

Professional Knowledge and Everyday Practice

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Professional knowledge and everyday practice

Abstract

Professional care work in preschools in Denmark is faced with a knowledge crisis, due to increasing influence by regulations from state and market. As a consequence the professionals seem more inclined to focus on how to meet demands for documentation, rather than focusing on developing their professional knowledge with regards to collective reflection and creating coherent practices and everyday lives for children and families. I propose an alternative perspective on development of professional knowledge, which takes aspects of professional knowledge and everyday practice, that are not traditionally valued, nor by “users” or the professionals themselves, into account. With inspiration from a Danish researcher of everyday life and her concept of ‘the unnoticed/unrecognized’ (det upåagtede) (Bech-Jørgensen 1994), this paper will discuss how understandings of professional identity and professional knowledge must involve an understanding of the importance of routines, habits and practical tasks.

The analysis takes its point of departure in observations and interviews in a daycare institution with a combined nursery and preschool (age 0-6 years)¹. In order to grasp the knowledge quality of the ‘unnoticed’ aspects of the professional work the field work was inspired by the German researcher Rudolph zur Lippe’s concept of ‘gesture’ (gestus) (Lippe 1987, Nielsen 2010). With an attention towards gestic knowledge in professional care work the attention is directed at bodily action and communication which is recognized as rhythms in everyday practice. This understanding of knowledge can only be observed in context and must be analyzed in the light of context. Gesture is part of specific situations and is in this way both part of and an answer to a situation as a whole.

¹ Observations and interviews are part of a research project concerning the professional competences of professional care workers in Denmark. The project focuses on the every practice in daycare institutions and asks the question how the professional knowledge embedded in everyday practice can constitute a point of departure for developing an alternative strategy to the neo liberal strategy with emphasis on evidence based knowledge in developing professional competences for care workers. The project is conducted by Associate Professor Annegrethe Ahrenkiel, Professor Birger Steen Nielsen, Assistant Professor Camilla Schmidt, Associate Professor Finn Sommer and Associate Professor Niels Warring all from Roskilde University, Denmark (Ahrenkiel et.al in press).

Knowledge in professional care work is in this perspective regarded as a constellation of several qualities of knowledge, which are in play simultaneously.

The significance of researching and addressing the ‘unnoticed’

In his most recent book, ‘The Craftsman’ (2008), Richard Sennett argues for a clear connection between the quality of work and the awareness of the social effect and impact of the work. Sennett refers to an example from the work of two historically well known architects (Loos and Wittgenstein) who both had engaged in designing and building the perfect house. The two houses became beautiful, but also very different to live in. Sennett states that the house built by an architect who has been involved in the building process (Loos), adjusted his drawing along the way to fit the surroundings and the people who were supposed to inhabit the house, holds much higher quality than the house built by an architect (Wittgenstein) who merely has been occupied with sketching the ‘ideal’ house with perfect proportions and never care for the realization process (Sennett 2008). He uses the analogy of designing houses in order to point to the significance of awareness and process, and argues that the difference lies in the awareness of the context (people’s lives and course of the day) and of the working process (making adjustments along the way to fit the needs of the surroundings). If you as a ‘craftsman’ or a professional care worker do not pay attention to context or the impact of your work on others you lose sight of the social meaning of your work and the impact it has on the people involved in it or gaining from it. Following Sennett’s point, good work and work with high quality is interrelated with the social impact of the work. For a care worker this means that in order to provide professional work of high quality you need to be aware of your surroundings, the children and your colleagues and the effect your actions have on the atmosphere surrounding you.

But how do we lock on to and sense this ‘atmosphere’ and make it a central aspect of our understanding of professional knowledge? When spending time in a daycare institution you might easily reduce your focus to the explicit activities during the day. Planned activities like when the children are going to the crafts room to work with colors, when they engage in practicing their motor co-ordination, reading books out loud, training social competences and so on. You could mention many activities that are easy to recognize regardless if they are seen as significant (professional) or routine activities. But many things occur between and along the side of these activities that are not easily detected as significant, but are rather taken for granted and definitely not accounted for as significant or valued. Nevertheless all these little things are important for the sense of coherence during the day for both children and professionals, and if they are not there at all you immediately register what can be perceived as a lack of social quality. Like when the ideal house with the perfect proportions is unbearable to live in if it isn’t built to pay any attention to how light or sound is reflected. This means that the house is perceived as detached from its surroundings, just like when professional practice in a day care institution becomes instrumental if it doesn’t pay any attention to the needs and signals from children and colleagues, as well as the course and rhythms of the day.

