

Session: Formation of Subjects, their Personal trajectories and Action Competences

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***Professionalism – across conflicting practices for the development of children***

**1. Introduction**

Well, there is not much time, so in case the points will drown in the hurry I will start with the conclusion.

I will state that when we discuss professionalism in relation to the ‘formation of subjects in professional practice’ as it is stressed in the Session abstract, *professionalism* must be related to acting in interconnected social practices characterized by a *plurality* of perspectives related to the *life* and development of the subject.

For instance in relation to the development of children the professionals are in one and the same time connected to the same general subject – the life and development of children – and they are placed in different – and conflicting - positions in relation to the same children.

I will try to show that the involved perspectives are not different by accident. They are *connected* through their relations to the subject and the social structures they are taking part in. In this way they may teach us about the general connections and contradictions we are part of.

So instead of the traditions of relating professionalism to the individual acquisition of abstract knowledge and methods of a profession I will try to discuss professionalism as *interconnected ways* of dealing with such connections - and to search for concrete, varying and compound knowledge through the conflicting perspectives about those problems.

So you might say that I emphasize the collective interplay in relation to developmental work.

(Agenda for the paper)

I would like to reach these conclusions by some examples from projects where different kinds of researchers and professionals are doing practice-research together. We are exploring processes of cooperation, conflicts and marginalization across different professional practices for children (kindergartens, families, schools, psychological counseling’s among others). So, before the examples I think I have to

present our approach to these questions, our projects and some arguments from the research. Then I will try to present an example of professionalism to illustrate the mentioned points.

## **2. Acting in social communities**

Why can't we just take our point of reference in isolated professional skills related to influence the development of an as well isolated subject?

Because subjects live their lives, act, learn and develop in and across different kinds of social practices and when we become involved in their lives and development we become involved in the interplay between different perspectives, positions and communities.

This makes the question about formation of subjects, to a question of *participation in human communities*. And that raises a question of how subjects act and create things *together* in and with social structures.

When we take part and create communities together we *distribute* possibilities of actions, responsibility, contributions, influence etc among us and by doing that we *structure the possibilities of each other*.

We make up the conditions for each other, and persons as well as social practices are **connected** in particular ways. For instance institutions as kindergartens, schools and psychological consultancies are connected in special societal and historical ways.

What I am occupied about here is *what people create together*. I am curious about the ways participants make up conditions to each other and in this way constitute the possibilities of development – and of professionalism. I think these are the movements to explore – and to organize.

## **3. The projects the discussion draw on**

Well, with this point of reference in a theory of participation in social practice I will discuss professionalism across conflicting practices for the development of children. I will involve several projects from the field of children

(First project – user perspectives)

– very shortly it can be said that the research I present started up with an interest in *user perspectives at psychosocial work* in relation to children and their parents. After interviewing families and professionals working with the children we became occupied with the many conflicts between the grown-ups involved in the development of children – and how these social conflicts influenced the trajectories of the children across their different life spheres.

(Second project - co-operation on the development of children)

To explore these processes we organized a study of some children's course from kindergarten through preschool class and into the first grades of school as well as the after-school centre and playgrounds. Especially that study pointed at *the ways children develop through participation* in very different social practices, it pointed at the significances of *the communities of children* and it pointed at *the conflictual division of labor* among the professionals.

These social conflicts have crucial meanings for some of the children participating across different life contexts, and we became occupied with *processes of marginalization*.

Too many children have to grow up – develop, learn and play – in marginalized positions and the meanings of this goes *across* their different life contexts and influence their participations in the communities of children.

In particular we became curious about how to understand and work professionally with the communities of children and the cooperation between the grown ups.

(Third kind of projects – Three projects about Cooperation, Integration of children and Professionalism)

In continuation of these recognitions we are now involved in projects of development and research related to forms of cooperation between the practices for children, or you might say the development of *the organization across the different contexts* where children live their life and are supposed to learn and develop.

In the latest project it has become a theme to discuss and explore different kinds of professionalism in relation to working with the children – seen *in the light of the challenges about cooperation, integration and communities of children*.

