

Ethics  
for Early  
Childhood  
Educators

# Ethics for Early Childhood Educators

B U P L



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## **BUPL**

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The articles in this booklet are translated from the Danish anthology "Pædagogers etik"(2010). Some of the articles have been slightly edited towards an international audience.

### **A few facts on children's institutional life in Denmark:**

In Denmark 68 % of all children between 0-2 yrs attend nursery, and 97% of Children between 3-5 yrs are in kindergarten in an average of 7 hrs. a day, 5 days a week(BUPL 2013). Almost all early education institutions (nursery/kindergarten) are public and run by local municipalities. Parents pay a monthly fee of approximately 25% of the cost. Low income families/single parents etc. pay a reduced fee according to their income.

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## FOREWORD

Ethical reflections on how human beings behave and interact are essential in the pedagogical praxis. The relation between the early childhood educator and the child is asymmetrical, which points out that ethical questions have to be asked and ethical choices have to be made.

The early childhood educator has to deal with very different perspectives that have to be considered, and there is no single answer to an ethical dilemma and no right or wrong way to describe one. The educator often has to make a choice between mutually exclusive possibilities. Making decisions between conflicting views is difficult and demands ethical reflections and an ongoing dialogue.

The dialogue is an important means to increase early childhood educators' ethical awareness and ethical judgment.

The five articles in this booklet serve as an inspiration to the ethical dialogue between early childhood educators, students and stakeholders. Different perspectives to ethical questions are raised in the articles that are edited and translated versions from the Danish anthology "Pædagogers etik"(2010). Our hope is that they will inspire and qualify the dialogue on ethical issues among early childhood educators beyond borders.

Marianne Gilbert, Chairman  
BUPL Aarhus, 2015

# 1 CHANGES IN THE WELFARE STATE AND THE ETHICS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS



**BY KATRIN HJORT**

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**This chapter is based on the realisation that ethical reflection is more relevant now than ever before. As a reaction to both the trend of utilitarianism in early childhood education and the changes in the organisation of welfare services, the author advocates establishing a professional ethics of virtue focusing on the special obligations of early childhood education and care. Yet, this is not an easy path to follow because of the potential pitfalls of self-righteousness and trivial suggestions for changes.**

"Why all this talk of ethics and professional work now?" we might ask ourselves. Don't ethical discussions involve moralising or spite and resentment? Why should professionals within welfare services, such as early childhood educators, be any better than others? On the contrary, have we not learnt from innumerable scandals that public employees cheat, swindle and advance their own interests? Why should we trust these professionals and their morals and ethics? Would we not benefit from greater control of public services, instead of blindly believing that professionals do their best, know what's best and want what's best?

Seen from the point of view of early childhood educators – as well as other professionals involved in public welfare – the ethical questions are especially difficult. Because of ongoing changes in the way we organise welfare in society, these questions have also become especially important. Currently, public employees are confronted with many dilemmas in which the ideals of duty-based ethics – that everyone should have the best help and support – are competing with new forms of utilitarianism: What is best for the individual person? What will be most profitable for the individual institution? What is the best investment from an economic point of view? These are complicated dilemmas to handle and require ethical reflection. Such reflection is a necessity if early childhood educators – like school teachers, nurses and others – want to establish a profession; that is, a professional

group that can keep its own house in order and create respect in society, developing a space within which the group can make professional decisions based on its members' knowledge, skills and commitment.

Although ethical reflections are important and necessary for early childhood educators as professionals, a debate on ethics may also be a process riddled with pitfalls including self-righteousness and trivial suggestions for changes. New dress codes or new codes of behaviour? Bans on bare stomachs, nose rings, scarves or children sitting on your lap? Do we need institutional ethics accounts that management, staff or users (children, parents, local administration and politicians) may check off? Ethics emoticons? Ethical principles to be published on the Internet? Codes for the individual institution or for the entire profession? A committee on professional ethics with the authority to judge early childhood educators in the event of 'violation of professional practice'?

At best, a debate on professional ethics may turn into a process that generates opportunities, perhaps even opportunities for developing what the philosopher Anne-Marie S. Christensen calls a professional virtue ethic. Professionals following this ethic would dedicate more attention to the specific areas they have influence on and to the virtues needed to create 'the good life' for the people they are responsible for.

## MORALS AND ETHICS

Ethical problems are nothing new in early childhood education. On the contrary, ethical reflections (i.e., deliberations on how human beings behave with each other), have always been at the core of early childhood education, because such reflections are about establishing stimulating relations between people and, consequently, about early childhood educators being their own agents for change.

Morals or standards are about how we ought to act. What must we do and not do within a specific cultural sphere? Ethics, or basic values, are therefore a matter of why we must act in specific ways, that is, ethics concern the justifications for or reflections on why certain acts are better or more correct than others.

In Denmark, for instance, it is forbidden to hit children. This is true for employees in institutions and schools as well as for parents. But why is that? Is it because it is cowardly to hit someone smaller than yourself? Is it because we wish to teach children that conflicts are not solved by violence? Is it because as an adult you are obligated to protect children against physical or psychological harm – including harm you could cause? Is it because research has shown that as a method of raising children, rewards are more effective than punishment? Or do we refrain from doing what we might wish to do to avoid sanctions such as dismissal?

The discussion of punishment may become wide-ranging: What if the child is half a head taller than you are and already good at fighting? Is it always possible to be principled, or are there cases in which the right decision may be to do something that is wrong? What if

new research were to show that punishment is actually the most effective way of bringing up (some) children and young people? Should we then resort to violence? And what if no one discovers that we handle them a bit roughly? Would such treatment be all right then? Because there are people – children, young people and adults – who resist sensible arguments and who are incapable of controlling themselves such as questions of punishment arise:

Although discussions of morals and ethics are not new to early childhood education, they have intentionally been placed on the agenda today for two reasons. The first reason is that the welfare state, of which early childhood institutions are an integral part, is undergoing changes in Denmark, as in the rest of Scandinavia. This implies mutually competing demands on public employees, including in the ethical realm. The other reason is that, as a professional group, early childhood educators – like other professional groups within education, health and social welfare – are endeavouring to find their own legs to stand on as a profession according to the new terms. Let us consider the latter reason first.

## PROFESSIONAL CHOICES AND PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

If a professional group wants to develop into a profession and receive the recognition that accompanies such status, there are several elements that must be in place, theoretically speaking. Professional work is different from other types of service work, in which workers follow specific rules or regulations and the "customer is always right". A key element of professional work, including professional early childhood education, is that an important part of daily duties consists of making decisions. Educators assess a situation and based on that they decide what action to take or not take. A characteristic of early childhood education is that refraining from acting may be as well-justified in educational terms as taking action. It all depends on the situation.

Early childhood educators may make diverse decisions, some of which are individual, and others made collectively among colleagues. How is the day, the week and the year to be planned? Which activities will benefit whom right now? How do we handle conflicts with children or young people, parents and colleagues? Some of these decisions seem easy, because educators can rely on habits and routines ('this is what we usually do') or on experience and practical sense ('this usually works well'). Other decisions are more difficult because they involve a dilemma in which educators need to make a choice between several mutually exclusive possibilities. Should we, for instance, prioritise spending time on the individual who needs contact or on activities that benefit the group? Should we enter into the conflict now, even if it disrupts an activity that is well underway? Should we accept that others handle conflicts in ways we find unacceptable, simply because we wish to respect our colleagues – or the children's parents – and their different ways of handling conflicts? Where do we draw the line? When and how should we intervene or step aside? What do we do if something unexpected happens? Establishing fixed rules and standards in dealing with such matters is difficult. What is interesting, however, is the foundation on which we



make difficult decisions, and how we justify them to children, young people, adults, relatives, colleagues, management, and others.

Ideally, professional choices should be based on 'experience, evidence and ethics'. In early childhood education, choices must be based on knowledge of individuals and situations and on practical sense – a feeling for and ability to handle complex situations. Today, however, the demand is for choosing methods based on scientific knowledge or evidence, requiring any educational effort to be verifiable. This new demand gives renewed strength to the question about the purpose of early childhood education. What sort of effect or outcome do we wish to achieve? Happy children? Competent adults? A good society? What is the early childhood educator to strive for or subscribe to if he or she wishes to be professional? This is where professional ethics comes into play.

Being professional involves an obligation to endeavour to do what is best for your 'client' in a specific situation. Doctors taking the Hippocratic oath, for example, have made a commitment to attempt to save lives or relieve pain. Having a system of ethics does not mean that professionals are better human beings than others, only that the profession has established an ethical foundation for its self-regulation – what do we accept from colleagues and ourselves? – and is making the effort to become or remain credible vis-à-vis the surrounding society.

## THE ETHOS OF THE WELFARE STATE

For many of the professional groups working with people in the public sector, including early childhood educators, the ethical principles on which their work is based have seldom been explicitly formulated. Often principles emerge indirectly as dissatisfaction and virtuous indignation. When we experience something as meaningless, or complain about the behaviour of (other) people, it indicates that we have moral limits or are confronting an ethical dilemma that we have not previously considered.

Like many other professional groups within education, health and social services, early childhood educators have been able to rely on the ethos of the welfare state, that is, the ideals on which the Scandinavian welfare states have been based since World War II. But today, the situation is different. Concurrently with the changes in the way we organise welfare, the legitimacy of public employees has been questioned. By turns, various professional groups have been criticised for drinking too much coffee, being inefficient and giving poor service. Do public employees serve the best interests of their 'clients', or are they only concerned with advancing their own interests? If these professional groups want to be seen as professions (i.e., develop the foundation for making professional decisions and avoid being reduced to service staff), they must initiate the discussion about professional ethics.

In 1961, Asa Briggs formulated the ideal for the welfare state that the Scandinavian states all subscribe to, which is that all citizens, regardless of their background, should be

offered the best level of service possible from a number of social services.<sup>1</sup> 'All the best for everyone' was the overriding principle to strive for in public institutions responsible for education, health and social security. Again, it is necessary to stress that we are discussing ideals – striving to do something – and not realities. The definition of what is best is a matter of opinion, in Briggs' words, meaning that the organisation of the welfare state also becomes a question of political and social power relations.

For public employees, however, the ideals of the welfare state have meant that their duties are already defined, and they are expected to fulfil the goal of doing what is best for all people. 'To make a difference' (i.e., to contribute to giving all citizens, regardless of social background, the best possible service) is seen as the ultimate obligation one could assume when choosing an education or a line of work in human service. To discriminate against people based on financial status, sex or skin colour, for instance, is absolutely forbidden.

### ETHICS OF DUTY AND THE WELFARE STATE

Historically, the ethos of the welfare state – which also became the ethical foundation for public employees – has been rooted in European humanism. Most obvious is the heritage from the ethics of duty as formulated by the German philosopher of the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Duty ethics are based on a 'categorical imperative' – an absolute requirement that as human beings we should act according to the maxim that our actions must be of such quality that we would wish them to become universal law. In other words, as the adage states, 'Do unto others what you would have them do unto you'. Here, no excuses about 'the right thing depending on the situation' will suffice. If you advocate that others should follow the ground rules, such as traffic regulations, you must observe them yourself, which includes stopping at a red light in the middle of the night. The ethical principles are universal – they apply to all people in all situations.

The essential element of the ethics of duty is humanism – the respect for other humans' self-determination and autonomy. As Kant stated, 'Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end'. The wording is similar to the Christian message of love: 'Love yourself as you love your neighbour', but for Kant the justification is not religious. It is based on rationalism. The duties of humans have not been placed upon them by God but may be assumed by humans themselves because they are beings of reason and capable citizens of a society. What is essential for the evaluation of whether an act is right or not is the intention or ethical reflection that lies behind the act. It is the thought that counts.