In the research project which is the basis for this paper, we worked out an empirical design with point of departure in the notion of ‘the unnoticed’ inspired by the Danish sociologist, Birthe Beck Jørgensen (1992). She has pointed to the importance of the ‘unnoticed activities’ in everyday life; activities that are important but hardly ever noticed or taken into account and therefore excluded

from our self perception as well as our understanding of social importance. Beck Jørgensen points to the fact that you, by paying attention to these unnoticed aspect in everyday activities you are able to gain insight into what 'glues' the day together. In the same way, by focusing on the unnoticed and taken for granted aspects of work and activities in daycare institutions, we get an insight into what constitutes the coherence during the day as well as how work in day care institutions have an impact on the social cohesion. In the empirical design it meant that we focused our attention on the many transitions during the day in a daycare institution. By focusing on the transitions we avoided the temptation of mainly describing the planned activities end were able to maintain a so-called 'free floating' attention. This meant we paid attention to the interaction between the professional adults just as the interaction between adults and children.

The observation which is in focus in this paper was conducted in the integrated nursery and preschool called The Pond with approximately 80 children (from the age 0 till 6 years) and 16 adults. The Pond is divided into several different age groups (0-2 yrs, 2-3 yrs, 3-4 yrs, 4-5 yrs and 5-6 yrs). In daycare institutions like The Pond many events occur during a day. Some are planned activities, some are referred to as routines, such as meals, washing and dressing, tidying up, and many more are events and activities which occur in the transitions between activities and routines. In order to maintain focus on transitions during the course of the day we decided that we would spend a longer period of time in one room at the time. This way we could focus on a smaller group of professionals at the time also. In addition to observations during the day we also participated in staff meetings and conducted individual interviews.

The neo liberal focus on documented and evidence based knowledge

The question whether knowledge produced in professional work is at stake when it is increasingly regulated by state and market has been posed many times in research concerning welfare service and work in welfare institutions. The relevance of the question is evident in all welfare states, but seems even more pressing in the Scandinavian countries where the regulation of professional work in all public welfare institutions traditionally has not been regulated by the market, but has been closely linked to the development of the national state, meaning that the state has been a guarantee for quality and regulations in order to suit the needs of the citizens of the state. The universal welfare state has been challenged for several years now, and welfare services are no longer something you are entitled to just by being a citizen. Welfare services are increasingly linked to the citizens' employability and if you do not at all times ready to engage into the work market you are not entitled to complete access to welfare services (Pedersen 2011). In parallel this development also has an impact on how welfare services are organized and not least on how it is being regulated. A market orientation also means and increased emphasis on documented effects as well as evidence based knowledge. As a consequence professional knowledge is no longer only developed and regulated by the code of ethics within the professions, but is increasingly pointed in particular directions by individual consumer- and market related interests. Numerous empirical studies have shown how the professional work field has become increasingly instrumental and directed towards documenting effects and producing high efficiency. Many have pointed to the consequences for the professionals themselves, for the quality of and for their identification with their work (ex. Hjort 2008, Andersen et.al 2008, Aili 2007, Dybbroe 2008).

During our empirical observations of professional care work in daycare institutions in Denmark, the increasing combination of instrumentality, individualization and routinisation of the work has become quite evident. And in combination with demands for economical cut backs on welfare services in general the increasing demands for documentation of the efficiency, quality and results of the work is a dangerous cocktail. When individualization in general is followed by a decrease in resources the professional care workers are often left alone with many decisions and with the responsibility for developing professional competences. The care workers we have talked to point out the importance of setting professional goals for their work every day. But since the working conditions hardly ever allow time for collective reflection, they only formulate their intentions and goals for the day for themselves. For most professional care workers the different technologies offered by national authorities in order to document higher quality of their work is regarded as welcome instruments to maintain some sort of focus. These technologies are often manuals and programs developed in accordance to evidence based knowledge of what works and it gives the professionals a sense of 'doing the best they can' under the circumstances as well as providing them as basis for a more general recognition of the impact of their work. In this sense they are inclined to accept the demand for documentation as a way of increasing the quality of their work as well as making it visible to parents and the general public. But the balance between qualifying and controlling is tense, though. The professional care workers stress the fact that in order to make these programs and manuals work they also need to be given the resources to actually carry out their work. If not given the demanded time and resources it is impossible to obtain the intended quality in this work.

