with Socially Vulnerable Children and Families

Abstract: This article illustrates the effort and importance of preschool institutions when working with socially vulnerable children and families in Denmark. When institutions are physically located in socially deprived residential areas, the pedagogical personnel conduct their work with a social pedagogical approach in everyday practice. The author's research investigated such professionals' work in preschool institutions in socially deprived residential areas. The article exemplifies pedagogical interventions in everyday life, and points to the fact that the development of pedagogical practice creates a framework for developing and improving the social pedagogical efforts that are targeted at socially vulnerable children and their families. As there is no common concept related to day care, to avoid misunderstandings, the article uses the term "preschool", which seems to be the most neutral international term, instead of using "nursery school" (UK), "Kindergarten" (D), "kindergarten" (US), "école maternelle" (F) or "børnehave" (DK) – terms that carry different connotations or sometimes overlap. The term combines the ideas of welfare and education in a Danish context.

Keywords: social pedagogy; preschool institutions; socially vulnerable children and families; pedagogy; socially deprived area

1. Introduction

Social pedagogy and education are embedded in societal purposes, values and goals. In a sense, social pedagogy is a technique aligned to sophisticated processes of social control (Rose 1996, pp. 26–27). Professional expertise in the field may be identified as a modality of societal regulation which encompasses practical techniques such as investigation, classification, assess-

ment and intervention. In other words, it is an ambiguous activity involving empowerment or punishment in equal measure. However, in the golden years of the welfare state, empowerment seemed to be the primary option, often in accordance with the ideals of the social and pedagogical professions.

1.1 Paradigm shift in society

One important contemporary trend is the emerging contours of a new form of socialisation, shifting from professionalism to managerialism. This shift is closely connected with neoliberalism. “Neoliberalism is a vision of society in which competition for wealth is the only recognised value and virtually all social decisions are left to unregulated markets” (Faux 2006, p. 5). Essentially, the same thing is said by Treanor (2009) when he writes, “Neoliberalism is not simply economic structure, it is a philosophy. This is most visible in attitudes to society, the individual and employment. Neo-liberals tend to see the world in terms of market metaphors” (p. 9). We should add that neoliberalism is more than an economic theory or political philosophy; it is a way of seeing reality in terms of quantifiable transactions.

In his history of neoliberalism, David Harvey uses the term “commodification” to describe this process. Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as follows,

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. [...] Neoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects in ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world (pp. 2–3).

Yet we have to be aware of the many ways in which neoliberalism can be conceptualised. Approaches have varied: Is it a policy paradigm? Is it more broadly understood as a hegemonic ideology? Or is it a distinctive form of governmentality? For our purpose, the most important point is to avoid a totalising interpretation of neoliberalism. Related to preschool institutions, the dominant trends have included a reorganisation of the public sector

into corporate units organised along product or service lines (a shift from a unitary, functional form to a multidivisional structure); an emphasis on contract-based competitive provision, with internal markets and term contracts (the introduction of “managed markets” with public agencies as funders and contract managers, private individuals for making profits, and non-profit providers as contractors); a stress on discipline and frugality in the use of resources, including a focus on cost and revenue accounting; greater use of explicit, formal standards and performance measures; and greater emphasis on output rather than input controls (cf. Hood 1995).

The above presentation of the main trends in this development is not irrelevant for the article, as pedagogues¹ argue and explain how their practice has been changed.

1.2 The PISA shock

Against this backdrop, early and preventive measures have had an important impact on politics, professional practice, and research. In many European countries, one certain external circumstance, especially, accelerated the pace of change: the less than encouraging results of the PISA studies, producing a state of shock similar to the “sputnik shock” of the 1950s. As early as the 1990s, the goal of the Danish parliament was to ensure that all children could enroll in a childcare facility: this was also known as the “childcare guarantee”. This led to a certain internal maturation in the way the pedagogical institutions worked, as the rising number of places and the purpose of providing a place to all children raised new, challenging tasks for the personnel in the day-care institutions. Thus, this was not solely based on an external influence, as the ground was laid by waves of development work which were well-suited to the New Public Management reforms that were implemented in Denmark from the mid-1980s. In brief, early intervention was seen as having multiple purposes: to increase national competitiveness in relation to PISA, to involve all children in a social normalisation process, and, if possible, to make the pedagogical work in the day-care institutions more efficient.