A surprisingly large number of the ethical ideals of the Enlightenment are recognisable in Danish early childhood education today. If we do not hit children, it is because we do not wish to violate their dignity as humans. If we prefer to use reason when speaking with children, it is because we see them as rational beings, able to learn how to control

themselves and solve conflicts peaceably out of respect for their fellow humans. But if we talk rather than hit, it is also because we attempt to act in accordance with the categorical imperative: "Act in such a way that ...' We wish for our actions to become 'universal law', and that children, young people and adults learn for themselves how to behave appropriately by observing us and our behaviour. We want to be role models. And, incidentally, we have trouble answering the question: "Why did you do that?" For even if our intention, in the best Kantian sense, is to ask about the child's motivation behind a certain act, thereby initiating a sensible discussion, the question often risks being perceived as criticism or accusation: "How stupid you are to be doing something so wrong."

The categorical imperatives of fulfilling the ethics of duty, including acting in ways you can vouch for, respecting people's dignity and self-determination and building on sensible arguments, may be difficult to achieve for all people in all kinds of situations. In welfare work, these imperatives have played a key role – and continue to do so – but the work of early childhood education is complicated by the fact that it is not only a calling performed out of love for human beings and the desire to make a difference. It is also paid work carried out in public institutions with limited resources. We all know about the work with mentally handicapped children, young people and adults, and we are familiar with the question about the balance between neglect of care and duty of care: To what extent may we assume that the people we endeavour to help, because they are unable to help themselves, are rational beings who may ultimately become capable of taking care of and controlling themselves in the best possible way?

## THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COMMUNITY

The discussion of the ethics of duty, as formulated in Europe in the eighteenth century, also involves other discussions of moral philosophy that were conducted both before and after the Enlightenment. A key problem is the relationship between the individual and the community. To what extent are we by nature selfish and focused on advancing our own interests? And, given human nature, how should society organise itself?

We can distinguish between a conservative, a liberal and a social model. According to Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), we are by nature selfish and self-asserting, but if we are to avoid being at war with everyone around us, our self-interest extends to following the common ground rules that keep our selfishness at bay. Using our reason, we see that we depend on others to get what we want and, consequently, we can best serve our own interests by accepting the laws and rules of society. To act in a morally and ethically correct way, in accordance with society's standards, creates trust and will therefore produce results in the long term.

Liberal philosophy, developed in the seventeenth century by John Locke (1632-1704), challenges the conservative Hobbesian model. The fundamental concept in this context is tolerance, acknowledging that other people should have the same right to con-

trol their own lives as we ourselves wish to have. Consequently, society is not entitled to subject the individual to the moral standards of the community. Carried to its extreme, this principle may mean that the state is not entitled to force anyone to pay taxes for the purpose of social redistribution, and spending our own money to support others must be a voluntary decision. This argument contrasts with the social model of the relationship between the individual and the community that has been one of the pillars of the welfare state. According to the social model, it is essential that community-created advantages be distributed as justly as possible. The state and public employees therefore have a special duty to look after the interests of the disadvantaged – including children, the sick and the old. These philosophical discussions have become more topical in view of the ongoing changes in the way we organise welfare.

### UTILITARIANISM AND THE COMPETITIVE STATE

In European philosophy, the strongest competitor to the ethics of duty is the utilitarianism originally formulated by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1834) in late-eighteenth-century England and subsequently endorsed by John Stuart Mill (1806-1874). Utilitarianism is an ethic of consequence. If we wish to evaluate an act, its consequences are more relevant than the motive behind the act. The objective by which our actions should be judged is to create "the greatest possible happiness for the greatest possible number of people". This is another statement that is difficult to interpret, for how is happiness to be defined and by whom? To Bentham, it seemed natural for people to aspire to having as many positive experiences and as much joy as possible, and suffering would only be justifiable if counter-balanced by proportionally greater joys.

Thus, utilitarianism does not invite absolute principles like the ethics of duty, instead offering an estimation – a calculation of the advantages and disadvantages or costs and gains of certain acts. This is true at the individual level and for society as a whole, leading to a number of ethical dilemmas. The classic example is the question of whether it is acceptable that nine people marooned on a desert island decide to kill and eat number ten in order to improve their chances of survival. From the ethics of duty perspective, killing would be the ultimate violation of both the respect for individual life and the killers' humanity, as a violation that would be difficult for them to live with. In a utilitarian perspective, however, the killing might be a sensible act with positive consequences for the survival of the majority.

In the present version of utilitarianism, as it is formulated with regard to welfare, the problems of defining happiness are typically solved by equating the greatest possible happiness with the greatest possible value in economic terms. For example, we often hear questions regarding how we can acquire maximum healthcare for our money. How do we benefit the most from our health spending? How do we develop our children's competencies most effectively using as few resources as possible? This form of calculation implies setting priorities and opt-outs, leading to the suspension of other forms of ethical reflection.

If taking care of other people does not have economic benefits, should we then stop doing it? On what basis would a political majority be entitled to limit the possibilities for a minority population? Is it justifiable to give up attempts to improve the quality of life for some children, simply because it is too expensive, or to refrain from treating sick people because they are unlikely to re-enter the labour market? Is it legitimate for a publicly financed institution to select 'all the best clients' (i.e., those children, young people or patients who are most likely to be successful, such as the most talented or those with the most privileged social background)?

### ALL THE BEST FOR EVERYONE – ALL THE BEST FOR US

The changes in the organisation of Danish welfare over the past ten years imply both new methods of management and an entirely new welfare philosophy. New Public Management – contract management and exposing public enterprises to competition – is based on the assumption that humans and institutions are by nature selfish and self-interested, which enables the political system to control them through financial incentive. The efforts of people and institutions must pay off, while poor results are recorded and publicized to ensure that competition will force the stragglers to pull themselves together. Even the functions of welfare organisations, and thus the state, have been redefined. The classic welfare state was intended to handle tasks for which there was political consensus and services that were deemed unprofitable for private enterprises to handle on market terms. As taxpayers, we would pay for welfare as an expenditure – a social redistribution or social insurance – that we would not expect to recover.

Today, with the nation state being defined as a competition state, welfare is something that must pay off. Welfare, including education, health and social services, is considered an investment that must yield a profit, either indirectly in the form of saved public spending or directly as income to private welfare services. Welfare is expected to support the international competitiveness of the nation (i.e., the nation's business enterprises). For this purpose, the endeavours of the ethics of duty to fulfil a general objective will not suffice. Instead, the new system requires to make straightforward calculations based on precise, measurable targets, a practice that also requires a new way of registering citizens, their objectives and target fulfilment, as compared to the pupil plans of the Danish school system and the many new forms of assessment and testing in early education services.

The utilitarian assessment of the competition state is at odds with the fundamental philosophy of the welfare state. 'All the best for all clients' may easily turn into 'all the best clients for us'. From the perspective of duty ethics, this involves the risk that individuals will become 'the mere means' to another end, economic growth. Where the ethics of duty called for the self-sacrifice of public employees, utilitarianism invites self-centeredness, wherein individual employees and institutions concentrate on what is best for themselves and their own financial survival or success. This new situation does not mean that the

public's traditional expectations of employees' universal devotion to duty, humane disposition and rational explanations have been suspended. On the contrary, today's well-situated citizens as consumers require all that is best within welfare: high-quality services, great commitment and abundant information. The competition for the 'soul of welfare work' is tough. If the professional groups working with people want to establish themselves as professionals on these new terms, they need to find their own two feet.

### MORALISM, MEASURING QUALITY AND HOT AIR

If early childhood educators (and similar professional groups) want to develop a professional ethic, they need to be mindful of the aforementioned potential pitfalls in the process, as well as the many possibilities. The process may catalyse a discussion of the conflicts that need to be handled in everyday life, as seen in the light of more general ethical dilemmas. In this context, it is particularly necessary to be aware of the conflicts between the competing requirements of welfare work. How do we balance the traditional expectations of duty ethics against the utilitarian calculations that are necessary in the competition state? How do we find a middle way between social and liberal principles and concern for the community and the individual? Is a middle way doable and should it be doable? Or is it possible to develop a third possibility?

The pitfalls are obvious: moralising, quality measurements and hot air. In the worst case, the attempts to discuss moral and ethical questions turn into internal pettiness, indignation or slander, into websites and four-colour brochures, marketing fine words such as openness, honesty and respect for diversity and finally. These are words that no one can disagree with or believe in, but we all perceive for what they are: Advertising, which strengthens neither the profession's nor the organisation's credibility. On the contrary, self-interest is stressed in the manner of businesses that may work for the best interests of their clients but prioritise their own success. In a competition state, a political majority in addition may attempt to ensure the quality of welfare work by ranking and result based financing according to ethical output rather than through a dialogue between clients and professionals.

### A PROFESSIONAL ETHICS OF VIRTUE

In spite of the fundamental differences between the principles of duty ethics and utilitarianism, they do have one common feature. The arguments for both philosophies are based on a special type of reasoning, an abstract rationality distinct from concrete practice – from the particular people in particular circumstances that we are discussing. The imperative of duty ethics applies to all people, regardless of cultural and social context. Utilitarianism, as it is practiced in the competition state, refuses to compromise on the principles that everything must be measurable and that there will always be more efficient methods of reaching specific targets.

The philosopher Anne-Marie S. Christensen claims that the development of a modern professional welfare ethic may use Aristotle's virtue ethics for inspiration. Christensen argues that instead of general, abstract principles, we should ask what special obligations we wish to assume as a profession and what particular virtues are important in that context. A doctor, for instance, may assume responsibility for the patient's health, and in that context it is important for the doctor to practice the virtue of 'human empathy'. This virtue, however, is limited to the particular case for which the doctor is responsible. The doctor is not to practice empathy for the patient in all other areas of life. On the contrary, perhaps a certain insensitivity in other respects is a necessary precondition for the doctor's ability to perform his or her work, for instance when performing surgery.

Christensen, however, warns against assuming that professional ethics and the associated virtues may be made fully explicit to the point of becoming completely comprehensible to non-professionals. Such attempts would always prove inadequate and inflexible, because the virtues are not merely based on knowledge communicated through educational programmes but also on experience acquired through work. If the virtues are to be discussed sensibly, one needs knowledge of the particular field of work within which the virtues are to be practiced. Even if the virtues cannot be explained fully to others, they may be practiced with respect to others. For early childhood education, Aristotle's conception of the 'good life' is particularly relevant, Christensen claims. According to Aristotle, what constitutes the good life cannot be determined once and for all. It is not a matter of general principles but of what is good and right in specific contexts involving other people. Doing what is good and right creates the good life, which might be said to constitute the core of early childhood education.

## 2 ETHICAL DILEMMAS



**BY CHRISTIAN AABRO**

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**What are the characteristics of an ethical dilemma? And how do we handle them in early childhood education? These are some of the questions that will be dealt with in this chapter. The author shows how ethical dilemmas on the one hand are both insoluble and unpredictable, and therefore something we cannot guard against, but also how, using ethics, we may turn them into an instrument for continuous reflection in early childhood education.**

Some time ago I listened to a radio broadcast,<sup>(1)</sup> during which a school teacher called Anne phoned in to talk about the following dilemma:

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“At a quiet moment a boy asked me confidentially whether, as an exception, it would be okay for him to leave his cell phone on during class, as he was expecting an important call from his father. ‘Why does your father need to call you in the middle of school hours,’ was my natural question to the small nine-year-old boy standing beside me with tears in his eyes. The boy told me in a very low voice that his father, who happens to be a member of a biker gang, was in court waiting for his sentence – something to do with homicidal assault, the boy thought. The father apparently feared that he would have to go to jail for at least six months, and in that case he intended to go underground. The boy got the call from his father in the middle of the next lesson. The father was disappointed about his sentence and intended to go into hiding. Then came a time when the boy did not see his father, followed by a period when his father’s ‘brothers’ frequently came to pick up the boy, so that he could meet with his father, now wanted by the police, on neutral ground for brief and secret moments together.