In addition the professional care workers also express a concern that programs and technologies offered may not be sufficient in order to ensure the quality of their work. They point out that the programs often seem to be developed by people who are far from having real life experience of what's important in every day practice and what is professionally profound. In consequence, the demand for documentation for the quality of their work is dislodged from a large part of everyday practice and transformed into instrumental 'showings' of what has occurred during the day instead of constituting the knowledge base for reflecting on practice. They simply focus on documenting that the activity has occurred rather than focusing on the substance of the activity. An example is when the professional care workers use programs for the work with developing the children's social competences. Very often the focus is on following the instructions of the manual and making sure that the activity can be documented instead of using the children's reactions and suggestions in order to develop the exercise in accordance to the children's needs. When insisting on the following instructions the professional care workers lose sight of what is important, as well as the sensitivity towards the concrete situation. So the demand for documented quality turns into an urge to make the work 'visible' in order to ensure the immediate recognition from parents and other important actors, and the social and collective recognition based on professionally qualified activities in the association with the children they are responsible for fades into the background. In this way professional knowledge is reduced to instrumental presentations and documentation.

The trouble is that if we maintain this view on what is legitimate professional knowledge, we also maintain a reduced understanding of what is important knowledge to be interchanged in professional care work. And we maintain a reduced understanding of quality in and of care work. The question is how this tendency to reduce the knowledge base for professional care work can be changed? Our suggestion is that we change our perspective.

Towards an alternative knowledge base

As I have already mentioned, we focused our attention on the ‘unnoticed’ aspects of the professional care work in our search for an alternative knowledge base. The ‘atmosphere’ and the social communication were made the main focus in the observations we conducted as a research group. We have paid attention to events and scenes which seemed successful in the sense that everyone involved seemed to be in line with intentions and objectives. This doesn’t mean that we only focused on situations where everyone seemed happy, but rather on situations with a good ‘atmosphere’. This very specific attention has made it possible to grasp what constituted this atmosphere and successful communication.

In addition to the notion of the ‘unnoticed’ we based our design on an understanding of ‘gestic’ knowledge. This understanding has been developed by the critical theorist Rudolph zur Lippe (Lippe 1987/2000) and taken into Danish research in work life by Birger Steen Nielsen (Nielsen 2010, Nielsen & Nielsen 2006). The simplest way to understand the concept of ‘gestic’ knowledge is to perceive it as an ‘everyday wisdom’, meaning that it is often not even registered as knowledge, as such. In this way it is very closely related to the ‘unnoticed’. The concept of ‘gestic’ knowledge is placed somewhere between a cognitive, intellectual knowledge and a vital, purely bodily knowledge. It is neither completely theoretical nor completely tacit, but it holds elements of both. You might say that ‘gestic’ knowledge interlinks the rationality and awareness with the sensuous and with sensibility. So ‘gestic’ knowledge must be understood as a certain way of knowing, which is closely connected to both cognitive knowledge and bodily knowledge and cannot be understood completely detached from either. It always has to be understood as contextualized knowledge. You might say, that the ‘gestic’ action is on the one hand related to what we are acting in proportion to and on the other hand it is related to the way we are involved in the situation. So it is both connected to context, the situation, and to the acting person’s subjective intentions of the act. This means that it becomes both sensuous and creative in the situation and has a suggestive and directed meaning.