Past political battles about whether children should be looked after at home or attend a childcare facility were thus laid to rest. All political parties agree on the importance of day-care facilities as evidenced from the Day-

1 A pedagogue is an educated professional who educates children or young people in preschool or residential homes.

Care Facilities Act (2013), which states that the task of the day-care institution is to help:

[...] prevent children from inheriting negative social traits and suffering exclusion by making pedagogical measures an integral part of both the legal authority's overall, general offer to children and adolescents and the preventive and supportive activities aimed at children and adolescents requiring special support, including children and adolescents with diminished mental and physical capacity [...] (Section 1 (3)).

In principle, the day-care institution must both help to prevent and to establish supportive interventions. Accordingly, research on work in day-care institutions aimed at socially vulnerable children has been increasing (Nordenbo et al. 2008; 2009; 2010; Larsen et al. 2011; 2012; 2013).

2. Relevant research in Denmark – a brief sketch

Nordenbo et al. (2008; 2009) point out that the existing Danish and Nordic research pertaining to preschool engages with three focus points: (1) socially vulnerable children in a societal perspective, (2) socially vulnerable children in an individualised perspective, and (3) exclusion mechanisms related to the socially vulnerable child in day care.

However, the existing research confirms an *absence* of studies aimed at socially vulnerable children in day care which also include children's living conditions and upbringing and the impact of these on children, parents, and pedagogues. This absence means that the research on socially vulnerable children, their living conditions, and upbringing often provides a *simplistic* view on children's living conditions and opportunities for development. At best, socially vulnerable children's housing conditions and upbringing are mentioned as part of an enumeration, for example of risk factors – with no further determination of how those conditions affect the child; what kind of dilemmas, challenges and difficulties the conditions hold; and, not least, what options are available for development in spite of their socially vulnerable situation in life.

The absence means a lack of knowledge. However, this lack can be rectified if research connects the children with their location, including the institutional contexts in which everyday life takes place and where the children live their lives along with other children, the professionals, and their parents. This kind of knowledge is more complex, but provides a more reli-

able basis for deciding what pedagogical measures might be launched in order to help and support the development of socially vulnerable children.

Although, generally speaking, all children in Denmark attend day-care facilities, significant differences between the various institutions emerge. This also reveals differences between (all) children's experiences, opportunities, and actions in relation to day-care institutions' pedagogical practice (Jensen et al. 2012; Petersen 2009; 2011; Petersen & Ladefoged 2015).

3. Preschool in deprived areas

The differences concern both the structure and the content of the pedagogical work, human resources, and focus on the pedagogy. In particular, it is crucial whether the day-care institutions are located in socially deprived residential areas where a large group of children are estimated to have severely difficult living conditions.

Although the institutions appear similar in form – lots of children, toys, group rooms, children's drawings, etc. – they are marked by differences. The pedagogical personnel in certain day-care institutions possess special skills and perform a number of unusual and specific tasks which are significantly beyond what are framed as ordinary pedagogical tasks (Jensen et al. 2012; 2015; Petersen 2009; 2011).

This article mainly includes institutions which are geographically located in the middle of a residential area surrounded by apartment blocks and placed on the government's list of socially deprived residential areas. A socially deprived residential area is marked by high unemployment, considerable poverty and income below the poverty line, low educational attainment, and a high proportion of ethnic minorities (Ministry of Housing, Urban and Rural Affairs 2014). However, a socially deprived residential area is not a ghetto (Jensen et al. 2015; Reutlinger & Wigger 2010; Wacquant 2008; 2010). Thus, the political interest, the research situation, and the day-care institution's physical location have been used as a framework. In the following section, the theoretical and methodological basis of the study will be broadly outlined.

