**Unnoticed professional competence and knowledge in day care work**

Annegrethe Ahrenkiel, Camilla Schmidt, Birger Steen Nielsen, Finn Sommer and Niels Warring, Department of Psychology and Educational Studies, Roskilde University, Denmark

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**1. Introduction**

In research on professions in the public care and health sector the issue of professional competence and knowledge is central. Discussions on tacit knowledge (Polanyi), modus 1 and 2 knowledge (Gibbons), intuitive expertise (Dreyfus), reflective practice (Schön), practical knowledge (Bourdieu), communities of practice (Wenger) have been influencing the discussion on professional development. Across the different notions there is a shared view that important parts of professional competence is part of daily practices and embedded in routines, experiences, shared repertoire, etc.

NPM and neoliberalism has had an important impact on care and health work imposing demands for documentation, standardization and evaluation. These increasing demands seem to be in contrast with the tacit and embodied parts of professional competence that not easily can be documented, standardized and evaluated. It can be argued that there is a pressure on these aspects of professional competence and knowledge ultimately resulting in poorer quality of work for both employees and citizens – the exact opposite of what presumably has been the goal with the steering systems.

This paper deals with the case of social educators in day care centers. The paper is based on material from two research projects (Ahrenkiel et al. 2009, 2011) involving social educators and union representatives in day care institutions. We have observed everyday work activities in day care centres and various meetings involving union representatives and on this basis interviewed both social educators and union representatives. Finally, we facilitated research workshops in the projects, inspired by action research, where the focal point was the suggestions for change put forward by the social educators and union representatives themselves.

In the following we first discuss the impact of new steering mechanisms and how the social educators deal with them. We will shortly touch upon the increasing use of pedagogical ‘systems’ and we will continue outlining two empirical examples on how different types of professional competences and knowledge are involved in social educators’ work. We will discuss the notion of ‘unnoticed professional competence’ in day care work and will finally draw on short examples from the research workshops to conclude that social educators have the interest and ability to develop professional competence and knowledge in ways that point away from a one-sided view on professionalism and the undermining of democratic influence in day care centres.

**2. Neoliberalism and NPM in day care institutions**

Day care centres serve a central function in modern society since taking care of children is a prerequisite for the parents’ participation in the labour market. This is certainly the case in Denmark; in 2010 more than 97 % of children aged 3-5 attended day care centres and more than 87 % of children aged 1-2.[[1]](#endnote-1) As other parts of the public sector in health, care, and education, day care is regulated politically and a contested terrain (Edwards 1979) with many agents trying to influence the development of day care centres.

The neoliberal governance and New Public Management in the Danish welfare state has developed over the past 20 years (Campbell 2001). Several key reforms have had both structural consequences as well as implications for the everyday work life in the public sector. Two of the major reforms were the Quality Reform and the Structural Reform, both dating from 2007. The Quality Reform was launched in the desire to allow employees and management freedom to choose how they would live up to key government targets. In this way the Quality Reform further developed contract management as a tool to create quality, implying also that quality is identified as a target which can be quantified. The reform has been met with criticism because bureaucratic governance simply assumed new forms involving standards, benchmarking, accreditation, etc. It has been considered a paradox that the rhetorical liberation has been wrapped up in powerful governance and control.

In the day care sector, various statutory requirements have been introduced and the redefinition by the Government’s Day Care Services Act of day care centres from day care *institutions* to day care *supplies* is symptomatic of the growing market-, service- and customer-oriented thinking that characterises welfare services (Pedersen 2006). Among the new requirements are: Language assessments of 3-year-olds and language stimulation programmes for children with insufficient language skills, and the child’s benefit from such programmes must be documented. The children's environment will be evaluated, with a review at least every three years. Educational curricula for young children in six specified areas will be developed. The day care centres will set targets and define methods and activities for the curricula, and the outcomes of working with the six themes will be documented and be subject to an annual evaluation, including an indication of how to follow up the results. There will be status and development talks with parents with the aim of creating a dialogue on the child’s development in relation to the six specified learning objectives. Local councils and day care centres will be required to document the overall effort, goal achievement and resource use in day care. These are all measures which remove the authority for determining everyday work in day care *away from* the employees (to the leaders) and *away from* the institutions (to administrative and political bodies).