Now this week my pupil came up and told me that for the coming weekend his father had invited him to a well-known Danish aqua park, the name of which he gave me. As I mentioned before, his father is wanted by the police. So now I’m thinking: Should I anonymously tip the police (...), or should I just mind my own business and forget about the confidential information given to me by a poor boy who misses his father?”



To this we may say: "As human beings we quite often find ourselves having to make difficult choices. That is a part of life. When dealing with each other, without knowing all the intentions and underlying reasons why we do what we do, it is no wonder that dilemmas occur. It is hard enough just to sort out our own intentions. What principles should we follow? Should we be honest (on principle), or should we lie (in order to spare the feelings of others)? Should we ignore the written rules because the unwritten ones are more compelling? Should we withhold or hand over information? To what and to whom should we be faithful?"

When mixing with others, we adjust, negotiate and fix the rules for what is allowed and what is not. Not as permanent rules but as constantly negotiated – and loosely linked – supporting markers telling us what we are allowed to and what not. And we have always done that. This is something life has taught us. Because already in childhood we pick up this feeling for the rules of the game as we are playing. Or in other words: As children we develop our ability to reflect on fundamental values and standards.

Within the context of early childhood education, having doubts is nothing out of the ordinary. But there are times when our doubts are of a more fundamental nature, when it is suddenly a matter of basic values that affect us more profoundly. Such predicaments are indeed part of early childhood education. Perhaps we may risk saying that having to navigate among many different values and interests is precisely what early childhood education is about. In early childhood services, characterised by asymmetrical relations between the various actors,<sup>(2)</sup> choices and decisions must be made that, apart from providing immediate solutions to problems, also involve more basic decisions that include consciously or instinctively setting aside certain values or interests in favour of others. In other words, we end up in ethical dilemmas.

## WHAT IS THE LINK BETWEEN DILEMMAS AND ETHICS?

In predicaments like Anne's, ethics assumes relevance. As mentioned, ethics is about deciding what is right by looking at the basic values in play. In Anne's case it is not easy to see what is right. There is a clash between, on the one hand, a highly valued relationship of trust with the boy and, on the other, a duty to inform the authorities. Therefore, Anne is facing an ethical dilemma, because she is dealing with a problem that does not merely call for an immediate solution but involves an almost impossible choice between two contradictory – but equally acknowledged – values. Thus, an ethical dilemma occurs when a person has good reasons for acting in two different ways at a specific point but is only allowed to choose one of these. In the example mentioned, Anna may choose either to inform the police or not, she cannot do both. An ethical dilemma, therefore, always implies imminent defeat: Regardless of her choice, Anne will do something wrong by avoiding to do what, from a certain perspective, would be the right thing to do.

So, a genuine ethical dilemma is characterised by its degree of insolubleness. You might say that it is a fundamental feature of the classic ethical dilemma that it almost forces

us to do violence to ourselves; and in that way it reminds us that life cannot be expected to continue along a straight line.

#### CLASSIC EXAMPLES OF DIFFICULT DILEMMAS

- A mother with two little children is standing in line, waiting to enter a concentration camp. A Nazi officer tells her that she can only take one child with her. The other child must die. If she fails to make a choice, they must both die. What should she do? Is she to choose between the children and try to live with this choice for the rest of her life, or should she refuse and leave it to the officer to bear the responsibility for the crime?<sup>(3)</sup>
- A cruise ship has sunk, and you have managed to get into one of the lifeboats. But there are so many survivors in the lifeboat that it is bound to sink. Even though everyone is wearing a life jacket, no one will survive the cold water. Someone in the boat is seriously ill and will not survive the trip no matter what. Are you going to throw that person overboard to keep the boat from sinking?
- A railway car has been disconnected from the train and is now moving down the line towards five workmen that you will not be able to warn. Next to you is a handle for the point switch that will take the train into a parallel line. In this line is only one unsuspecting workman. Will you pull the handle?

Now, it is not just the degree of insolubleness that characterises ethical dilemmas. For you might justifiably ask: If ethical dilemmas are truly insoluble, why take the trouble to worry about them in the first place? Perhaps because the belief that a solution must be available is a key element. The very fact that ethical dilemmas are ethical does indeed point to an expectation that specifically ethics will help us solve them.

So, to describe a dilemma as ethical may be understood in two ways: In one sense it is a matter of the degree of insolubleness, in the other it is precisely the possibility of finding a solution. On the one hand, an ethical dilemma is characterised by involving such great and basic values that prioritising among them automatically involves setting aside some of them, which can be quite unbearable. On the other hand, ethics as philosophical discipline is precisely what provides a number of logical techniques of reflection that specifically assist people in solving a dilemma – or at least in making it tolerable. Thus, ethics may at one and the same time define the dead ends of a dilemma and point to solutions. I shall return to this duality in several ways. But at this point, I will first point to some dilemmas of early childhood education.

"Ditte is looking at her watch. It is almost four o'clock. She needs to get off work now. But there are still a number of children in the kindergarten. She walks down the passage towards the door to the playground to get a breath of fresh air. Passing the pillow room, she looks briefly through the long, narrow window next to the door, almost as a reflex, and gets a glimpse of Sofie and Nina, who appear to have something going on with Valdemar. Valdemar is not wearing any clothes, and Nina has dropped her trousers. Approaching the window, Ditte can see that Sofie has got hold of grip on Valdemar's willie and is pulling on it so that he has to walk along in the direction she is pulling. Nina is sitting on a pillow, grinning while keeping one of her hands between her legs.

Ditte is petrified. What to do? Should she intervene? Something tells her to stop the game. A thousand thoughts are rushing through her head. The children shouldn't be naked, should they? And they might hurt themselves. And what would the parents say? But what if the colleagues disagree? Perhaps the children have even been given permission. They certainly appear to be having fun. And perhaps it is a natural thing – something that shouldn't be taboo?

Ditte has not been long in the job, so she is still uncertain about the rules – written as well as unwritten. But she can feel that she has no wish to display her uncertainty. She starts walking towards the playground, almost paralysed and feeling that she is running away from the problem."

This is not an easy choice.<sup>(4)</sup> Ditte does not know what to do. Should she intervene or not? And if she intervenes, how should she go about doing that? There is no doubt that she experiences the situation as a concrete problem. But does it actually raise questions about values, standards and ethics? Off-hand one might say that it is more a question of uncertainty and that there is a solution that she just does not know or fails to see.

But if we go a bit further into the problem, a number of questions to do with ethics, morals and values do pop up. For instance, what carries most weight, the individual child's ability to act out its curiosity (or perhaps even sexuality), or the respect for the social ground rules (and making sure that everyone is treated equally and no one is violated)? Which is more important, the individual or the community? On the one hand – and drawing on classic developmental psychology – it is possible to argue for the importance of allowing an individual to act out a need or an urge, where the body is not tabooed and hidden away.<sup>(5)</sup> Likewise, we could argue for the socialising function of the institution, where the children are continuously assisted in learning the codes and ground rules of society, enabling them to join communities now and in the future. This involves practising to respect and recognize people around you, regardless of age, sex cultural origin etc. Among other things, this involves not biting, refraining from swearing, greeting people politely and keeping your

clothes on in social contexts. If in early childhood education we therefore distinguish between a pedagogical problem and ditto dilemma, the problem calls for an immediate solution, whereas a dilemma cannot be solved in a traditional sense but rather opens up ethical perspectives. But problems and dilemmas are often linked to each other in the sense that what at first glance appears to be a problem may turn out on reflection to possess the more permanent characteristic of a dilemma. Consequently, the task of the professionals may often be to identify the dilemma within the problem.

Does this mean, then, that all questions of doubt or all dilemmas are ethical? As I see it, dilemmas always contain an ethical dimension. It is a matter of a choice that may be turned into a fundamental question about the life we would like to live and the human beings we would want to be. And it is a matter of choosing between two solutions that can both be defended from a certain perspective. As Marianne Skytte puts it: "In early childhood education there are no neutral ideas about the good life, the good childhood, the good parenthood etc. In Denmark there is no single, neutral image of the good life that covers the diversity of lifestyles and outlooks on life. Therefore, there are no right solutions to educational problems, but several different ones, each of which will appear to be right based on different fundamental values."<sup>(6)</sup>

So, it is not just a matter of ethics but about ethical perspectives. Recognising that there are different ways of looking at things. For Ditte's experience of the problematical situation is also about which perspective to choose. On the one hand, an institutional perspective: What is my spontaneous reaction to children playing intimate games? Should I act according to my own point of view or based on a qualified guess about the official policy?

## ETHICS IS ABOUT CHOICE OF PERSPECTIVE

It becomes clear that ethical dilemmas are also about a clash of different perspectives. You need to take a stand, choose sides; but the choice very much depends on the perspective you choose.<sup>(7)</sup> A traditional discipline-based perspective would define such choices according to the different approaches of the individual scientific disciplines, in Ditte's case resulting in something like this: A psychological perspective is likely to focus on the child's understanding of itself and its sexuality; an anthropological perspective will primarily accentuate the children's common ground rules and logic in the shape of hierarchies or conventions; and a sociological perspective might be more concerned with the child's rights, power relations or socio-cultural impulses.

The weakness of this discipline-based view is that, in terms of categorisation of perspectives, it may give an impression of an almost stereotypical way of organising the world (and science), which, as technique applied from a distance, fails to capture the individual and situational dimensions and, consequently, does not capture the clashes occurring in the specific situations. In terms of the visualisation of the ethical dilemmas, it would probably make greater sense to distinguish between the following levels:

- **Length** of perspective: Should we prioritise the short-term or the long-term? In the short term, perhaps one thing will make sense, in the long term, perhaps another. And the question, then, would typically be: Will a long-term benefit justify an act that conflicts with what, as a first reaction, appears to be right? Ethical dilemmas are not just dilemmas because of a conflict between the right and the wrong of an act, and because a choice has to be made between the right and the wrong of the consequences of that act. If the right act involves something that is bad, and the wrong act leads to something good, we must choose between the satisfaction of doing right, regardless of the subsequent damage, or we may aim for the best possible result, regardless of how wrong our actions appear to be (the end justifies the means).
- **Breadth** of perspective: Should we prioritise the individual, the collective or the societal horizon? Or put differently: Do we consider what is best for the individual, the group or society as a whole? As we saw in the example involving Ditte's encounter with the children's intimate playing, it becomes a matter of choosing between the individual and the collective perspective.
- **Focus** of perspective: Here we may ask: The right thing to do for whom? From whose perspective should the dilemma be viewed? In other words, this is question of prioritising points of view in the literal sense of the phrase (the point from which you are looking). In the case of the pillow room, there is a considerable difference between the perspectives of respectively Valdemar, Nina and Sofie. And, moreover: What is right from the point of view of the institution, the parents etc.?

As mentioned, Ditte's problem includes an ethical dimension, both because the dilemma is characterised by a degree of insolubleness and because the dilemma may be made the object of ethical analysis. It is possible to list the values at play and discuss the role she, as an early childhood educator, should ideally be playing. Ethics, as we see, is able to help us clarify what the right course of action would be. It has to do with the idea that, as an early childhood educator, you are able to make an informed choice, a choice of perspective – and a choice of the role you wish to play.

## EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS PLAY A PART

We often say about actors that they are credible in the roles they play. And we recognise the professional acting as a technique we can practice and study. A professional role must be taken seriously as something above and beyond being an amateur. At the same time, it is acting – not life itself. This also goes for early childhood educators. They must play a role. Both in the sense of 'making a difference' but also in terms of giving a 'professional performance', which in this context means giving an educational performance with tech-

nique and determination, demonstrating an ability to stay in the role with credibility (without losing your nerve). It is about being authentic yet clear and coherent in manner. Cheats and gamblers will not be acknowledged. The early childhood educator who steps in and out of the role, who alternates between (pseudo) presence among children and private orientation towards colleagues, will often be unmasked, resulting in loss of confidence from children as well as colleagues and parents.