The direction of meaning in the ‘gestic’ act is very central. The direction of an act means that it also involves the people whom the act is directed towards. So an act is only ‘gestic’ if it is also recognized in the situation and returned with an understanding of the intention of the act. In this way it constitutes a play and counter-play which transforms into an interplay making the reciprocity is important. This makes ‘gestic’ knowledge attentive towards the communicative aspect of action and meaning, and it makes it social in its base. This suggests a ‘wholeness’ of a ‘gestic’ situation – you only realize ‘gestic’ character of the act if you recognize the intention, which also suggests a notion of successfulness of the act. But most important, it makes it social and contextualized.

The constitution of a good ‘atmosphere’ is not easy to neither register nor maintain focus on. But by focusing on what takes place during the day, as well as, the bodily support of what the involved people are saying to each other in addition to what they do when interacting, we get access to a knowledge base constituted by every day practice and professionally based actions in routines and seemingly unimportant actions. The communicative suggestion in the concept of ‘gestic’ knowledge has focused our attention towards how the involved actors in every day events experience the interplay. The involved actors also include ourselves as researchers. It has helped us to keep focus on being involved in the situation and at the same time be aware of our involvement. In our field notes we have simply described what’s going on outside and around planned activities, and

especially during transitions, and in addition described how we experienced our own involvement as well as how we perceived the other actors' involvement. In the transitions between clearly planned activities the communicative element in the receptive aspect of the 'gestic' act is intensified, because the action and communication in these situations are free of the otherwise rather clearly defined settings for everyday actions in day care institutions. In transitions everyone seems to have to rely on the sending and receiving of intentions. How these observations can point us towards an alternative understanding of professional knowledge in professional care work is the focus of this next section.

An 'atmosphere' of the 'unnoticed' professional knowledge

In order to show how 'unnoticed' aspects of professional care work can make a basis for an alternative knowledge base, I will invite you into The Pond. Here we meet the professionally trained care workers, Beth and Susan, and the unskilled care worker, Ann, and of course the children in a nursery group. The children here are between 1 and 3 years old:

Ann, an unskilled temporary worker, starts to clean up after the warm meal that has been served during lunch. She is quite thorough. Susan and Beth starts getting the children ready for their nap, getting them changed and undressing them. They start with the youngest children. Everyone seems to enjoy this time. The children playfully run away from Susan and Beth when they approach them, but they all squeal with delight when they are being caught. Susan and Beth say out loud what they are going to do next. It's not directed to anyone concrete, nor me, but it seems as if the other one consents without having to answer. While they wash and dress the children one by one they talk to each of them, laugh and pat them on the stomach as they finish the washing and dressing. I ask about their routines and they tell me that they usually get the children ready for sleep over half an hour. Some of the children sleep outside in outdoor cribs and some inside on temporary beds. This particular room (the bumble bee room) functions as a common sleeping room for all children under the age of 3 in the whole day care. There is another room (the water lily room) which functions as a playroom for the children that wake up early or don't sleep during nap time. Two adults always sit with the sleeping children. I follow Susan to the crib room with a small girl. The girl knows exactly what's going to happen and she climbs the ladder to the crib herself and plumps into the sleeping bag. She makes herself comfortable as Susan straps her to the harness and keeps talking to her in a playful and comforting voice. She pushes the crib outside, says goodnight and goes back to the room to snatch another child. Back in the room Ann has begun to lay out the temporary beds. One of the oldest girls has helped her by telling her where each bed should go (they each have their own). Susan notices that the girl has pointed out a place for her own bed where another of the older girls usually lies. Susan says laughing that 'it's probably a part of the competition between these two girls'. Susan says 'she has been very clever'. The oldest children are going to sleep inside in the room. They are also being undressed and get their diaper changed one by one. During this process they are playing a great game where they all circle around a large dinosaur and slide down its tail every time they pass it. A girl sings a popular children's song. She is really good at it. I'm impressed. They are enjoying it and Beth and Susan allow them to play like this for quite some time. They observe them while they undress them one by one. When they are all ready and all have their dummy they get their blankets and pile them on bean bags and mattresses. This is not where they are supposed to sleep but they pretend to be gone and hide under the blankets. Susan and Beth are willingly playing along and seem to find them inventive. Beth says out in the room 'where have all the children gone'? They are

allowed to play for quite a while. This game is what both Susan and Beth tell the parents later in the afternoon when they come to pick up the children.