*The response of social educators*

In our projects, we have encountered a great variety of attitudes from social educators to these increased demands. Some view the initiatives positively, believing they can help to give their work a boost and a more clear professional profile. Others emphasise the possible increased recognition of social educators’ status as professionals who, like other professional groups, are capable of planning, implementing and documenting work in accordance with regulations. Yet others are positive in principle about some of the initiatives, but stress the matter of resources - there is already too little time for the actual work with children. Finally there is a group that is generally critical of the initiatives. Some criticise the element of learning- and competence-based thinking which they find implicit in some of the initiatives. Others’ criticism is based on a perception that the actions are driven by control and distrust of the ability of social educators to work in a professionally responsible manner.

The often positive attitude in principle of social educators and their unions towards increased formal requirements for documentation and evaluation may be based on a belief that this could help to enhance their status and thus eventually also improve working conditions and salaries. The focus on documentation can also be seen as a reflection of the increasing service orientation towards the public and not least the parents. An example is when a social educator tell us how they, when they take pictures of a social activity planned in accordance with the learning curricula (as documentation), are more inclined to make sure all children are in the picture so no parent (or child) feels neglected than they are of showing the intentions and the gain of the activity. Or even worse, they are more focused on actually taking pictures and getting the right angle than they are on socializing with the children. So the demand for documentation turns into an urge to make their work ‘visible’ in order to ensure the immediate recognition from parents and other important actors during their day, and the collective recognition based on professionally qualified activities in the association with the children they are responsible for fades away.

The everyday consequences of the market oriented regulations made by national authorities are well known and are documented in many aspects of research on professions (Hjort 2009). This means that the question of whether the development of professional knowledge is threatened by state and market regulations should immediately be followed by the question of ‘how we change this tendency and bring the development of professional knowledge closer to practice and to the professionals themselves’? In the process, however, there may be a danger of professionalism submitting to goal rationality, so that in fact de-qualification may take place if professional assessments previously based on everyday practice are instead based on standards, filling in forms, etc. The development away from a higher degree of professional autonomy in day care centres towards greater regulation of content can be described as a development from high trust to low trust. Seen from this perspective there is anything but recognition of the professional competence of social educators in the new management systems and requirements for evaluation and documentation. How insulting these new demands could be experienced is seen in the following statement from one of the employee representatives in our study: *"I think it's insulting, it's as if the only thing that counts now is the few hours a week I’m obviously working on the curriculum goals. Then I start to think like this: What about before we got the curriculum, didn’t I do anything important then? "*

*The learning agenda*

One of the rationales behind the implementation of learning curricula and the focus on development of the children’s competences is to get children ready for school through organised learning activities. Some have argued that it reflects a general tendency to value primarily labour market oriented competences – to start on the process of becoming a usable employee already in pre-school. Studying the implementation and regulation of learning curricula it becomes clear that the important thing is not necessarily whether the wanted competences are developed, but whether it is possible to document them and fit them in the learning curriculum.

The emphasis of learning curricula in day care institution is connected to a growth in the implementation of many different pedagogical systems and concepts. Fixed and well-described methods can come in handy when there is a need to document and evaluate. Many of these systems or concepts - Marte Meo, Step by step, Work Assessment Method, Multiple Intelligences, Common Language just to name a few - are not new, but they experience an increasing interest in the era of neo-liberalism. Ironically, thoughts behind some of the clearly critical and political thoughts that were popular 30-40 years ago, fit very well to neoliberal governance. Not least the various, often Soviet inspired pedagogical systems which also were keen on systematic learning processes of the children, the clear guidance from the social educators, and the emphasis on well described formal procedures to be followed. Against this stood the not less radical thoughts and practices centred on children’s free playing, often being part of the tradition of reform pedagogy. These days there is a pressure on pedagogical thinking that emphasises children’s free playing, lately seen in a public attacks on ‘hippie-pedagogies’.

