Democratic experiences for everybody – cultural pedagogical models and biases for minority children

Karen Mathilde Prins
Roskilde University/University College UCC, Denmark

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Karen Prins, Ass. professor University College UCC & PhD student Roskilde University.

This paper builds on a PhD project that explores the possibilities for children’s democratic experiences in Danish early childhood institutions. With a critical pedagogical starting point, inspired by Dewey as well as Gerd Biesta’s furthering of Hannah Arendt’s concept of Action, I work with an understanding of democratic experiences as the possibility for working with processes between individual wants and collective desires. I explore what that can possibly mean for younger children in early childhood institutions. My overall question is: What are the possibilities for children to be invited as a somebody that can contribute to the community and as a somebody with something on their mind? Assuming that recognizability as a contributing subject is a precondition for democratic experiences.

I investigate constructions of childhood, childhood pedagogy and imbedded understandings of democracy, participation and community and how that produces different invitations and engagement possibilities for different children, through a combination of ethnographic fieldwork and participatory workshops with the professionals in two early childhood institutions in Denmark. I ask; Where and what are the spaces, places and situations where children struggle with the question of how could we live together? When and how are children invited to engage with space, materiality and relations? How are children negotiating participation in this context?

Through a cultural analysis of connections between policy, actions, materiality and sense making and inspired by postcolonial and critical race theory, I wish to discuss how naturalized cultural models of democratic practices in Danish early childhood pedagogy, and neoliberal discourses of language ability and early intervention seem to produce minority children as foreign and deprived, and thereby marginalizing them from possibilities of democratic experiences.

In my presentation, I explore how cultural models of singing certain songs in certain ways distribute experiences of recognizability and possibilities for belonging and participation in different ways, with the starting point in a recount of my own initial intra-action with the children’s SongBook in an Early childhood institution.

Keywords: cultural understandings, minority children, democratic experiences, early childhood pedagogy