This field note shows how the responsible professional care workers carefully accommodate the intentions of the children and of each other. This can easily be detected in the positive description of what takes place and of every one's mood during this scene. They seem to like to be there and seem to relate explicitly to each other. They do not seem to need to articulate their intentions in words or have to be very explicit, every one's needs and intentions are met in the interplay between them all. This suggests a clear 'gestic' quality of their communication. The question is how this can be understood as part of or as based on their professional knowledge base?

Going further into this particular scene, there seems to be an inexplicit cooperation about priorities between Susan and Beth. They do not have to discuss the division of their work, they simply seem to know what to do next and by giving out small remarks to each other they easily find their way in 'how far along they are in the program'. In this way they very much support each other in their work. The support and acceptance of each other's intentions are being played out, not always as direct words or conversations about their work, but more as subtle nods towards each other, gestures that help or guide the other in her work, or by playing along with the children's games in community.

Also the children are accommodated in their needs. Susan and Beth seem to have very thorough knowledge of who tires first and who gets into conflicts when they become too tired. So they pay explicit regard to each child as well as meeting the collective group's demands for a good 'atmosphere'. The Swedish Professor in pedagogics, Eva Johansson, has developed a concept of 'atmosphere' to describe and understand learning encounters for the children and professionals in care work (Johansson 2003, 2004, 2008). In her understanding of atmosphere, she emphasizes the encounter between child(ren) and adults. The 'atmosphere' comprises the reoccurring features of attitudes, ways of relating to and the extent of involvement in the life world of children, as they are played out in professional care workers' interaction with children. The focus is mainly on the adults' interaction with the children, but also on the perception of the children as it is explicated in the interaction between the adults comes into focus. In the attention towards the perception and reception in interactions the concept of 'atmosphere' relates to the concept of 'gestic' knowledge and action. Especially the shared attention towards the concrete situation and context connects the two. But where 'gestic' action is focused on the communicative and social meaning in the act, the concept of 'atmosphere' directs the attention towards 'place' and 'space'.

Johansson takes her point of departure in a phenomenological understanding of intersubjectiveness as it has been developed by Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty 1962 in Johansson 2008). This means that the concept of 'atmosphere' involves an understanding of a wholeness of the body and mind. The body cannot detach itself from the senses, thoughts, feelings and language, and is therefore not just an object or a tool for actions. Our experiences, emotions and articulations are all interlinked with the body. So the way we are in the world, the way we interpret and understand the world is expressed bodily. This means that the way we are met in the world can be interpreted in the way we express ourselves bodily and emotionally in any concrete situation. In this way our perception of space or of the 'atmosphere' of the situation can more or less be perceived as wholeness of intended, unintended or not intended actions and communications. So our involvement in the world and our perception of this involvement becomes a spectacle for what the child is capable of learning

and bringing with it self. The concept of 'gestic' knowledge and action has a broader social attention. It focuses on how the perception of actions constitutes social change or maybe resists change in a broader social or societal sense. The strong emphasis on context and perception of context means that the focus is on how we simultaneously can be both live and be present in the situation as well as relate to our being in the situation. This duality in our relation to context is the core of the ability to create a space for social fantasy or imagination, which also means that we can act from it. If the distance is too great we are not able to identify with the situation and if we are too involved we are not able to look beyond it. It's a balance.

Johansson makes a distinction between a good 'atmosphere', a controlling 'atmosphere' and a distancing 'atmosphere'. She emphasizes that in order to register the good 'atmosphere' you must also understand the constitution of a controlling and distancing 'atmosphere'. A good 'atmosphere' is characterized by intimacy, receptiveness, reciprocity and an allowing atmosphere created by the engaged adults. When Susan registers how the older girl in the scene above has made sure that her bed is placed where the girl she competes with bed usually is placed, she also recognizes this girl's accomplishment and supports her striving for a better position or maybe a friendship. These two adults who are responsible for this girl's social development, at least in the daytime, for 2-3 years are receptive of her needs and support her in her intentions. Another good example of the receptive and allowing adults in the scene above, is when the group of the oldest children who will be sleeping inside are being 'naughty' and hide themselves under their blankets are seen and encouraged to keep playing their game by two adult who recognize their playful pretense of being gone. Susan and Beth relate to their game as inventive and appear thrilled about their idea. The two social/care workers are aware of these children's need for testing boundaries and to be gone for just a moment.