#### **4. The conflicting professional practices**

To reach my conclusions I have to illustrate the background of that. First I shall try to illustrate why the discussion about professionalism I raise is related to *conflicting practices for the development of children*. This attention takes its point of reference in the compound life where children participate in these different social practices – often 3 different practices in one day.

When you go across the different practices that we have arranged for the learning and development for our children you realize many interesting differences, contradictions and disagreements. I will very shortly try to illustrate some of these by some statements from different parties who are transferring responsibility for the children among each other. A preschool class teacher is disappointed with the first

grade teachers' judgments and explains that she does not work with the children from the point of reference of what is demanded by the first grade teachers:

*"No, I have overcome that, we each have our own way to run it. It took me 10 years to free myself from this, it was horrible in the beginning."*

The first grade teachers don't think the preschool teacher does the right things, and find the children poorly prepared for learning:

*They are not ready for learning because there are other things that a sort of hinder it... But actually it would be good if they could just learn when they start in first grade...*

Also the teachers find that some of the parents should have brought up their children in better ways too – and in contradiction to that some parents think the professionals are the ones who cannot manage their job:

*"It has something to do with the teachers... As long as they (the children) are at school, I think it is their (the teachers') duty to do something about things up there..."*

I show you this to illustrate how discussions about a concrete problem are connected to discussions about the *division of responsibility* among the grown-ups. They simply do not agree about whom to teach children what, and their descriptions of the children seem addressed to others parties whose priorities are different and who do not, therefore, prepare the children to meet the expectations of their next professionals. This is the conflictual complexity, which characterizes the interconnected practices where the kinds of professionalism that I discuss here are unfolding.

## **5. Developing through participation across connected communities**

Still children move around, learn and develop across these practices. I will return to the life and perspectives of the children to argue for the connection to the communities of children.

When I follow the children and discuss with them quite other themes are in focus. The children often talk about having friends and how much friends mean to them. For example they estimate their different life-contexts in relation to whether and how they can be together with their friends here. Some of them characterize friends like this:

*'It is someone you are able to do different things with'*

*'It is someone you may go on playing with'*

*'It is someone you can quarrel with and becomes good friend again...'*

It seems as if the children stick to a question of continuity by these statements – continuity across different activities, places and across time and conflicts. It seems to me that the children use their playmates in the ways they *create connections* in their

compound life. They discuss the places together, they exchange their preferences, priorities and experiences and they ask each other about ‘how to behave here’.

When I observe the children at different places and times it seems that they involve themselves in new challenges together, they explore special kinds of questions together, they learn from the ways the communities handle conflicts, changes and rules of their games. They create developmental possibilities together. I would understand their action competences related to these possibilities.

But sometimes children have difficulties participating in the communities. As mentioned the conflicts between the grown-ups have consequences exactly for the possibilities of participation of some children.

And when we realize problems of some kind we have the tradition of isolating the children in our understanding as well as in our professional efforts for helping them. We become occupied by stimulating individual competences which may be a great idea but many studies have illustrated that the very arrangement for this help is placing the children in quite marginalized positions and may restrict their possibilities of participation in communities relevant to them.

Well, I use to discuss the connectedness of these marginalized positions and the social conflicts about them, but today I will dare trying to discuss an example of integration.

Of course we cannot define professionalism that way, but maybe we can get input to a discussion about what professionalism related to these processes could be about?

## **6. Professionalism related to the communities of the children**

The example is about a boy with what we in Denmark categorize as ‘special needs’. For the moment we have a lot of discussions in Denmark about children with special needs – since our arrangements about special education are very expensive and at the same time we seem to exclude more and more children.