This dramaturgic approach is inspired by the Canadian-American professor of socio-anthropology, Erving Goffman (1922-82), who used the analogy of society as a stage on which people's social lives and interactions are played out as theatrical performances. He therefore uses terms such as roles and, especially, 'front stage' and 'backstage' to explain why we as human beings constantly focus on how to present ourselves in life, and that we put up a show both to the external world (on stage) and to ourselves (behind stage). We are all capable of handling many different roles, depending on the circumstances. In an illustrative example provided by Goffman himself<sup>(8)</sup>, we meet a holidaying Englishman, Preedy, who is making an entrance on a Spanish beach:

#### EXAMPLE: GOFFMAN'S ROLEPLAY THEORY

"But in any case he took care to avoid catching anyone's eye. First of all, he had to make it clear to those potential companions of his holiday that they were of no concern to him whatsoever. He stared through them, round them, over them – eyes lost in space. The beach might have been empty. If by chance a ball was thrown his way, he looked surprised; then let a smile of amusement lighten his face (Kindly Preedy), looked round dazed to see that there were people on the beach, tossed it back with a smile to himself and not a smile at the people, and then resumed carelessly his nonchalant survey of space.

But it was time to institute a little parade, the parade of the Ideal Preedy. By devious handlings he gave any who wanted to look a chance to see the title of his book, a Spanish translation of Homer, classic thus, but not daring, cosmopolitan too – and then gathered together his beach-wrap and bag into a neat sand-resistant pile (Methodical and Sensible Preedy), rose slowly to stretch at ease his huge frame (Big-Cat Preedy), and tossed aside his sandals (Carefree Preedy, after all).

The marriage of Preedy and the sea! There were alternative rituals. The first involved the stroll that turns into a run and a dive straight into the water, thereafter smoothing into a strong splashless crawl towards the horizon. But of course not really to the horizon. Quite suddenly he would turn on to his back and thrash great white splashes with his legs, some-

how thus showing that he could have swum further had he wanted to, and then would stand up a quarter out of water for all to see who it was. The alternative course was simpler, it avoided the cold-water shock and it avoided the risk of appearing too high-spirited. The point was to appear to be so used to the sea, the Mediterranean, and this particular beach, that one might as well be in the sea as out of it. It involved a slow stroll down and into the edge of the water – not even noticing his toes were wet, land and water all the same to him – with his eyes up at the sky gravely surveying portents, invisible to others, of the weather (Local Fisherman Preedy).”

According to Goffman, individuals take on specific roles, thereby communicating specific images of themselves. Among these roles are fulfilment of expectations and obligations. The role taken on by an individual should not be mistaken for his or her innermost personality or personal identity. Thus, when an actor performs a role, it is a matter of enrolling the facade, i.e. your ability to communicate expressively.<sup>(9)</sup>

Within the context of early childhood education, the challenge is of course to remain in the professional role, even when it appears to be self-contradictory or challenged by opposing interests and ethical dilemmas. The ideal in this connection must precisely be not to change position but to achieve credibility through predictable presence. Obviously, this is a great professional challenge. Therefore, according to Goffman, it requires performing and staging performances; that the performers work together in groups; and that these groups jointly define the social context. The group appears as consensus-preserving with regard to its own situation, allowing the actors to act appropriately and in accordance with the jointly adopted policy. It may feel quite restrictive having to follow a common policy, but at the same time it contributes to stabilising the interactions of the members of staff which might otherwise, in individual cases, become context-dependent and inconsistent. Therefore, in addition to creating internal stability, any group will also attempt to preserve a specific definition of the particular situation vis-a-vis others outside the group.<sup>(10)</sup> This is an important ingredient in the establishment of professional identity.

In summing up, it seems that the trick is to be aware of the role you play as an educator. Perhaps you simply have to remain in the role of the appreciative educator, even if you feel inclined to scold. And in your relations with the parents you should perhaps do your best to remain in the role of responsible educator, even if you fundamentally agree with them that everything will fall apart as a consequence of the cutbacks and reductions.

The role of an early childhood educator is a matter of credible improvisation, carried out with professional skill and quality but in most cases without a script. But what does it

mean to be loyal to our role as an early childhood educator? What are we supposed to be loyal to?

## DECLARING LOYALTY

Everyone who has ever been inside an early childhood service realises that some early childhood educators are simply better at what they do than others. It may be difficult to pinpoint exactly what makes them better. Perhaps they give an impression of being more self-sustained. Perhaps they always say the right thing at the right time. Perhaps they have a natural authority that the children willingly recognise. Or perhaps they are good at including and recognising all parents – even those that are tiresome or cause trouble. Further to the above, I would claim that what characterises a good early childhood educator, generally speaking, is credibility. They are credible in the role.

Above all, credibility is about the degree of coherence between what you say and what you do. The phrase 'putting action behind words' is a very apt description. Therefore, credibility is also about being consistent (if you make your bed, you've got to lie in it). But in order to be credible, we must be faithful to something. The special challenge of early childhood education is to be faithful to several different things at one and the same time. Or in other words: Early childhood educators must constantly declare loyalty to several different 'levels', such as:

- Being loyal to yourselves – your own values
- Being loyal to the system – the local administration and legislation
- Being loyal to colleagues – the professional and social community
- Being loyal to the parents – the users/customers
- Being loyal to the children – well-being, development, care.

The problem is that these loyalty levels are not of equal status. Some things must come before others. Ethical dilemmas occur precisely because we end up in situations where these loyalty levels obstruct each other, and where we recognise that fact that it is impossible to be loyal to several things at the same time. As early childhood educators we may experience a conflict between the role as a helper (being loyal to the children) and the role of controller (being loyal to the system). At the same time, most early childhood educators have probably experienced situations in which the loyalty to colleagues comes into conflict with the loyalty to parents. For instance, in an attempt to establish trusting relations with a parent, we may accidentally make a promise that is out of line with the common policy among the colleagues. Finally, loyalty to our own values may conflict with loyalty to colleagues or management, for instance in situations when a choice has to be made between an institutional – and perhaps at times routine – working procedure and a more individual digression, where we focus more on an individual child, or spend a bit more time helping a child than actually allowed within the amount set aside.



### EXAMPLE OF A CONFLICT OF LOYALTIES

In kindergarten the early childhood educator Rikke notices a Muslim boy eating a ham sandwich without realising what he is doing. Should she inform the parents? Should the boy be told? Because he did not himself notice. To whom or what should Rikke be loyal?

When there is a clash of loyalties, we might imagine that loyalty to oneself would always be prioritised. However, this is often not the case. In certain situations, we are all capable of disregarding even quite fundamental values in order to adjust and become one with the group or the system. The way we are made as people makes us tolerate quite a lot before deciding to go against the tide. The Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman reminds us of this inclination to subject to authority by showing that it is far more important for us to belong than to do what is right.<sup>(11)</sup>

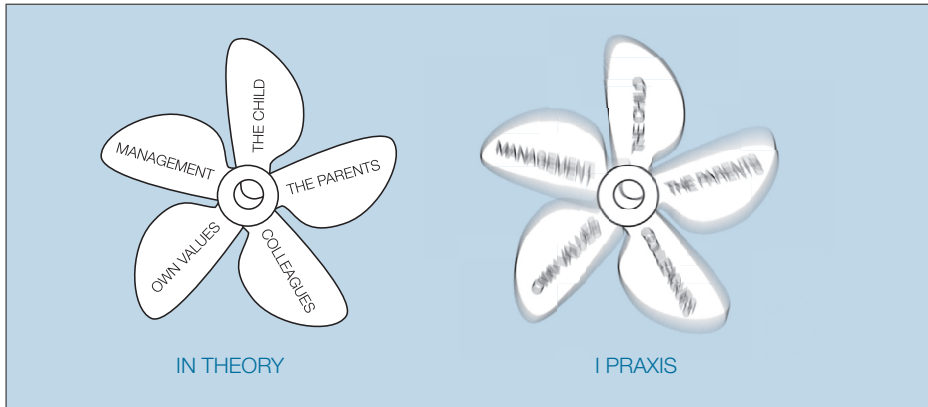
An important element in the understanding of the ethical dilemmas we end up in, is that we attempt to sort out our loyalties. In this process of realization and definition is also a process of declaration, in the sense that we must make clear precisely to which constituents we ascribe educational value and, in the best case scenario, also a declaration of which constituents we may smuggle across the border – undetected. It may often turn out to be at least as important to attempt to uncover the disloyalty, i.e. the episodes where we are not loyal to our own ideals and values. In that sense, disloyalty is almost an occupational hazard in early childhood education, and the symptoms are easy to spot. We encounter them as stress, burnout and a poor working climate.<sup>(12)</sup>

Now, the clashes do not just occur across the different levels. In most cases there may be simultaneous internal conflicts and clashes. The colleagues may be divided on certain issues, and they may be difficult to use as unambiguous reference. Systems such as local government administrations may seem arbitrary or conflicting in their expectations of improved educational quality on the one hand and, on the other, fewer financial resources. And the clash may also take place within the individual early childhood educator and between the different values that trip up each other. In the example of the Muslim boy, Rikke operates on the one hand with a general value to do with the importance of respecting all cultures and prioritising honest dialogue very highly; and on the other hand she wishes to hold on to a value of care that involves protecting the children and preventing them from ending up in conflicts for which they have no responsibility.

So it is in the clashes that ethics becomes important. And it is in the clashes that we must demonstrate professionalism as early childhood educators. But is it possible to isolate these clashes in practice – in a reality and during a workday where everything is mixed up and everything moves at a fast pace?

## PROFESSIONALISM ADRIFT

As mentioned, it is possible to separate the different loyalty levels – at least in theory. But it is a different matter in practice, once things have been set in motion. Every day early childhood education is adrift – in more ways than one. The following is an illustration of this state of affairs:



When I say that professionalism is adrift, I first of all refer to the fact that everyday activities represent a challenge in terms of identifying professional reference points. In an institutional setting full of lived (and unpredictable) life, it may be difficult as an early childhood educator to hold on to the professional and ethical policy. Or put differently: It may be difficult to drop anchor (the symbol of loyalty) in waters filled with undercurrents and constantly whipped by new winds. Nevertheless, it is necessary to determine your position, i.e. where you are and where you are going.

On the other hand, being adrift also refers to a state of being, where we are required to be in constant motion, to develop freely and show progress. The labour market has developed into something that is unregulated and in a state of flux, representing a sea of opportunities. But indirectly the eagerness to develop also means that we will sink if we remain anchored in the same place too long. This is especially conspicuous within the entire field of in-service and further education, into which unprecedented investments are poured. And a complete train-the-trainers system has been developed for the purpose.<sup>(13)</sup> So, preferably, we should keep moving and set all sails.

But back to the question: How are we as human beings (and as early childhood educators) to navigate? Will ethics work as the compass we can use to mark out the course? For instance, is it possible to take a course in ethical navigation? Is it possible in this way to avoid letting ourselves be governed by the local stars and the tide? As people

we are not completely rational beings, of course. But on the other hand, we very much tend to reflect on matters. We often ask ourselves: Could I have done this differently? Could I have done it better? In the context of early childhood education, this tendency is reflected in the fact that it has become more difficult to ascertain whether we have done 'well enough'. The paradox, therefore is that while becoming better and better at reflecting on situations, and not just acting automatically (or according to the conventions of society), it is becoming more difficult to acquire sufficient experience of and confidence in our own abilities, attitudes and values.

So, how do we create certainty? Are we able to simulate the ethical dilemmas through practicing? Is it possible, as we do by photographically freezing traffic situations when preparing for a driving test, to freeze the educational reality in order to work out the ethically most desirable action?