Common to the pedagogical systems are they are that the facilitate a direct link to the increased interest in using evidence based knowledge and ensuring academic quality through controlled processes as a way to professionalize the work of social educators. The systems provide solutions to some of the demands social educators are facing, both from politicians, administrators, parents and colleagues. The pedagogical systems work well in making intentions transparent to parents through the pre-defined set of values ​​and the corresponding template for how work is to be carried out. But the templates also have a downside - the risk is to fixate the social educators' work and prevent professional development and ability to adapt their actions to the situation. It involves the risk of excluding the professional competences and knowledge embedded in everyday practices.

**3. Professional competence and knowledge in practice – empirical examples**

*The pedagogical system Step by Step*

In this first empirical example we follow two employees in a day care center, a social educator and an assistant. They conduct an exercise based on the pedagogical system *Step by Step*, which described goals are to develop children's social skills, empathy and develop their ability to articulate both own and other children's feelings. The scene here is from a preschool group of children who are 4 years old. Marlene, the social educator and Norma, the assistant, use the corresponding kit, consisting of a box with a series of images of children, which clearly show different emotions, cards with different types of questions and instructions on how to use the material. There are clear set rules for how to work with pictures and how and on what to speak. Children must sit on the floor in a circle, they must reach a finger up when they want to say something, toys are not allowed in front of them in the circle, and several other rules. The kids know the rules and have them repeated constantly. In addition to developing children's capacity for empathy and teach them to verbalize, understand and work with emotions, the purpose is also through the repeated rules for tone and behaviour to develop impulse control, self control and management of aggression.

*The children sit in a circle on the floor together with Marlene and Norma. It's Marlene, who leads step-by-step activity. She takes a large photo poster from the Step by Step box with materials. It is a photo of a girl who looks sad. Marlene talks to the children about how the girl feels. Several children express in different ways that the girl is sad. Marlene asks the children: “When are you sad?” One of the boys, Svend, replies: 'When my father is shouting in my face.' He turns around and takes a toy. Norma said: "Svend, you need to put the toy away” Svend does not respond, but looks down on the toy. Norma takes the toy from him. Svend gets very upset, he gets up and runs into the playroom. Norma runs after him to talk with him and after a while get him back in the circle.*

If you take an immediate look at the situation it is carried out according to the intention behind it - and thus successful. The children understand what they are supposed to do and they join the activity without reservation. They see immediately that the girl in the photo is sad, and they can put into words when Marlene asks about the feeling to be sad. You could say that the children follow the rules that are laid out, they are attentive and do what is expected of them. Svend’s response to the question on what makes him sad and what he says is fully meaningful in the situation, but when he takes the toy – maybe to seek comfort - Norma focuses on the rules they have set, and chooses to focus on Svend breaking the rules. In the template for Step by step, there is little help available to deal with the situation that arises. There are no instructions on how to tackle emotional reactions from the children in the situation, only directions in relation to behavior and social conventions. Norma thus chooses to stick to the rules and takes toys out of the hands of Svend. He reacts further by leaving the circle – which is not allowed. She follows after him, trying to comfort him and bring him back to the session.

Reflecting on the situation afterwards the social educators weren’t happy with their own reactions. They thought they hadn’t done enough to include Svend’s reactions in the situation and they had difficulty in continuing the exercise in a meaningful way for both Svend and the rest of the children.

*The lunch*

Next we will show an example from a lunch situation involving the group of 3-4 year old children in the day care center. In day care centers lunch situations are often used as opportunities to focus on how children engage in larger contexts. Social educators emphasize the importance of situations like lunch and afternoon breaks with snacks. Although the situations maybe not are reflected as strict learning settings in practice they function as distinct opportunities for social educators to interact with the children in larger groups, observe how the children act together etc. But seen from the perspective on what is important as learning activities scheduled in learning plans etc. eating situations are not central. They are examples of situations involving unnoticed professional competences.