4. Theoretical perspectives on children, pedagogues and residential areas

The theoretical background is educational research that considers vulnerability among children and families as part of social chance inequality (Hansen 2003; Jensen et al. 2012). An uneven distribution is essential in regard to the children's opportunities to go through a life course of a day-care institution, school, further education and work. Both international and Danish educational research reveals how children from families with no further education or attachment to the labour market, who live on public benefits, have far more difficulties in performing with regard to day care, school, and education during their childhood (Hansen 2003; 2005; Jensen et al. 2012; Palludan 2005).

The central issues of educational sociology have been *social reproduction* and *social mobility* (Hansen 1986; 1988; 2003; 2005). Despite the development of the welfare state, working class children still experience difficulties and barriers in gaining access to higher education, decent work, and, thus, good housing and other social benefits. The concept of *life chances* shows differences in people's positions in the social structure and thus also social inequality: that is, differences in living conditions between the different social classes (Hansen 2003; 2005). The concept of life chance inequality brings out structural and societal differences in gaining access to education and work. At the same time, this approach rejects arguments that inequality is in part because the child or adolescent refuses to take responsibility or display adequate commitment in relation to completing school or other forms of education. In a capitalist society, inequality is a result of the mechanism of social reproduction; though inequality is not acceptable for the majority of the populace, the system survives.

Going one step further, Gramsci (1971/1997) extends the Marxist exploration of the relationship between economic structure, the state, and the institutions of civil society by pointing out that inequitable social relations are legitimated by a hegemony in which bourgeois interests are represented as universal interests:

[...] every state is ethical in as much as one of its most important functions is to raise the mass of the population to a particular cultural and moral level (or type) which corresponds to the needs of the productive forces for development, and hence the interests of the ruling classes. (p. 258)

If we further elaborate the Gramscian notion, it becomes obvious that the lives of human subjects are ordered through embedded or inherent processes of power. This means that the modern citizen becomes his or her own jailor. If we accept this explanation, then governed freedom is exercised, and mediating or moderating practices of social pedagogy make an outstanding vehicle. In addition, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) point to the function of the “new spirit of capitalism”:

In many respects, capitalism is an absurd system: in it wage earners have lost ownership of the fruits of their labour and the possibility of pursuing a working life free of subordination. As for capitalists, they find themselves yoked to an indeterminable, insatiable process, which is utterly abstract and dissociated from satisfaction of consumptions needs, even of a luxury kind. For two such protagonists, integration into the capitalist process is singularly lacking in justification. (p. 7)

Moreover, they point to how activities or projects justify this system. This means networking and being engaged in a discontinuous process of project planning, project implementation, and project finishing. If they are right, this feature offers a plausible explanation for the challenges facing the professions.

On the basis of this general approach, the following section describes and analyses the day-care institutions’ effort and importance in relation to socially vulnerable children and families; further, it discusses how professional pedagogues’ skills emerge and evolve in pedagogical work in the day-care institutions.

5. Methodology and data basis

Three day-care institutions participated in the research project. Two of them are smaller institutions physically located close to each other in the same socially deprived residential area in a small Danish town. One of these is a nursery; the other is an integrated institution containing both a nursery and a kindergarten. The third institution is a large integrated institution containing a nursery, a kindergarten and after-school care located close to two socially deprived residential areas in Copenhagen.

The approach is practice-based research, implying that practice is studied from the practitioner’s perspective and that the pedagogical personnel function as co-researchers in the development and research process

(Højholt 2005; Petersen 2009). The professionals are expected to be active co-creators and participants throughout the research project, from its detailed planning to collecting knowledge, analysing it and coming to a conclusion, while the researchers adopt an initial, facilitating, advisory or frame-building role that may contribute to new knowledge from the outside if required. Collaboration around a common defined development plan accompanied by the development of scientific knowledge is the basis for research conducted *with* pedagogues as opposed to research *for* pedagogues, as the practitioner is regarded and treated as the expert in his field of practice. The crucial issue is the *pedagogues' perspective* as an active part of their professional everyday lives, i. e. their experiences and actions in regard to pedagogical practice, opportunities and limitations, conflicts, and dilemmas in their everyday work. Though this sounds more like a “bottom-up” approach, as opposed to “top-down” research, it is still a difficult method to use. Firstly, some practitioners lacked research skills, which had to be overcome by means of a comprehensive training program; secondly, the insider/outsider perspectives are difficult to balance. Barriers can be overcome and staff viewpoints and perspectives can be elicited in ways that are not possible for outsiders to achieve. At the same time, one challenge might be that the co-researchers may lack the broader perspective of the research and that their close identification with their colleagues may lead to bias. Therefore, it is reasonable to question the extent to which competence might determine the level of involvement in the research process. In our case, engaging with co-researchers is not a *must* or a *dogma* but was based on whether their involvement added value to the research.