## ETHICS AS PROMPTER

Is it possible to simulate ethical dilemmas? A first reaction would be to say no. Ethical dilemmas always include a certain degree of unpredictability because they play out in a unique time-related, social and geographical locality, where we feel trapped by circumstances. Inevitably, one cannot practice the unpractised, and the dilemma will always be unpractised, if only for the reason that practice will always differ from the prescriptions of theory. The next time Rikke discovers a Muslim boy eating pork, it may be in a situation involving another educator who may ignore the incident, thereby placing Rikke in a new variation of the dilemma. Perhaps she will be observing a completely different boy (or girl) and therefore a completely different family background etc.

Viewed in this way, perhaps we should warn against simulations. Working with a predetermined ethically correct answer, a predefined approach or action, means assuming a degree of predictability that will work against understanding the uniqueness of the situation. In this way simulations may lead to inflexible behaviour, to acting in stereotypical ways. It is hardly desirable to emulate the hospitals' use of coloured lines in the floors to prevent patients from getting lost, thereby setting aside educators' professional sense of direction and personal judgment. There is no ethical master key. Nor is it advisable to look for one. However, over time many have made the attempt and have categorised principles and established various ethical schools (ethics of virtue, ethics of duty, ethics of care etc.). But it is highly doubtful whether such systematization may be distilled into a final result. If history has taught us anything, it must be that ethics works poorly as an exact method of action that may protect us against new dilemmas. It is comparable to alchemy – we so much wish to find the 'gold'.<sup>(14)</sup> But ultimately, we now probably want standards that reduce the value of human choices – of judgment. In the words of Mach-Zagel & Nøhr:

"At the crucial moment, when the choice is made and the course of action is chosen, the ethical traditions, institutional and personal values and standards disappear from conscious thought. It is in the quiet moment that you reflect on the ethical act and the difficult choices. There is no guarantee that you will always act rationally or appropriately. But if you always act according to the rules, you will be deprived of the possibility of growing and living the good life. Excessive dependence on rules and regulations will lead to stagnation and carelessness. A certain kind of security may emerge from keeping strictly to the rules, but what's the use if you lose the possibility for human contact and affection." <sup>(15)</sup>

So on the one hand we must advise against allowing the categories to take the lead in analyses, because they risk becoming deliberately assumed roles, supporting the idea of convenient operationalization of predetermined labels that do not support the situation-specific, unique reflection.

But there is a different way of looking at it. As previously shown, labels may also contribute to making the clashes clear to us. They tell us what is at stake. And they may help us stay in role. So, on the other hand we might claim that ethics is precisely what whispers to us the answer – like a prompter – in the middle of a play. And ethics is quite useful as analytical tool for scrutinizing dilemmas. In the context of early childhood education we do know that what we refer to as professional reflection is a matter of practice and experience that may be simulated within an educational space.

Therefore, the case of Rikke and the Muslim boy may be simulated, either in the course of an educational process or in practice within a group of staff. And in this context discussions about matters of obedience and faithfulness as reflexive discipline may increase our awareness of how highly we value honesty versus the welfare of a child and, not least, how we relate to each other as colleagues. All this cannot be distilled into templates for future action, but as an exercise in clarification of our values, it may serve as something to rely on the next time we end up in a similar situation. In that sense we may talk of establishing an ethical contingency plan, as long as we acknowledge that it is not possible to twist ethics into becoming guidelines for action. We simply must recognize that the play for the values is a procedural exercise that enables us to function well in the role.

The ethical training may take place in many ways. Here, four will suffice:

#### **SIMULATION THROUGH CASES**

Discussions of cases, i.e. short everyday descriptions to serve as a fruitful take-off for the recognition of attitudes to specific choices and opt-outs – and ultimately recognition of ethics. Especially disagreement about concrete action versus the simulated situation constitutes the basis for clarification and analysis of the values and ethical foundations of early childhood educators.

### SIMULATION THROUGH GAMES

Ethical discussions may also be the product of special ethics games. One example is the so-called dilemma game used by early childhood educators, Inklusia,<sup>(16)</sup> a board game consisting of a board, dilemma cards and value cards. The participants draw dilemma cards describing little cases drawn from early childhood practice, and the object is then to identify the ethical dilemma involved and, by means of the value cards, decide which eight values are to be in play. Subsequently the eight values are reduced to four, and the participants take turns to discuss them. According to the rules of the game, the purpose is exclusively to facilitate reflection, and it is not possible to win.

### SIMULATION THROUGH DIALOGUE CARDS

A third example of simulation is dialogue cards, developed by the Danish Union of Early Childhood and Youth Educators (BUPL). These are little cards that on one side describe some incident at an early childhood service and, on the other, ask a number of questions regarding the ethical values in play. These are intended to be used by the staff to launch ethical discussions in an easy and manageable way.<sup>(17)</sup>


### SIMULATION THROUGH FILMS

Finally some unions as Utdanningsforbundet in Norway and BUPL in Denmark have produced films as a tool for simulating ethical dilemmas. Films often work in the same way as cases by showing everyday examples that can be discussed and reflected upon.

What characterises these methods is precisely that as simulation they serve as models of procedure and analysis to facilitate an exchange of opinions and, with that, ethical reflection. However, it is important to remember that they do not represent reality and therefore cannot serve as precise filters for the extraction of what is by definition the right action. But still, simulations may be extremely useful as catalysts of conversation about and thereby clarification of key ethical questions.<sup>(18)</sup> As you are trained in spotting the ethical dimensions of everyday early childhood education, and as the ethical contingency plans are established, ethics as prompter will whisper to us proposals for setting priorities and direction whenever we lose our sense of direction mid-stage.

### ROUNDING OFF

As I hope to have shown in this chapter, ethics reflects a duality. On the one hand ethical dilemmas characterise unique, context-related situations that place us in insoluble positions, resulting in a conflict between different obedience relations and in becoming uncertain of our own role. On the other hand, precisely ethics may provide a dimension that, as method of reflection, may generate of practicing professional navigation within early child-



hood education. Ethics, thus, may characterise both the dead-ends of a dilemma and tell us something about how to get out of them.

If, as early childhood educators, we become capable of handling the duality of ethical dilemmas, we need a corresponding duality of technique – a technique that allows us to be both credible on stage and simultaneously reflecting off stage, a technique enabling us to be in the present while also somewhere in the futur,<sup>(19)</sup> and a technique enabling us to set course while also, through our power of judgment, preparing us for a change of course dictated by the circumstances and a basically unpredictable workday, and that is far from easy.

1. 'Mads og Monopolet' (Mads and the monopoly) , Danish Radio Corporation, P3, 12 December 2009
2. We often speak of asymmetrical relations. But the lack of symmetry characterises the entire context, i.e. the social, cultural and institutional setting and not just the relations between child and adult. Therefore I prefer this broader term
3. This dilemma comes from Alan J. Pakula's film 'Sophie's choice' (1982).
4. The dilemma is made up but inspired by a similar case in Frede Nielsen's book 'At udvikle praksis – kritisk konstruktiv pædagogik' (To develop practice – critical, constructive early childhood education), Borgen 1985.
5. I specifically refer to traditional, Freudian development psychology, e.g. Niels Ernst 1979, warning against the consequences of limiting children's sexual development: "It is further emphasized that the child's experience of the early psychosexual phases forms the background of social learning. The child is given certain basic attitudes in its relations with other people and itself. Naturally, this also applies to the phallic phase. Here it is a matter of initiative, self-observation and joy of life versus despondency, feelings of inferiority and guilt." (Ernst 1979, p.87-88).
6. Skytte. I: Mach-Zagel & Nøhr 2007, p. 130
7. Se Aabro, Christian (2006): 'Deltager og tilskuer – om valg af pædagogisk perspektiv' (Participant and bystander – on choice of educational perspective). In: Østergaard Andersen, Ellegaard & Muschinsky (red.): *Klassisk og moderne pædagogisk teori* (Classic and modern educational theory). Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
8. William Sansom: A contest of Ladies, London: Hogarth, 1956, pp 230-232, as reproduced in Goffman 1959, pp 4-5.
9. Also Wenger (2004) talks of the roles we play and that these roles constitute themselves as a repertoire. Among other things he says: "We become who we are by playing a role in the commitment relations on which our community is based." (p. 177).
10. Goffman 1959, s. 85-89
11. Several have since then discussed this phenomenon in an educational context, e.g. Øjvind Larsen (1995 and 2009).
12. This raises the question: Is the solution to declare loyalty to the profession through an ethically based oath, such as the Hippocratic oath?
13. Coaching. Most university colleges now offer a string of coaching programmes. On UCC's homepage, for instance, you can read as follows: "We work from a common ethical basis, also when we coach. This is characterised by: Wanting to create meaningful development – for you and your organisation. We help you identify and implement courses of action." See [www.ucc.dk](http://www.ucc.dk).
14. Speaking of the search for the answer, it is thought-provoking in this context that Learning Lab, Denmark's inspirational guide to working with curricula in Danish early education services was dubbed the 'golden guide'.
15. Mach-Zagel & Nøhr 2007, p. 23
16. See [www.inklusia.dk](http://www.inklusia.dk)
17. See [www.bupl.dk](http://www.bupl.dk)
18. In addition to actual methods of simulation, you can also point to various methods of reflection. For this purpose it is beneficial to distinguish between linear and circular methods. The linear methods are typically constructed step by step, including an introductory fact-oriented or analytical step, a second step defining interested parties, a third covering the dilemma etc. The circular methods, such as Jørgen Husted's (2009) ethics wheel, are more concerned with continuous processes that, in the form of dialogue, fluctuate between relevant reasons for and against e.g. the three dimensions: duties, consequences and ideals.
19. And in the past too, for that matter – registering what has already happened – and the chord that has long since been struck.

# 3 PROFESSIONAL ETHICS AND THE CONSCIENCE OF LEADERSHIP



**BY CLAUD HOLM**

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**The nature of the care provided by early childhood educators is closely linked to their conscience formation. But what is the link between care and conscience? Is it possible to exercise care in different ways? And is it possible to be guided by – and towards – different types of conscience? This chapter answers these questions by examining how different leadership styles prevent and support the conditions for the ideal of a reflecting – and conscientious – early childhood educator.**

Confidence in spontaneous ethics has declined. We do not blindly believe that early childhood educators spontaneously know the difference between right and wrong when exercising their professional care. Even so, care is provided every day. However, it need not be particularly professional. It may merely be in continuation of the way parents – i.e. the users – care for their children. If that is the case, the educators simply continue a type of care that has been defined by the parents. Ironically, it is possible at the same time to trace a tendency among parents to want the educators – not the parents themselves - to take over the responsibility for educating and intervening with the child, and that this 'intervention' means taking care of the development of their much-wanted child. So, at one and the same time the parents want the educators to love their child but God have mercy on them if they do. The dilemma emerges because the educators are not representatives of the authorities but an employee of a public institution supplying a service – care for the development of each individual child – demanded by the user. And, paradoxically, now and then authoritarian care is demanded by users facing a user-oriented and authority-anxious early childhood educator. Well, paradoxes – in contrast to problems – are not meant to be solved but to be handled, so how can educators handle this new situation? What sort of care is required, for whom, how and for what reasons?

So, my point of departure is that the work of early childhood educators is first of all a matter of care, and especially care for the individual child's development of its individual-



ity. Quite likely, other legitimate explanations do not exist, and certainly not at present. The reason is first of all that care is the professional version of love. Secondly, care is a basic human trait. It is not possible to deselect care. Care is linked to the basic concern for life. It manifests itself by taking care of or being solicitous of a person's weakness or – more fundamentally – a person's powerlessness. When in need of your own care or that of others, it is not necessarily based on a phase-related weakness or concrete defect in a person. For we live the major part of our lives in the tension field between the helplessness of the infant and the weakening of the person getting older. This means that powerlessness is a condition for us all – a condition that sometimes manifests itself as weakness, and a weakness we need help to cope with.