*Nina (the social educator) wants Sarah and Richard to hand out plates and all the kids’ lunch boxes, so she leads the two children to the lunch trolley. All the other children are seated at the tables. When Nina asks Sarah to give a lunch box to Emily, she is about to burst into tears. Nina keeps urging Sarah to bring the lunch box to Emily, but Sarah refuses. Nina suggests that she points Emily out to Sarah. Sarah reluctantly agrees. Then Sarah and Nina both walk over to Emily and Nina hands the lunch box to her while Sarah stands next to her. Then they return to the lunch trolley, ‘read’ the name on the next lunch box. The name is ‘Peter’. Nina says out loud that she will now show Sarah who Peter is. Sarah takes the lunch box and a plate from the trolley and follows Nina. She leads her to Peter’s seat, and they hand the lunch box and the plate to him together. Next Sarah dares to hand over the next lunch box to an unfamiliar and older child herself. Nina says out loud that all the children have to have received their lunch box and plate, and they have to keep quiet and wait till Sarah and Richard have said ‘you are welcome’ before anybody can start to eat. After everyone has unpacked their lunch, and Sarah and Richard stand at the trolley and say, ‘you are welcome’. Sarah is visibly relieved and proud she has managed to hand out all the lunch boxes to the other children.*

Around this lunch situation a lot of well established routines are handled by both children and adults: garbage bins are ready in advance, roller tables are ready, the kids come in at fixed positions, as they are finished with hand washing, etc. Sarah has experienced lunch distribution many times before and knows what should happen. But she doesn’s dare to be the one handing out lunch boxes. Nina sees this and uses the familiar situation as a ‘scaffold’ to help and challenge Sarah to continue. She does so by developing the actions to be taken by Sarah gradually until Sarah finally dares to stand in front of all the children and hand out their lunch boxes.

*Two versions of step-by-step*

The two described situations include different ways the children are met and different ways professional competences and knowledge are entailed.

The situation that has the most clearly defined learning goals and well described procedures – the Step-by-Step exercise - is the one that doesn’t include the child in focus. On the contrary it more or less excludes him until he is brought back, but at that time the exercise is difficult to continue. Seen from a competence and knowledge perspective, the social educators are well aware of the formalities, possible learning outcomes, how to describe the processes, document them etc. It would be too easy to conclude that the reason for this is that the social educators are not well prepared for such things to happen or that they don’t master the Step-by Step system well enough. Rather, what happens is that the social educators are so keen on following the formalities and the systematic, theorized knowledge that they exclude their otherwise well established competences and knowledge on how to meet the individual child and respond to emotional expressions and at the same time keep the collective activity in mind. This is a highly complex and sophisticated type of knowledge and professional competence – yet often unnoticed both by the governing rationales and by the social educators themselves. The learning and competence agenda has a tendency to put pressure on the unnoticed professional competence and knowledge, and activities carried out in too rigid interpretations of pedagogical systems, can further add to that process.

The other situation – lunch – also has well described procedures and even if they may seem just practical, the social educators vies them as important for the children to interact and be able to stand up in front of the rest of the children – to be responsible for an important task of organizing lunch. In this situation rules are also broken: The social educator intervenes and follows the child around until the child feels confident about doing it herself – step-by-step. The break of rules makes the situation successful and the child ends being included and acknowledged for her ability to carry out the task. If this should be ‘translated’ in to learning and competence development the situation develops the child’s social competences.

The social educator relies on her professional competence and knowledge about how children can be supported in developing confidence etc. And she is able to let the situation and actions continue instead of for example asking someone else to hand out lunch boxes or to do it herself. Although acknowledged as important situations lunches are not described as prime learning arenas – expect for learning to behave properly etc. But in this situation it becomes clear that indeed learning and competence development can be in focus. And the actions taken by the social educator show her reflecting that learning is part of everyday, practical activities – in itself an unnoticed professional competence under pressure.

**4. Unnoticed professional competencies**

The development towards greater demands for documentation and evaluation, set learning objectives, centrally determined procedures, etc. means that these aspects of day care work are more time-consuming and tends to steal the attention of professional competence. When accompanied by diminished resources because of cuts, a particular pressure emerges on the "unnoticed" part of professionalism. The “unnoticed” refers to every aspect of the work which according to the narrow service logic of “day care supplies” cannot easily be described, documented or included in a learning perspective; this is the professional competence and knowledge often disregarded as insignificant since it is connected to everyday activities, routines and habits. The fact that this knowledge is unnoticed is not an effect of NPM, but the ongoing reorganisation of institutions increases the structural pressure on it. The significance of this may be that it is not only the formal documentation and evaluation system which has difficulty in seeing and recognising this aspect of professionalism; the social educators themselves also find it hard to uphold its value and develop it as the central and essential part of professional competence, without which the "noticed" part cannot function properly.