There are limitations to be considered when working with practitioners as co-researchers. However, the ways in which participation can be achieved are varied and cover a range of possibilities. They included the research agenda being placed in a joint setting: the practitioners working alongside researchers during data collection, analysis, and dissemination. It is not possible to describe the comprehensive framework in any detail here. However, the following offers a summary of the main approaches and methods: for example, taking views into account when making decisions, consultations during the development stage of the research, joint planning and development, involvement in report writing, and dissemination activities. It is important to note that existing competence barriers and knowledge barriers do not simply vanish but have to be taken seriously throughout the project.

The result was that the way the practitioner works, why, and on what grounds and social conditions the practice is organised, developed, and altered became an object of common enquiry. Through active involvement

of the field of practice and with the practitioners, practice-based research seeks to develop concepts, theories, and knowledge about what the professional practice field actually looks like on its own terms, rather than developing theories and models that are detached from practice and subsequently implemented in the field of practice (Petersen 2009; 2011).

6. What do the results show?

Two dimensions will be presented here: firstly, a description of the kind of work that takes place in a day-care institution located in a socially deprived residential area, and secondly, of social pedagogical work with socially vulnerable children and families.

6.1 Working in a day-care institution in a socially deprived residential area

In this section, examples are employed to show the pedagogues' perspective and the researcher's attempt to understand the perspective.

Working in a socially deprived residential area has a physical and psychological impact according to the pedagogical personnel. Data from one of the day-care institutions show that pedagogues may experience a sense of inadequacy when they work with children who are failing to thrive educationally and, for example, when they behave as "failing" subjects. Further, they describe psychological difficulties in work with neglected children and experience difficulties in setting aside problems outside working hours. The pedagogical personnel also feel that their work differs from the pedagogical work in day-care institutions which are not located in socially deprived residential areas, as socially vulnerable families are not numerous there. The different means of cooperating with the families face barriers including that of language barriers, because of the children's use of modern urban vernacular – and requires extended cooperation with other professional groups, writing several reports, and advising and counseling parents about how to manage their life. In other words, the personnel felt that they had significantly more pedagogical tasks to manage.

Children whom the personnel regard as socially vulnerable are primarily children living in families marked by war trauma, mental illness or unemployment, children of young or divorced parents, and children living in foster care. The personnel believe that most of those attending their institution fall under the category of "socially vulnerable".

In the other two day-care institutions, the pedagogical personnel share those feelings as they work with children who have developmental difficulties and are also neglected to some extent. They spend more time on activities such as basic care and developing the children's ability to interact through supportive developmental measures. They have extended parental cooperation and tend to spend more resources on parental guidance. Contact with the department of family affairs or pedagogical and psychological counselling is not rare, and tolerance and adaptation to uncertain situations are normal. Some children need a sense of security, intimacy, fixed and predictable boundaries, and attentive adults. Other children must develop a sense of community with other children. The socially vulnerable children are characterised by low self-esteem, personal insecurity and confusion, lacking faith in themselves, aggression, and a tendency to behave outside normal limits.

The staff experience tough working conditions compared to “the good old days” of segregation, when “failing” children were looked after in residential homes or special institutions. Due to formal “inclusion” in ordinary day care, a growing number of new and partly new tasks create many tensions during working hours. Similarly, the ratio of children to pedagogues has changed, meaning that the workload is much higher today. Though the personnel are aware of the new conditions, they tend to characterise children in terms of deficiency – drawing among other things upon concepts from somewhat outdated theories about social inheritance. Moreover, we find examples of personalising responsibility for social “failure”. The moralising function of pedagogy and social pedagogy has grown as the disciplinary logic of society has evolved over recent decades. Though they know better, they seem to regress to an outdated professional knowledge base. In other words, the pedagogues experience social transformations “first-hand”, especially the growing precarisation of their social environment. In addition to these factors, there are others related to their institution, e. g. an increasing workload and complexity, and the dead end in which many find themselves due to a lack of resources (cf. Burns, 2012). The obvious question to ask is why they have not changed jobs. A full answer did not emerge during the research; however, a plausible explanation is offered in the next section.