At this point it seems reasonable to stop and consider whether it is true that care equals efforts to alleviate powerlessness. In other words, it is quite possible that I am a proponent of care for the powerless, but this view may approach wishful thinking. For today, we – as is true of most people – are actually not so concerned about our own powerlessness and that of others, on the contrary. Rather, it is a question of using, as our point of departure, the individual's actual or potential strengths for the purpose of promoting a positive (further) development of these strengths. Or put in another way: Looking at the Danish Union of Early Childhood and Youth Educators' (BUPL's) ethical basis, we encounter four values: care, equality, professional integrity and social justice. If we combine the values by asking a question, this is how it may go: Is it possible to preserve your professional integrity if, as an early childhood educator, you are required to be responsible for equality and social justice? The answer is that it can be quite difficult. Social justice is linked to an estimation of whether their work results in social injustice, whereas equality is linked to the work with dialogue, recognition, respect and tolerance. The one perspective points in the direction of unlimited respect for the strengths of the individual children, however different they may be. The other perspective does not accept these differences but takes considerable care to eliminate the differences that represent powerlessness. Precisely this new condition – the focus on strengths in the name of equality – constitutes a challenge to modern professional ethics, whose business it is to strengthen early childhood educators in deciding to whom they should primarily devote their attention in specific contexts. It is an awkward matter for both the individual educator and for the everyday manifestation of professional ethics in the services.

The awkwardness is about educators being able to live with themselves, their colleagues as well as their own decisions and those of their colleagues. Only a small minority are able to live with bad decisions – they usually avoid them, or at least avoid repeating them. "Act in such a way that you can/would want to repeat your action," is the ideal objective of a professional ethic.<sup>(1)</sup> If you live up to this, you will not feel bad about yourself – you will not feel bad about the way you take care of another person.

But what is meant by taking proper care of a child in the year 2010? What does it

mean to act conscientiously in the world we live in? These questions presuppose a certain view of conscience, i.e. that the world we live in produces individuals with different forms of conscience. Therefore, we need different types of leadership (for the 'leaders' and for the purpose of early childhood educator's self-leadership) to cope with the different ways of regulating the problems of the world in the medium of the individual consciences. The point is that we cannot at all times rely on a fixed idea that all people have one and the same natural, inherent inner voice that makes them behave well like other sensible people. Rather, we experience that different types of conscience dominate at different times in history, but also that competing types of conscience and conscience leadership manifest themselves at the same time. This article is concerned with the link between leadership and conscience – and in this connection with the question of what type of conscience you allow yourself to be governed by. Initially I introduce – and juxtapose – two types of conscience: traditional conscience-based morals and a more modern idea of conscience ethics. Secondly, I expand from two to four types of conscience formation, coupling them with four forms of leadership.

## TWO TYPES OF CONSCIENCE

Traditionally, conscience has been perceived – in moral and legal terms – as an ever-present and unambiguous phenomenon inside ourselves, like consciousness. And the purpose of this conscience has been to tell us what to do and what not to do, something it would be doing constantly as the whole point of our conscience was that it would always be with us. Or differently put: The philosopher Immanuel Kant saw conscience – a kind of internal 'exterior' – as a type of inner reason. It is true that reason is internal, but it is also a general, common sense that enables us to relate to other people. This means that if we listen to our conscience, we listen to the voice of reason at the same time, and then we may be sure of being able to turn the axiom behind our actions into a general law. The moral requirement to be made of a human being is to respect its inner judge by listening to it. To avoid doing damage to our conscience. The inner guardian is always with us, it is never wrong – and it is neither silent, capricious nor contradictory. In other words, the idea is that on the one hand an unerring conscience is ever present in all-encompassing, universal validity. On the other hand, it manifests itself through adults, such as parents and educators, who communicate the axioms that are associated with the inner reason.

In contrast to this traditional view, the philosopher Hannah Arendt formulates a different perception of conscience, what you might call ethics of conscience. In this view, conscience is a companion, not someone you will always be with but rather someone who is absent and whose presence is to be feared. This means that conscience is to be viewed as the opportunity for reflection on specific actions or on non-reflected-on views and routines in everyday life. It is obvious that most people wish to live without a bad conscience, but it is equally obvious that the precondition for wanting to live without is awareness of the

phenomenon in the first place. Human beings who are unfamiliar with this inner dialogue with themselves – what Arendt refers to as thinking – would not be averse to contradiction themselves, either in words or action. The process of thinking is fragile, and by consequence the formation of a conscience as a by-product of thinking acquires a similar kind of fragility.

## THE ART OF FINDING THE MIDDLE GROUND

The traditional view of conscience is of a general inner reason that we could all rely on being obeyed in the same way. The new notion of conscience is far more fragile and far more dependent on reflection. Or, as the philosopher Lars-Henrik Schmidt puts it, we live at a time when traffic-lights morals have given way to roundabout ethics. As a result, we are compelled at all times to take stock of the situation and observe the behaviour of the other. For we cannot blindly trust that the early childhood educator will have internalised the regulations of the institution and follows them conscientiously the way we dutifully used to respect traffic lights. Actually, we no longer wish to. What we want is a thoughtful way of exercising care for the individual that is conscious of the specific context, because a diagnosis of the present time tells us that we live in the era of individuality, an era in which individuals may have some value in themselves but do not see any reason to justify themselves in terms of a universal concept such as humankind. The most ‘universal’ today is the general agreement that we are all different individuals. “We are all different, we are all individuals, we are all of equal importance,” we say in unison. We might say – once again with reference to BUPL’s ethical basis – that all individuals must be recognized, tolerated and respected by early childhood educators, and that this must be done through a form of intervention that respects equality. Naturally, this means that in roundabouts, too, we come across predictable behaviour, including comparable ways of intervening, but the educator must constantly be prepared for situations developing differently from what she is expecting. And, above all, the educator must be able to explain why she took a different course of action than her usual approach. She needs to be able to justify her actions as a professional person. By giving her reasons, the educator reflects on whether she placed too much or too little emphasis on this or that element in the specific situation.

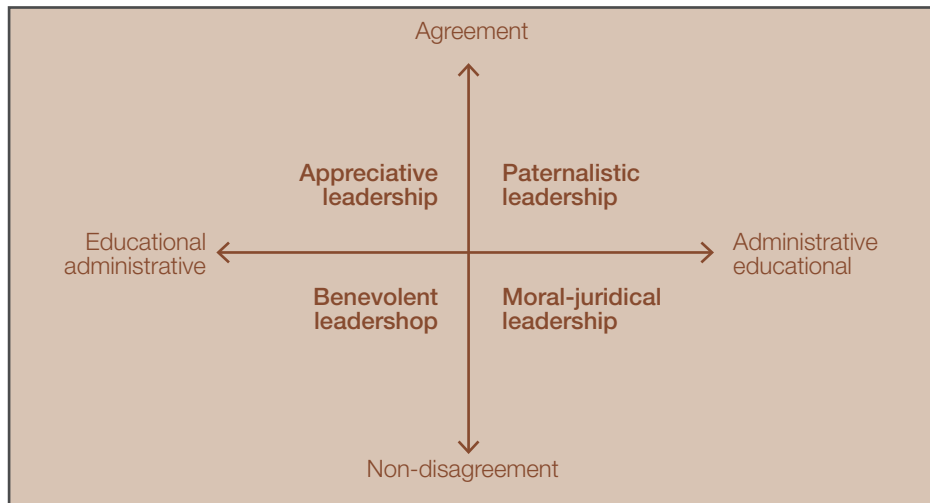
Professional ethics is about deciding when something is too much or too little. In his book ‘Ethics without morals – The good human being in the postmodern society’, the sociologist Ole Bjerg traces this definition of ethics to Aristotle, like him contrasting ethics with morals. According to Ole Bjerg Aristotle thought that, in contrast to moral decisions, ethical decisions are not made formally but only emerge out of practice – in the specific situation. And in this context ethics becomes a matter of finding the middle ground, i.e. being able, in the specific situation, to decide what is too much and what is too little. The problem that we are facing today, however, is ‘just’ that we do not know what is virtuous in advance, and consequently we are not able to determine what would be doing too much or too little.

On the contrary, the challenge is to practice taking stock of situations, i.e. to practice the ability to be attentive in the particular situation and get a sense of what is going on. We are talking about a kind of character formation, the educator's ability to exercise care. Does the specific educator actually like children? Does the educator have the reserves of energy also for this particular impossible child? Is she, in other words, sufficiently professional to appear as polite and helpful to a person she may not like? Is the educator able to take into account the financial, educational, political, emotional aspects of her actions – and to do so in a balanced sort of way? In this way, ethics involves both professional techniques, such as attentiveness to personal strengths and the importance of weaknesses in acting appropriately in specific contexts. But does this not imply a form of professional ethics that places a considerable degree of responsibility on the individual educator? This depends on the type of conscience leadership and profession-ethical leadership implemented in the institutions.

#### FOUR LEADERSHIP STYLES

My starting point is that four leadership styles are in operation at the moment, and that these four styles produce different types of conscience formation. I am referring to appreciative leadership, paternalistic leadership, moral-juridical leadership and benevolent leadership, see figure 1.<sup>(2)</sup>

FIGURE 1



My contention is that we live in a time that primarily favours a professional ethic promoted by different types of leadership ethics in contrast to the two morality-based leadership styles – the paternalistic and the moral-judicial. Secondly, there is a struggle for dominance among the four styles. Below is a presentation of the four leadership styles: the appreciative, the paternalistic, the moral-judicial and the benevolent.

### **APPRECIATIVE LEADERSHIP – APPRECIATION GENERATES A GOOD CONSCIENCE**

Appreciative leadership may allow for early childhood educators to take responsibility for the provision of care to the children. In other words, this type of leadership allows the educator the latitude for self-regulation and self-leadership. This is done in the conviction that good working conditions for the educator will allow her to perform her duties conscientiously and in a satisfactory manner. This link between the head educator and the employee rests on two preconditions. One is that leadership will provide the required and structural conditions for a professional and ethically justifiable exercise of care. The other precondition is that the individual employee is of a kind and caring disposition that, given the right conditions, will blossom to the benefit of the clients. The consequence of lack of appreciation will be lack of professional self-esteem for the educator, or a feeling of shame and bad conscience about one's own inadequacy in the provision of care. This feeling of inadequacy may develop into actual resignation, in contrast to the commitment that may be linked to self-esteem. Basically, this type of leadership may be associated with a social-liberal type of leader who is most concerned with relinquishing responsibility rather than accepting it for the purpose of ensuring that the opportunities provided will be fulfilled in a responsible way. In other words, it is in danger of becoming a type of leadership that may degenerate into an actual phasing out of leadership or a blurring of responsibilities. Many employees will probably concur that appreciative leadership means cessation of leadership, once the leader has given the employees freedom and responsibility in the performance of their tasks and, with that, the opportunity for putting their personal stamp on things – making a difference. A disadvantage may be that to some employees the freedom equals absence of sparring with colleagues and leadership. In such cases you might hear an employee say: 'We are working with professional ethics. We are each of us doing it in our own way'. A possible consequence of this is that the educator's individual responsibility becomes very large, and that too much is left to the self-defined conscience of the individual employee.