In a more controlling 'atmosphere' the attentiveness of the children's interests is lost. Of course, work in a day care institution involves levels of control since it is the adults' responsibility to maintain a reliable service. But the need for this type of control cannot be ascribed to the children. In what Eva Johansson calls a controlling 'atmosphere', the control is purely related to the adults' perspective and needs. A controlling 'atmosphere' is seen as a hindrance for the exploration and experience of the children. The adults hold the right to define and describe what takes place during the day as well as what is a legitimate need for a child. This means that a controlling atmosphere creates the basis for an unattentive and nonresponding communication with the children, and they are likely to feel that their intentions are not understood or meet. So when the 'atmosphere' is controlling and distanced the acts of adults and the activities in the day care institution become detached from the context and thereby from the bodily and emotional experience of both children and adults. When the outer demands become increasingly excessive, the care workers are more likely to indulge in a controlling 'atmosphere'. The demand for 'visible' documentation of their work makes an incentive for the controlling behavior, because when creating documentation you often need to make the children do certain things in order to have something to show, like when the care workers are focusing on getting a good picture where the children look as if they do specific things. But when this work loses its' sensitivity to the interest of both children and adults it also loses its' social meaning.

Making the 'unnoticed' as basis for a professional knowledge base

In routine practices like the one described in the scene above, the professional competences of the care worker are not made explicit in the sense that it can be communicated and documented in clear categories. The professional knowledge base for washing and dressing and 'passing time' in a meaningful way for both children and adults till it's time for sleep is not clear at all. Nor can this type work easily be put into a manual and become basis for the development of evidence based knowledge. The event described in the field note is not what Susan and Beth write on the whiteboard for information to the parent of today's events or report to the local authorities. Never the less it is the story they tell the parents when they come later in the day to collect their children. They describe how the children hid under their blankets and pretended to be gone and tell the parents how clever they think their children are. So the incident may not easily be documented, but it is made 'noticeable' or ascribed significance in the handing over of what took place and in describing the general atmosphere during the event. In doing this, they also recognize the event as important and central for that particular days work. And the significance of how they have chosen to respond to the children's 'naughtiness' is recognized as central by the parents.

In handing over this specific event of the day and not necessarily telling them about the planned activities of the day, Beth and Susan are putting emphasis on the social and collective aspect of the day, for the children and for themselves. Basically they are handing over the qualitative substance of the 'good atmosphere' as it has been detected by them selves and reflected by the children in their playfulness. The question is how they can grasp these incidents and their own reflection of them and make them basis for developing a pedagogical knowledge base?

Being able to maintain a good 'atmosphere' and thereby create a good learning environment for the children is a central aspect of maintaining or reclaiming the right to develop knowledge and substance of professional care work. But it doesn't seem to be enough. It makes it possible to limit the impact of the outer regulations on every day practice, but it doesn't constitute a new knowledge base in itself. In order to make changes the awareness of what constitutes a good 'atmosphere' needs to become collective. The group of colleagues (or the group of care workers in general) need to agree to be attentive and rejective of the tendency to assume a controlling behavior in their work. This, of course, is difficult in a reality where control and regulation on one part produces more control and distance on the other part. But by 'naming' the 'unnoticed' and taken for granted aspects of their work makes a starting point.

The insight into the everyday practice of care workers leaves us with the hope that they can create a change. In the scene which has been analyzed in this paper it is clear that an attention towards the forgotten and 'unnoticed' aspects of their work holds a clear social aim. They are attentive of both the individuals and the group of children, as well as each other as professionals. And when handing over the event to the parents, they are quite precise in pointing out exactly what is important in what they observed. In order to take charge of the development of professional knowledge, the care workers/social workers must bring these central aspects of their work into the collective forum and jointly make the theme for reflection and development. But in order to do that they need to be pointed out and we need to develop a language and conceptual framework.

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