6.2 Social pedagogical work with socially vulnerable children and families

But what is meant by the term “social pedagogy?” In this research, the concept is used in a narrow or a broad sense: an understanding that social

pedagogy is primarily an aspect of and perspective on pedagogy (in a broad sense) and an understanding of social pedagogy as an independent discipline characterised by a field of its own, with its own professional education, and with an independent trade union (a narrow sense). The narrow sense is based on Herman Nohl's (1928) idea of an autonomous "Theory of Youth Help" and Gertrud Bäumer's presentation of social pedagogy as the third field of education apart from the family and school (Jensen 2006, pp. 236 ff.).

Both a "purely" theoretical development and a "purely" practical one are possible – but neither is sufficiently precise. In real life, the development of social pedagogy influences its "application" in the professional practice – which in turn means that social pedagogy theory is fundamentally governed and regulated by the effects of its own "merger" or "amalgamation" with practice, since practice delivers the practical, experience-based problems which theory is supposed to solve; when theory is provided with practical problems, new conditions for theoretical interventions arise. In other words, the general thesis presented here is a complementary one derived from the way the relationship between theory and practice affects/impacts on theory itself. Theory tends to be strongly influenced by its application or import. This thesis also implies that theory is constituted within the relationship between theory and practice, not outside it. Consequently, it is not "pure"; rather, it is "impure" or, even better, contextualised.

The interventions targeting socially vulnerable children and families in the participating day-care institutions are not pre-standardised methods ready for application. On the contrary, the personnel in the day-care institutions have at their disposal a pool of experience with pedagogical interventions that they are able to tap into when meeting the individual child and family. Thus, in a meaningful way, the interventions cannot be seen as being detached from the pedagogical context in which they are used. In the following section, a case is employed to highlight the point.

The case does not directly relate to children, families or interventions in the individual day-care institution; it is based on descriptions of vulnerability, children, families, and interventions reported from the personnel and parents in the day-care institutions during the course of the project. The vulnerability described by the personnel reflects the fact that the residential areas in which the day-care institutions are located represent a strong concentration of social problems.

In the day-care institutions, a relatively large number of the families live in poverty. In several cases, the pedagogical personnel describe not knowing whether a disagreement with parents is due to cultural differences between

the personnel and parents or whether it is due to poverty in the family. When poverty becomes evident, as in the case study, the pedagogical personnel typically describe interventions against poverty in families that do not draw on pedagogical professionalism but on personal improvisation: one clears the fridge in the institution for food, one brings clothes from home, and one gets hold of Christmas gifts from local toy stores. The problem of poverty seems to stand out, partly because the personnel are unsure whether their experiences when meeting the children and families are an expression of poverty, and partly because handling children with problems related to poverty seems to a large extent to depend on the individual pedagogue's personal improvisation (Jensen, 2016). Managing social inequality turns out to develop separate identities among professionals. Paraphrasing, a typical statement may be illustrated by making this generic quote: "You have to draw the line. If you take in all the misery or suffering of every mother who comes here you'd go crazy". However, this does not imply that staff maintain a steady social distance from the families' misfortunes. The personnel feel a sense of responsibility towards the distress they witness, in particular when this is experienced face-to-face. Compassion is embedded in the unequal social relationship between professionals and the children and their families. A certain proximity in terms of gender seems to play an important role – the professional female is in tune with the mother who is in need of food for the weekend. Further, social proximity also seems to become an active factor when confronted with a family in recent decline or "falling". Such evidence is of great importance because it shows the two roles of the professional: on the one hand, marked by mere professionalism, and, on the other hand, marked by compassion.