The "unnoticed" professionalism is reflected in welcoming the children in the morning, mealtimes, bedtime, changing nappies, dressing and undressing, clearing up, etc. These activities clearly express continuity in daily routines and have great significance for the day-to-day structure. Such activities are obviously not in themselves unnoticed. But they are as *professional* activities. It is a fatal misunderstanding if, for example, one considers putting nursery children to bed after lunch as a routine activity that is not particularly pedagogical, but perhaps requires a special skill and feeling for the situation. The whole situation involved in putting children to bed is an excellent *professional situation* where the social educator's work differs substantially from the parents' putting children to bed at home, and therefore cannot simply be understood as "experience-based", but precisely as a professional activity.

In both of the two empirical examples unnoticed professional competence and knowledge is involved. It would be wrong to conclude that the unnoticed aspects only are present in practical situations and situations that are not defined as learning related. In the examples the unnoticed professional competence and knowledge is about having a shared view on both the individual child and the group of children as a whole, it is knowledge on how you best meet children when they express strong emotions, about how you work together with a colleague etc. These unnoticed aspects can work either together or against formal, theoretical knowledge on the same issues. If the theoretical knowledge is embedded in working with a specific pedagogical system – like in the Step-by-Step exercise – the danger is the unnoticed knowledge is ‘forgotten’ and the necessary combination of types of knowledge is lost. In the lunch situation the social educator draws highly on her unnoticed professional competence and knowledge when she allows rules to be broken resulting in a situation to develop successfully.

*Gestural knowledge, Coherence and Rhythm in everyday work*

In discussions on professional competence it is generally acknowledged that there are different types of knowledge involved (Eraut 1994, Gibbons 1994). Also, in day care work various forms of knowledge go hand in hand. There is theoretical academic knowledge, collectively embedded knowledge and personal knowledge. In practice, the forms of knowledge are closely intertwined, and overall we can use the concept of "gestural knowledge" to describe a significant dimension of day care work. This concept, as we use it here, has been developed from the theory of "sensory awareness" of the German social philosopher Rudolf zur Lippe (Lippe 1990). Sensory awareness is a concept that, as the word suggests, is intended to overcome the polarisation or division of body and spirit without letting the two sides flow into each other. Sensory awareness is the result of a creative process centred on a bodily aesthetic experience whose essential medium is gestural. Human gesture is a significant and *communicative* form of expression, and gestures are not simply bodily movements, but bodily movements that combine into gestalts or rhythms. Further, being communicative, they are never merely individual movements, but elements of social interaction. They are therefore an essential part of creating a coherent context. Gestures can be closely connected to the performance of certain tasks or more freely linked to social exchanges. They will always be part of the situations where they themselves are the responses. What matters in a work perspective is that they also possess a knowledge dimension: a "gestural knowledge" that develops over time and is continuously activated, restored and renewed in new situations. Gestural knowledge is inherently bodily experiential knowledge that can be learned, practiced and developed. However, it must not be understood as something exclusively bodily, but it is created and used in a close relationship with discursive forms of knowledge.

Generally speaking, gesture is at one and the same time the expression of an experience and the imparting of information. Thus, gestural knowledge has a communicative and interactional dimension, which is a prerequisite for its potential to "gestalt" contexts. Gestural knowledge is personal, bodily embedded, practical experiential knowledge about how to deal with certain (work) tasks and master certain situations, and also inter-personal, situation-related knowledge. In concrete situations, the gestures of individuals are attuned - more or less successfully, of course - to others' gestures to form an overarching pattern or interaction. In this way, the concept of gestural knowledge matches the strong physical element and personal "embedding" of pedagogical work connected to the fact that it is work with children, as well as its strong collective element linked to the fact that several people are working together in relation to a group of children.