This example starts up with conflicts as well. The boy is beginning at an advanced age in a so-called normal kindergarten and especially parents of the other children are frustrated and angry about meeting this badfunctioning and quite violent child. But the professionals connect the participation of Jonathan to the community, and his father concludes:

*...The whole integration has succeeded because of Jonathan’s friends down there, the parents and a very good dialog...*

I think this conclusion is interesting – part of it says that it was the playmates that made the difference. The father tells how especially some of the eldest have resources to involve Jonathan in the games and to make things function with him. It

is not a story of angles – the father notes that ‘*children are straightforward when they play – if Jonathan did not understand a game then he got rejected*’, and he is emphasising the contributions of the professionals. If the staff is not involved he just gets a sense of failure and does not understand the situations:

*He gets much more out of it if he is guided in some situations... that’s where he gets success... it is minimizing the times he says ‘sorry’ and that means a lot to his self-worth*

But what did the professionals do? I think several things have significations in relation to understand how the boy became a contributing part of the communities, how he developed through this and how the other children learned from this.

I do not have time for a summary on lots of characteristics so I will choose a single concrete example and then make my very general conclusions. The professionals state that:

*It is about being very conscious in relation to who plays with whom and who is ‘hanging about’? It demands that we are involved – it is not enough to put the children together ... we have to be a part of it... you can arrange something that gives possibilities for ‘having something together’*

You might say that the professionals work very concretely with the communities of children, with what the children *create together* as for example processes of exclusion and uncertainty, or processes of care and responsibility, or we could say: with the ways the children make up conditions for the participation of each other.

When the professionals organize situations together with the children they create possibilities of discovering common interests, possibilities of contributing and for showing other parts of themselves.

But the professionals can’t do this without the parents. An important part of the process is the involvement of all parents in a compound community and responsibility. This gives opportunities for Jonathan’s father at an open meeting to tell about his son, and for the other parents to contribute by inviting Jonathan and reflecting the dilemmas with their kids at home.

But 2 more themes are important. The basis for the professional involvement is the **continuous observations** of the children’s interplay and the **daily common reflections in the community** of professionals. It is observations of *conditions* for participation in the kindergarten, it is observation of what the children DO instead of how they are, and it is observations of situations and their varying meanings for different participants. The professionals have organized common exploring practices and arranged situations for the exchange of different perspectives.

## 7. Organizing exploratory cooperation

A psychologist formulates this in relation to her work with institutions and parents who do not have these kinds of traditions. She is working with processes to make professionals and parents cooperate about concrete problems in relation to the communities of children. She tells that in the beginning some parents can't see the importance to their own child – they can't see the other children as resources for the development of their own child – but she is illustrating that connection and building up a community about supporting groups of children – instead of individualizing problems. In relation to that she describes her professionalism like this:

*You investigate the statements of each other. You have to break the usual hierarchies and instead acknowledge the contributions you have... descriptions are neither right or wrong... it is the differences that become strengthen... I underline that 'you say that' and that's how life is...*

She explains how the different experiences become *contributing* and in this way you might say that the conflicting perspectives become *connected*, and the knowledge as well as the possibilities of doing something becomes compounded.

## 8. Professional communities

And now I reached my points from the beginning. To work with the possibilities of children's participation requires acting in interconnected social practices characterized by a *plurality* of perspectives related to the *life* and development of the subject.

I have tried to show that the involved perspectives are not just different – to put it a little paradoxically: They are different in the way the way they are connected.

As we saw in the example with the conflictual division of work: In the conflicts about who has the responsibility for what, and especially for the failure, learning got conceptualized in a way that anything else 'disturbed' the individual process of acquiring knowledge.

But if we relate learning to life it becomes obvious that the individual possibilities of learning are related to possibilities of participation. If we relate the pedagogic work with children in child institutions to working with the participation and communities of children it becomes indeed connected to the possibilities for learning in the school.

Professionalism requires dealing with exactly such general connections and learning about them through and despite their conflicting perspectives.

But still professionalism should not be considered as an individual competence, a reflexive way of acting in compound practice. Professionals are *doing this together* – in different kind of professional communities. Professionals make up conditions to each other and together they organize possibilities for investigating the mentioned perspectives and for connecting them.

Professional communities have developed through historical arrangements and ways of organizing a particular field. In this way, professional practice becomes at one and the same time tied to historical and general connections and to concrete situated practice. Communities of professionals have developed in relation to *particular societal problems* and ways of dealing with them.

I think professionalism is related to taking part in special communities with special traditions for ‘doing’ special kinds of knowledge.