During the research project, children, families and personnel were followed in the three day-care institutions for three years. Three years is a long time with regard to a complete day-care institution course for children and their families, which made it possible to follow developments in work with vulnerability among children and families in the institutions. On the basis of the research project, it is not possible to say anything about the effect of the day-care institutions in the long term; however, it is possible to point out some of the effects that the day-care institutions have in the short term: here and now in the child's life, and also with regard to parents' experiences with upbringing and child care.

The parents we spoke to and who are in socially vulnerable positions point out challenges that their children face and which they would like the personnel to help solve. They also experience that the personnel provide this help. They express that their acceptance of this help is all about trust;

trusting in the fact that the personnel wish them and their children well. It is very important for them that they are heard and that they are commended on their efforts; further, it is important for their children that the relationship between the parents and the personnel in the institution is mutually trusting. They feel that it makes their children more confident, and that this sense of security is important in relation to the children's development of social relationships and language skills. The pedagogical personnel in the institutions express their close relationship with the families: a premise for being able to work with the children's learning and development.

7. Conclusion and perspectives in the long term

The following presents a list of the conclusions that can be drawn from the theoretical and empirical basis of the project.

7.1 The socially deprived residential area

The first conclusion concerns socially deprived residential areas, socially vulnerable people, and poverty. The research project has shown that a residential area has an effect on the children, adolescents, and families who live there. The effects are of course not entirely negative, but have a negative impact compared to the images of normality that are predominant in the population as a whole. The negative image of the neighbourhood appears to play a certain role. Children and families from the neighbourhood are not dissatisfied, but other people's prejudice about the neighbourhood has an impact on the residents' well-being. Such social stigma has a limiting effect on the residents' actions, in particular a difficult way of life and restricted options.

Seen from the outside, a partially diverging culture is established, which also has an impact on those who are not a part of it. The culture is part of a social learning that differs from the norms and patterns of behaviour in "normal society". This may weaken the use of existing opportunities. In regard to the children, the effects of the socially vulnerable environment appear in the form of socialisation effects and limited social interactions, i. e. limited social experience and mutual exchange processes, which are further enhanced by child poverty.

These limitations must be clearly distinguished from knee-jerk reactions. The residential area in question is neither a ghetto nor a parallel soci-

ety. If one allows elements such as ethnicity or ghettoisation to overshadow poverty and lack of opportunities for participation, this detracts from the lesson learned on vulnerability and socially vulnerable children. The residential areas show signs of social, economic, and ethnic diversity. Not all residents can be grouped together, which is an important basis for the social pedagogical work. Diversity and mobility are part of the picture, and will have an impact on the practical pedagogical interventions.

The socially deprived residential areas are characterised by a high concentration of vulnerability, i. e. they are inhabited by children and families in very different, socially vulnerable positions. The concentration of social vulnerability can affect the socially vulnerable, adding to their vulnerability, given that socially deprived residential areas expose their residents to social vulnerability.

7.2 The tasks of the day-care institution

The second conclusion emphasises the fact that the objective is to break with social vulnerability. On this basis, the day-care institutions in socially deprived residential areas have a significantly important role. The pedagogical and social pedagogical interventions in the day-care institutions must reflect the breadth of ways in which people are socially vulnerable in this area. This requires a high level of broad (social) pedagogical insight and knowledge and professional skills among the personnel in the institutions.

7.3 Staff culture

The project shows that the staff culture in the three day-care institutions develops both awareness and determination in terms of dealing with the different social pedagogical tasks that come with the location in a socially deprived residential area. As a result of this awareness and action competence, the staff see themselves as having a heavy workload. When the specific interventions become evident, it may reduce the staff's perception of their workload. This can be explained by the staff having a certain degree of latitude (academic professional autonomy), understanding the importance of the task (wishing to make a difference), and possessing the appropriate breadth of skills.

Thus, more could be said about working conditions in the three day-care institutions: some employees may experience emotional exhaustion or feel ineffective. Both can give them a negative attitude to their work. However, on the basis of the collected material, it is not possible to conclude

more than this. Still, it has been stated that the perception of meaningfulness in work is strong. This means that the employees can identify with the task and deal with it, and see themselves as making a difference. The academic professional latitude offers freedom or autonomy, and it creates accountability in relation to the outcomes. Finally, there is collegial feedback, which helps to ensure that the employees always have a sense of whether small successes or backwards steps along the way contribute to an overall improvement.