### **PATERNALISTIC LEADERSHIP – CONSCIENCE IS SURE OF ITSELF**

Paternalistic leadership assumes responsibility by intervening in the individual's sense of self – for their own good. At times this may happen against the early childhood educator's own will, and in such cases the legitimacy of the intervention is a matter of the paternalistic

leader knowing better what is in the interests of the educator concerned. We know the paternalistic leader as being characterised by an external 'exterior' but also by an internal 'exterior'.<sup>(3)</sup> A classic example of an external exterior is the pastoral leadership of Catholicism. The Catholic priest is better informed about God's observation of man than the ordinary person. For the same reason, people may contact their local Catholic priest to confess their sins and receive spiritual guidance. An equally classic example is Immanuel Kant's previously mentioned notion of conscience. To him conscience is not an exterior compulsion but a stable, unequivocal and internal general reason. The strength of the paternalistic perspective is that it expresses a will to assume responsibility for others. In principle, the paternalistic worry – the paralysed will – about not intervening is alien to this perspective. Basically, this type of leadership may be associated with a leader who is inclined towards socialism; someone who is mostly concerned with taking the responsibility for others and who is so convinced about the strength of her own solutions that other views are precluded. The weakness, consequently, is that the paternalistic leader may be too self-assured, too sure about the rightness of her decisions, and for that reason may demand uniformity of educational intervention with reference to her own superior knowledge. In other words, it is possible to listen too much to the voice of the general conscience, incarnated, for example, in the voices of the experienced early childhood educators: 'I'm just doing my job as I was told to'. As a consequence, new employees are obliged to 'feel their way about', but an awakened conscience demands openness to new perspectives. Otherwise we will drown out any independent sense of the complexity of a situation. And complexity and dilemmas do exist. At least, many employees in early childhood education experience grey areas, cases of doubt, uncertainty and perhaps even disagreement among the employees as to whether they have a duty to exercise care in specific situations or should rather respect a right of self-determination.

### **MORAL-JURIDICAL LEADERSHIP – THE INNOCENT ORGANISATION**

The leader whose style of leadership is based on legislation and natural moral law grants the employees – and herself – certain formalised possibilities for action. This is done in the shape of laws, government regulations, local guidelines and procedures to which the exercise of care must conform. Therefore, within this perspective it is possible to speak of being part of a well-guided organisation, characterised by a totality of coherent, legally and morally defined scopes for action. From this emerges the innocent organisation, whose staff fails to take the lead in terms of establishing the premises for local and context-related decisions. As a result the staff will be able to justify their intervention, or lack of same, by reference to external – legal – requirements. In contrast to the Kantian notion of conscience as the seat of general principles of reason, conscience in this case is a feeling. And a feeling of good conscience is achieved by acting in accordance with the legal and moral basis. This feeling of good conscience is possible with a liberal leader who defines fulfilment of our

responsibility as allowing well-defined possibilities for following the rules and procedures to which the clients, i.e. the children, are legally entitled.

The strength of this perspective is that it may reduce a high level of fear among employees by determining whether the individual educator is on legal or illegal ground with respect to the exercise of a specific intervention. For the child, the strength lies in the well-defined and specific rights that guarantee against neglect of care and intimidating behaviour of the professional caregiver. However, the risk of this type of leadership is that it produces a desire for innocence. You might ask: Is it ethically justifiable always to think about being on the right side of the law? Will there be an ethical problem if the notion of professional ethics turns into professional law? The risk is that the feeling of good conscience gets into conflict with an action imperative and pressure of time in the particular situation by which the professional may be governed. Also, the thought of constantly having to observe very operational rules and procedures may set aside a certain freedom of interpretation on the part of the early childhood educators. Because, it goes without saying that a child will be disappointed and angry if the educator shows too little interest in him or her and pays too much attention to the rules. It is non-disagreement about the rules that must be the ambition, or rather that the rules must be applied based on "insight, understanding and empathy contributing to practical judgements that concentrate the professional ethic in the specific situation".<sup>(4)</sup>

## **BENEVOLENT LEADERSHIP – EMBARRASSEMENT IMPEDES GENEROSITY**

Benevolent leadership<sup>(5)</sup> assumes responsibility for providing opportunities. This means that the leader will accept responsibility for 'the other' but will not take away responsibility from that 'other'. The other person is not confined to obeying or agreeing with the leadership about everything. The leader is well disposed towards the employee within certain organisational values and boundaries, such as they emerge through a coherent educational strategy, including a rationale of professional ethics or a pledge to provide care. I intend to demonstrate the consequences of this type of leadership for the self-leadership and conscience formation of early childhood educators by comparison with the previous types of leadership.

First of all, it should be noted that whereas appreciative leadership requires mutuality, benevolent leadership is associated with a requirement of generosity. This means that if a leader assumes responsibility for providing good opportunities, it is expected that the employee will take this opportunity to assume a responsibility that may be acknowledged. The benevolent leader, on the other hand, accepts the responsibility for creating a comprehensive organisational picture, but there is no pre-expectation that everyone will agree. Because the ethic of benevolent leadership is an ethic of renunciation borne by the notion of non-disagreement. This may be translated into a requirement that the employee is able

to acquaint herself with impulses from the outside, from colleagues and leaders, in order to see herself from their perspective, but also for the employees to be able to see and act, whenever a situation requires the ability to see something they were unable to see.<sup>(6)</sup> This is liberal-socialist leadership that assumes the responsibility for providing opportunities – including opportunities for independently assuming responsibility and for justifying your way of doing that. In other words, there is a demand that the individual professional person must assume responsibility for the rightness of his or her actions. The ideal objective for this fourth perspective may be stated as follows: "Act in such a way that you can/would want to repeat your action".<sup>(7)</sup> The acknowledgement is in the repetition. Conversely, this means that the precondition for this perspective is that the professional educator would regret her action and refrain from repeating it as it would be too embarrassing. In other words, good care depends on the educator's ability to feel shame and bad conscience. Another consequence is that the management must insist on and offer the individual educator possibilities for practicing how to motivate intervention – that is to say: the management must insist on a compulsory requirement of reflection. Among other things, this means being able to explain in public why her conscience prompted her to deviate from standard practice in comparable situations. So, we might say to a leader: "Never hire an early childhood educator who is unable to get a bad conscience, and never organize your institution in such a way that you and your employees will not exercise reflective attention with respect to the institution".

Secondly, it is a fact that benevolent leadership is in contrast to both paternalistic leadership and moral-judicial leadership as both these perspectives place obstacles in the way of the educators reflective attention. As mentioned, the ideal of the reflective educator is inspired by the philosopher Hannah Arendt, who claims that clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality, i.e. against the demand for reflective attention.<sup>(8)</sup> It is not because of any fundamental reason to be against formal rules or against taking the advice of others. On the contrary, it gives the advantage of speed, and it prevents the exhaustion that we would all end up feeling if everything and everyone were entitled to reflective attention. Nevertheless, Arendt warns against the absence of reflection as such – not least because she links reflective attention to conscience. To Arendt reflection activates consciousness in a two-to-one relation as you are carrying on a silent dialogue with yourself. The by-product of this is conscience and the ability to judge. In other words, Arendt warns that the handling of rules comes to represent non-reflective routine attitudes. On the other hand she believes that reflective attention is an expression of an awakened conscience that does not ignore the cries for attention of care, which may require suspension of the rules or their standard interpretation. But is that really all? Will Arendt's conscience take care of everything? Is it this conscience that provides early



childhood educators with resourcefulness and judgment, enabling them to avoid being too much or too little in their concrete exercising of care? Unfortunately it is not that simple.

### CONCLUSION: EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS MUST BE FAMILIAR WITH POWERLESSNESS – THEIR OWN AND THAT OF OTHERS

The article began with the assertion that confidence in the spontaneous early childhood educator had been weakened. Now at the end of the chapter, we may ask ourselves if there is any good reason to have greater faith in the reflective early childhood educator with an awakened conscience. Is it not true that a educator with a large superego is more resourceful than the reflective ego we may associate with the idea of the reflective educator? Might the educator actually reflect her resourcefulness to death?

Reflection is negativity that leads to 'nay saying'. Rather than guide us in our actions, reflection paralyses us. In the familiar phrase we stop and think. In this way thinking, or reflection, seems to disturb normal activities by creating doubts and putting up 101 question marks in front of established truths. This means that the reflectively attentive educator will not lose contact with the surrounding world, because it is represented in all his or her reflections. But these reflections need a space – one that 'saves' them from the paralysing deliberations which are always ambiguous – for the purpose of constitution of a revitalised, resourceful identity. It is therefore a matter of creating a public arena – a common world – that promotes attention to the skills and techniques educators must possess in order to put up resistance to acting wrongly. That requires courage. On the one hand, reflective attention is precisely courageous attention incarnated in an individual who comes forward and stands by her reflections. On the other hand, it requires social resources and forms of organisation that provide the space to think out loud and to share your thoughts about your doubts. Profession-based ethical leadership needs to pursue the best possible balance between the individual and the shared – between the individual person's conscientious reflections and appreciation of his or her relevance in a profession-based ethical community. Balance is always difficult to achieve. For that reason it often turns into a notion of embarrassment. For it is far easier to point to what is unbalanced, and what constitutes too much or too little in the actions of early childhood educators. So why focus on that? Because remedying the powerlessness that educators experience by being too much or too little is the precondition for a strengthening of resourcefulness in profession-ethical terms. Why does it not just take place through appreciative – positive – leadership ethics? Because there is a need for a leadership that allows the employees to know their own powerlessness, not just their strengths. Focus on recognition of employees' strengths risks contributing to promoting the idea that care is about caring for the strengths of children of equal standing rather than about relieving powerlessness. This claim is based on the belief that the precondition for recognising the powerlessness of another human being,

and contributing to relieving it, is your own familiarity with powerlessness, and recognising that the powerlessness of another person is closely linked to the early childhood educator's similar familiarity with powerlessness. And this powerlessness, strange as it may sound, is a strong foundation for helping those that need help.

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1. Schmidt 1999a: 183

2."When managing educational processes in early childhood and youth services, you may focus more on either the educational-administrative or the administrative-educational (horizontal axis, CH).

This is not a question of either one or the other, merely one of focusing more on one than the other, and you are not free to choose. You are chosen by, or perhaps called by, the situation. It is a matter of a focus determined by the situation. In your leadership style you may be prepared to decide or settle matters for the purpose of reaching agreement – or you may lean on non-disagreement.

It goes without saying that the latter is not the same as dissenting opinions. It may merely be a question of yet to be discovered disagreement." (Schmidt 1999c: 155-56)

3. Andersen and Born 2005, p. 97

4. Christoffersen 2005, p. 71

5. Schmidt 2000, p. 312

6. Sløk 2008,p. 101

7. Schmidt 1991a,p. 183

8. Arendt 1998 1971,p. 91



# 4 SECURING QUALITY THROUGH PROCEDURES OR THROUGH TRUST IN PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENT?

How can a common ethical foundation serve as a leverage for professional judgment among early childhood educators?



**BY KAREN PRINS**

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**The trend towards developing ethical codes in educational work is detectable in many Western countries. This chapter discusses from a Danish perspective how Britain – with its far more advanced ethical manualisation – may serve as an afterthought rather than as an ideal. In Britain ethics is used as a tool for regulation. A form of regulation that accentuates the view that quality and protection of children are achieved through procedure rather than through confidence in the professional staff. Against this background it is argued that the qualities of Danish early childhood education should instead be based on trust in professional judgment.**

**”** *Ethics is a key part of early childhood education, and, by consequence, reflections on ethical matters become quite central to the educational work. Ethics is about being in dialogue with each other”.*<sup>(1)</sup>

With these words BUPL (The Danish Union of Early Childhood and Youth Educators) introduces its discussion paper on a common ethical basis for early childhood educators. Likewise, over the past ten years other Danish welfare professions – social workers, school teachers, nurses and social welfare workers – have launched a similar process or have already adopted a profession’s ethic. In other words, there seems to be a trend in the modern strategies of welfare professions towards formulating an ethical basis. The quotation stresses that it is the reflection upon ethical questions and the dialogue about them

that are key to early childhood education. This is in contrast to ethical definitions and guidelines pointing out how to act – correctly – in practice. The question is then how the establishment of an ethical basis for early childhood education may contribute to ensuring such reflection and dialogue. Among other things, a common ethical basis must address questions about challenges facing the profession and concrete reality.