Our observations highlighted for us the importance of creating coherence in day care work. In many situations, the social educators were successful in creating an organic coherence, leading to smooth transitions from one situation to another, so that they are not perceived as disruptive. These include the transition from the home to the institution where the social educators’ way of dealing with it is important for the child. They also include transitions between different kinds of activities in the course of the day. Creating coherence is important for children, for the parents and for the social educators themselves because a substantial part of the overall meaning of the work derives from its ability to link aspects of everyday life. In this way, the work of social educators has a specific dimension that connects different spheres of everyday life.

In the empirical examples above the Step-by-Step exercise was close to creating exactly the opposite of coherence, namely a dissolving of the situation leading to a break-down and a missed opportunity to include the child’s reactions. The formal rules were kept, but this formality stood in clear contrast to the emotional elements and thus leading to what could be interpreted as a lack of coherence. In the lunch situation the social educator was able to create coherence because she catched the unexpected turn and developed it in to a powerful (learning) experience for the child and at the same time managed to focus on the collective of children. If she had not been able to improvise and lead the child and kept the overall goal with the ‘exercise’ for all the children in mind the situation could very well have led to a similar loss of coherence.

The creation of coherence as a professional competence implies certain rhythmic qualities. Lefebvre (Lefebvre 2005) has developed a concept of rhythm that draws inspiration from such diverse dimensions as our bodily-gestural movements, (cooperative) work processes and music. In rhythm, different and transient elements are integrated into a fluid whole, which both follows certain patterns and continuously improvises. The reference to this concept of rhythm is important because it suggests that the creation of continuity is not just a question of a person being able to move between and function in different spheres or systems, only needing to note how life is lived *in* those spheres or systems. If we take walking or a melody as models of rhythm, it becomes clear that rhythm only manifests itself as a quality in connection with what is happening now, what precedes and what follows. What precedes is something we have with us, it determines what is happening now and it also derives its quality (as a step in walking or a bar of a song) from what follows, retrospectively, so to speak. And what then follows is anticipated as a direction of movement or orientation; it is certainly not fixed, but neither can it assume just any form. If that were so, we would fall down, or the tune would go to pieces. Relating this to the work of the social educator it underlines the importance of different types of knowledge involved simultaneously. Knowing what creates rhythm and coherence function together with theoretically informed knowledge of social and psychological dimensions of children’s development.

These dimensions of the work of social educators – the unnoticed professional competencies, the gestural knowledge and the ability to create coherence and rhythm in everyday life – are dimensions that hold the potential to be further developed and not least acknowledged as important. Also the social educators themselves collectively can gain from focusing on these aspects, not least because they encompass the potential of developing new perspectives on day care work.

**5. Development of professional competence and knowledge**

The possibility of prioritizing collective development of professional competence and knowledge is under pressure from two sides: the ongoing reduction in resources (employees) and the predefined goals for learning outcomes. It is a general trend across the day care centres we have been in contact with during the two projects that the number of staff meetings and professional development days has been sharply reduced, and the few forums for collective reflection that are left are increasingly filled with extraneous agendas and documentation requirements. This entails limited opportunities for social educators to develop their professional competence based on their everyday work in the institutions. This strongly detracts from the "unnoticed" element, and consequently also professionalism in all its concrete aspects. The particular focus on the unnoticed part of professional competence requires a space free from pressing performance requirements, otherwise the result will be that the unnoticed can no longer take place as "unnoticed", but (as it cannot just be taken out) starts to become embedded and instrumentalised in specific goals and plans.

An example of this occurred in one of our projects we at a day care centre when we were presenting some of our preliminary findings and discussed the ordinary everyday situation of getting the children clothed before going out to the playground. We tried to show how the situation involved unnoticed professional competence and the manager of the day care centre responded: *“This is a very good example I will take to the parents, the board and the local authorities. It involves 5 of the 6 learning goals in the learning curriculum”* (and she went then on to exemplify what she meant). In itself there is nothing ‘wrong’ with this, you can argue that she is able to show the importance of a common, practical everyday activity in a professional learning perspective. But it can give a hint about the emphasis on interpreting everything in learning outcomes which narrows in the end the perspective of having day care centres. And for the social educators it appraises only the professional competence and knowledge that is aimed at fulfilling the learning agenda.