7.4 Knowledge and skills

In particular, the project has brought the day-care institutions' work in these residential areas into focus, including the pedagogues' skills and how the pedagogical work is organised. The results from the analysis show that the day-care institution offers a number of opportunities for creating inclusive, learning-promoting interventions aimed at socially vulnerable children and their parents. In this context, inclusive interventions aimed at children and parents give rise to participation in different social communities, which helps people spend time together and offers an opportunity to play with other children. This also means that professional adults notice and act on the child's socially vulnerable living conditions and support and help parents who themselves are suffering from socially vulnerable living conditions. On the other hand, the learning-promoting interventions are intended to structure and implement relevant activities and initiatives that increase the child's learning opportunities in the day-care institution while improving the child's preparation for school. This type of intervention was quite distinct in one of the institutions, which focused throughout the project on the children's transitions from nursery to kindergarten, from kindergarten to school, and also to after-school care. The special support was important for the child's ability to participate in the community, and for how participation was closely associated with the opportunity for learning.

Two main findings are of particular interest. One is about the importance of the day-care institution and the opportunities that it holds – as an inclusive, learning-promoting intervention and as a special preventive intervention in relation to socially vulnerable children and parents. In this context, the nurseries' work turned out to be very important in working with the individual child as well as working with the early mother/child relationship. In addition, the nursery also turned out to be the place where difficult upbringing conditions can be identified at an early stage and, thus, early preventive interventions can be initiated. Previous research in relation

to socially vulnerable children has shown this (Petersen, 2011) and illustrated that when children start nursery and from move there on to kindergarten, there is a period of approximately four years in which the child and parents can be followed, just as it is possible to organise interventions for a longer time period.

The second concerns the pedagogues' development in regard to their professional skills. In general, the pedagogues in the three participating institutions see themselves as having to accommodate and work with all children and parents, whether this takes place in the nursery, kindergarten or after-school care. However, this inclusiveness as part of the pedagogues' professional understanding comes with a price that they imposed on themselves. They work with socially vulnerable children and families and experience a heavy mental workload, which is difficult to set aside when the workday is over. They bring it home in the form of concern for a child or a family. Apparently, there is a close connection between the fact that the more the pedagogues themselves view themselves as developing their professional skills, the more they see themselves as able to handle the workload when working with socially vulnerable children and families. An increase in the professional pedagogues' knowledge contributes to an expansion of the professionals' skills in their work. It provides a necessary variation when several ways of working arise. It requires more knowledge of vulnerability, children and parents, and knowledge on how to organise the pedagogical work. In other words, the importance of the professional pedagogues' opportunity to develop their skills may be established but, furthermore, their improved skills relate to the children's opportunities for development. The two findings can be summarised in the following conclusion.

The professionals' improved skills in pedagogical practice with socially vulnerable children and families are conditional on:

- theoretically founded knowledge about socially vulnerable children and families, their living conditions, and their difficulties which help to go beyond and vary the analysis of the children's and the families' actions and conditions for development,
- analysis of the child's and/or the parent's complex behaviours as situated in pedagogical practice and not detached from this context: that is, as functional aspects of the child's and the parents' overall living conditions and opportunities,
- organisation of the pedagogical practice to give the children and the parents further options in relation to the day-care institution and in relation to the family's situation in life.

This implies that, generally, it is possible to indicate relevant factors with regard to the day-care institutions in socially deprived residential areas:

- including accurate analysis of the residential area and the group of children when developing the pedagogical approach used in the day-care institution,
- ensuring that there is a wide range of pedagogical and social pedagogical skills in the staff group,
- furthering the continuous development of an institution, which, on the one hand, must handle general pedagogical tasks but, on the other hand, must also deal with the social pedagogical tasks that come with its location in a socially deprived residential area. This may, for example, occur through a structuring of everyday life that takes into account time and places that provide a chance to focus on children's learning and development, and other times and places that provide a chance to implement social pedagogical interventions aimed at families.

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