In the research workshops in our project, social educators dealt with examples of successful and difficult situations from their everyday work. The space they were given to freely and exhaustively work through such examples and collectively reflect on them gave rise to some key questions about maintaining and developing professional competence and knowledge. The examples were based precisely on situations that are otherwise "unnoticed", such as eating, washing hands, going for walks, putting to bed, etc. Working with the problems in this way allowed for a common realisation of the particular qualities of professional competence. For example, the staff at one institution discussed how they jointly dealt with a conflict with a child on the way home from gymnastics. When the social educators reflected collectively on the difficult situation in detail, it was clear that this seemingly purely practical task - the trip back from the professionally verifiable activity - also contained numerous professional perspectives, such as understanding the situation from the point of view of the child and other people and joint proposals for action.

This highlights another important aspect of day care work which is increasingly under pressure, namely its collective character. It is generally recognised that day care work is highly collective. But our projects have revealed to us that the collective character of such work is the focal point for an essentially continuous development of professional competence that is an integral part of day care work and vital to its quality. We observed the first hints of this in the day-to-day activities of the institutions, we got a further understanding of it through the interview, but its potential became much more prominent in the free space for reflection offered by the research workshops.

It is a widespread prejudice that "ordinary social educators" are only interested in the immediate, concrete tasks of the institutions. But this is not correct. In our research workshops we asked the social educators: *Why do we have day care centres*, and the answers unfolded in the form of differentiated discussions about the role of day care centres in society, the meaning of a good childhood, social inequality, etc. The professional competence and knowledge of social educators is closely linked to such reflections and the arguments are based on their own everyday experiences from the institutions. Like other types of work there is a clear social and societal orientation (Sennett 2008) in day care work, and development of the social educators’ professional competence and knowledge holds the potential of pointing beyond the strict steering mechanisms of NPM and the neoliberal governance.

This implies that social educators are given the opportunity to collectively develop their professional – noticed as well as unnoticed – competence and knowledge. Policies and strategies for professionalism and collective interest representation should be concerned with this - creating time and space for the social educators’ own development of professional competence and knowledge.

**6. Conclusion**

In the paper we have discussed how NPM and neoliberal governance have impact on democratic influence and professional development in day care institutions. We have described how there is a strong focus on learning outcome and formal documentation and evaluation. We have showed how the social educators often have mixed feelings towards the increased demands: On the one hand they may find that working with learning curricula can create focus on some activities as well as help to show the professionalism involved in day care work – that it isn’t ‘just about looking after the kids.’ On the other hand they see that a lot of the already reduced time with the kids is spend on paper work, and how the focus on learning curricula leads to a reduced understanding of what is important in their work.

This importance we have tried to grasp with the notion of unnoticed professional competence and we have shortly sketched some of the possible aspects of the ‘unnoticed’ drawing on theories on everyday life and critical theory. In our two empirical examples we showed how both noticed and unnoticed professional competence were involved, but with a distinct difference: In the situation with the formal learning system the social educators didn’t rely on or include their unnoticed professional competence and knowledge and insisted instead of following the rules. And in the other situation the social educator broke the rules leading to a successful ending of an otherwise potential difficult situation.

Important aspects of social educators’ professional competence and knowledge risk being lost when the emphasis is on learning outcome, curricula, documentation, etc. If professional development should be taken care of, it is therefore needed to broaden the perspective and include the everyday experiences of social educators. We have showed how social educators can develop important perspectives for the development of day care work and day care centres if they are given the opportunity to reflect collectively. Unnoticed aspects of professional competence have shown to entail qualities for further development on a concrete level of practice in the day care centre. On a general level it points towards the need to challenge the reduced reception of professional competence embedded in steering systems and the learning agenda.

There is a close link between the focus on learning outcome, documentation, etc and the reduction of democratic influence following the structural changes and strengthening of managerial control over day care work. A struggle for influence over development of professional competence and knowledge therefore also is a struggle for democratic influence over own work.

1. [http://www.dst.dk/pukora/epb/Nyt/2011/NR080.pdf](http://www.dst.dk/pukora/epub/Nyt/2011/NR080.pdf) (Statistics Denmark, 2011)

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