## WILL STANDARDISATION GUARANTEE QUALITY?

” All staff meetings were used to talk about various demands and contracts from the local authorities, such as delegation of responsibilities for language testing, child environment evaluations etc.. More often than not we ran out of time, so we didn't get round to talking about children and other relevant subjects that we also needed to focus on.”<sup>(2)</sup> The quotation, which is from the reflections on the internship of a student of early childhood education, is an example of the reality of early childhood educators and the fundamental changes that early childhood services in Denmark have gone through in recent years. Corporate plans, annual plans, curricula, language tests, child environment evaluations etc. in addition to a general demand for documentation and evaluation are all examples of public management tools affecting both what the educators are spending their time on, in quite concrete terms, as well as affecting the view of what constitutes quality in early childhood education.<sup>(2a)</sup>

As it is, early childhood educators are only spending half their working hours on being with the children and communicating with their parents. The rest of the time is spent on administration, coordination and documentation.<sup>(3)</sup> Especially the work on curricula is time consuming and, also, it is frequently this task that takes up a large part of the documentation work. The curricula contribute to demonstrating to parents, local authorities – and the public at large – the importance of the work carried out by early childhood educators: ”Look, they are learning a lot, they are not just playing”. Another important feature of the curricula-related documentation work is to show how the early childhood educators perform their duties: ”Look, we are not just minding children at play. We contribute to ensuring very important learning during the children's early years”. In this way the curricula contribute to creating a, perhaps necessary, visibility round the profession and its importance for society. In general, the management tools and what is documented, evaluated, assessed and reported contributes to the construction of what becomes important, as this is what the early childhood educators must make certain to address, since this is what will be communicated to the surrounding world. At the same time, an avalanche of templates, tools, models and inspirational catalogues are being issued from local authorities, agencies etc. All of it, not merely to support the institutions in implementing the various initiatives, but also very much to ensure the production of comparable information, subsequently to be viewed as knowledge about the quality of early childhood education.<sup>(4)</sup> Forms and templates will help the educators accomplish their tasks. However, at the same time they contribute to

fencing in what is most important – what must be focused on – in such a way that it fits into the formats. For instance: What questions need to be asked in the child environment evaluation? How are the answers to be written into the questionnaires? Etc.? The element of control, therefore, lies not least in the format of the questionnaires and the reporting forms used, which like the conclusions may be used to communicate what is good and what works, and thereby setting standards for what is best and right. Parents, local authorities and other interested parties may form an impression of the institutions by visiting their web pages – in which corporate plans and curricula constitute a part of the institution's narrative about itself in addition to photo documentation of everyday activities and practical information to parents. A number of institutions also choose to post child environment evaluations and emoticon reports, so that we can all see how things are going and whether we are getting value for our money. Apparently, the idea that it is possible to form a picture of reality through various tools of documentation and evaluation is alive and well. And when the authorities attempt to guarantee the quality of early childhood education through standardisation and by disseminating knowledge of what works, this is reflected in the culture of the early education services – as it is everywhere else in the public sector.

## ROOM FOR IMAGINATION, RECOGNITION AND LIVE WIRES

The challenges, for the staff, consist of matching reality to the educators' professional attitudes, which are, broadly speaking, partly based on the basic values of progressive education concerning play, imagination, growth, nature etc., which are important for children's development into whole persons, partly on psychological theories on development that see relations between the very competent children and between children and adults as crucial to children's confidence, well-being and development, and last but not least on humanist ideals about children as individuals with their own rights and entitlement to recognition of their own experiences of meaningfulness.

To exaggerate a bit, perhaps, Danish early childhood educators must try to create a connection between, on the one hand, a recognition of children as rational and learning educational projects and, on the other, a more cultural awareness of children as indomitable, unpredictable, ungovernable, impressionable, enterprising, fun and cheeky and strangely subtle from a grownup perspective. Proof that the latter view has dominated so far, may be found in the names given to groups of children or 'classrooms': the young trolls, the live wires, the octopuses, the pranksters, the happy little monkeys, the grasshoppers etc. The variety is infinite. Incidentally, in a Danish context you wouldn't find group names with associations to something well-known, something predictable, tamed, boring, well-adjusted and with a clear utility value, names that include animals like dogs, chickens or cows. It must be difficult to make plans for pranksters, grasshoppers and live wires as they rarely behave in predictable ways. Also, it is not necessarily easy to document their

learning. Differently put, there is no shortage of challenges and it is definitely necessary for educators to reflect on and discuss ethics across management tools, educational projects and grasshoppers.

## AN INTERNATIONAL TREND

Professional organisations that establish common ethical definitions, codices or ethical pledges are not just a trend in Denmark but an international phenomenon that, based in the professions' international umbrella organisations, crystallize into national ethical statements. Thus, the great majority of national organisations within the field of social work initially refer to the ethical principles of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW)<sup>(5)</sup> which in combination with the UN's Human Rights Declaration constitutes the value base for the national declarations.<sup>(6)</sup> Despite the common general foundations, however, the national professional organisations differ greatly in terms of how they formulate their professional ethics. The codices or declarations of principles range from a general level of principles in keeping with the focus of international organisations on values to more concrete action instructions or moral injunctions on ethically correct practices. Some national organisations have adopted an ethical pledge that members have to make and live up to. Also, there are great differences with respect to length and level of detail. However, in general the organisations tend to start out with something brief and general to be expanded, on their first revision, by longer and more detailed documents with concrete instructions for action taking up more and more space.<sup>(7)</sup>

## A GLANCE AT BRITAIN – IDEAL OR BOGEY?

Turning to Britain. Since 2002 the social workers' organisation British Association of Social Work (BASW) has had an ethical codex. Also, the organisation has acquired extensive experience of acting in a public sector where comprehensive implementation of New Public Management principles and 30 years of neo-liberal-inspired politics has transformed the welfare state into a welfare market. The question is whether a glance at the British experience is a glance at what awaits us in the future, whether it is an ideal to be pursued or perhaps rather a bogey that calls for reflection?

In the introduction BASW describes the ethical codex:

**”** *The primary objective of the Association's Code of Ethics is to express the values and principles which are integral to social work, and to give guidance on ethical practice.*”<sup>(8)</sup>

So, already the introduction shows that the British ethical code is not content with just having ethical principles but includes principles on how social workers are to implement ethical practise. The set of codes initially consists of five basic ethical values: human dignity and worth, social justice, service to humanity, integrity and competence, relying very much on

IFSW's ethical values. Accompanying each of the five values is a set of duties that social workers must perform in practice in order to comply with the specific value, for instance:

Value:

”Every human being has intrinsic value. All persons have a right to well-being, to self-fulfilment and to as much control over their own lives as is consistent with the rights of others.” Duties: ” Show respect for all persons, and respect service users’ beliefs, values (...).Safeguard and promote service users’ dignity, individuality, rights, responsibilities and identity.”<sup>(9)</sup>

Or:

Value:

”Social justice.” Duties: ”Social workers have a duty to (...) use their power and authority in ways which serve humanity, using participatory and open processes to enable service users to realise their aims as far as possible, taking account of the relevant interests of others.”

After the section on values and duties follows a longer section on practice guidelines with 59 specific instructions for compliance. Among other things, the guidelines aim at solving some of the dilemmas that social workers may find themselves in, such as being in possession of confidential knowledge, having to protect the rights of others, identifying citizens’ needs as needs they are not themselves able to fulfil, or include rules on the relationship between private and professional spheres, such as: ’ Not to enter into an intimate or sexual relationship with a former service user without careful consideration of any potential for exploitation, taking advice as appropriate’.<sup>(10)</sup>

Thus, BASW’s ethical codes, basically range from ethical values and principles on the one hand and, and on the other, specific injunctions – also of a moral nature – aimed at regulating the concrete behaviour of social workers in practice and solving, in advance, dilemmas that might occur.<sup>(11)</sup>

Already in its objective, the difference to BUPL’s proposal seems clear, because ethical practice guidelines are fundamentally different from the desire for reflection and dialogue.

## RELIANCE ON PROCEDURES OR CONFIDENCE IN PROFESSIONALS?

A crucial management tool in the British public sector is the government-regulated practice code that covers the entire welfare field. The code has been prepared by the General Social Care Council (GSCC),<sup>(12)</sup> which is also responsible for registration and re-registration of social workers who, at five-year intervals, must show that they observe the guidelines of



the codes. The register is open access, so anyone can check whether specific employees live up to the standards.<sup>(13)</sup> The codes of practice is a large and comprehensive document that provides a detailed description of professional conduct, such as 'good at keeping time'.<sup>(14)</sup> In addition, all employers within the field of social services and early childhood education are obliged to ensure implementation and observance of the codes among employees. The purpose of the codes of practice is to ensure that social workers realise what minimum standards of conduct and concrete action they are expected to follow; that the employers are aware of their responsibilities and their role in the regulation of the workforce; and that the service users and members of the public in general understand how a social worker should act.<sup>(15)</sup> The codes of practice, thus, play a very considerable role in terms of regulating the work of social workers in practice as well as an important role in terms of enabling the public to evaluate whether the social workers are fulfilling their duties. In connection with a Birmingham case that ended with the death of a child, two social workers were convicted of dereliction of duty based on the codes of practice.<sup>(16)</sup> At the same time, it is paradoxical that the investigation of another tragic case in Britain, in which a child was subjected to extensive abuse over a long period, ending in the death of the child, specifically concluded that one of the reasons seems to have been that the professionals dealing with the case failed to take a good look at the child, being instead more concerned with procedural compliance.<sup>(17)</sup> Nevertheless, each and every child case in Britain has resulted in increased public demand for better and safer procedures in an attempt to neutralise the dilemmas completely, based on the view that it is possible to reach an unequivocally right decision in each situation. This should also be seen in the light of the generally low level of education characterising the field. By far the majority of those who work on a daily basis with children and young people have either a very short education – or none at all.

The British early education sector is fundamentally differently organized than the Danish, for one thing because children already begin school at the age of four. There are 12.5 hours of free preschool education for children between three and four in addition to a number of highly different private and public childcare services for young children, varying much in terms of hours and quality. For most of these very high user fees are charged. For instance, the fee asked by Brambles Nursery, a public institution, is so high that the trained staff would not be able to afford enrolling their own children.

The work with the children is the responsibility of educators who are specialists in early childhood education, assisted by unskilled assistants and regulated by the national curricula for children from birth to the age of five,<sup>(18)</sup> describing which 115 learning goals the children must reach within a year and precisely how the professionals should act, document and evaluate. Only twenty per cent of activities may be directly adult controlled, the rest of the time the adults are to organize learning environments for and document the progress of the children.

”After being welcomed, the children are led into their respective group rooms, where adults are ready to receive them. The rooms are organized according to their function, inviting the children to engage in different types of activities and different forms of learning. The first room is prepared for various activities involving water and sand. The children are given aprons and arrange themselves around a table with a sandbox in the middle. They start digging and shaping animals with the tools provided. The member of staff is sitting on a chair in the middle of the room with his/her observation chart, making detailed notes to record what the children are doing, e.g. whether they turn their heads as a reaction to sounds, react attentively to approaches from other children, form castles with their hands etc.”<sup>(19)</sup>

On top of this comes other control tools in the form of special policies, action areas etc. that have followed in the wake of the mentioned child cases and the enormous political focus. These must also be implemented in practice, among them the extensive child protection policy.<sup>(20)</sup> Like the rest of the school system, the zero to five sector (including day carers, day nurseries, residential care units etc.) is monitored by the Ofsted inspection institute, which publishes its inspection reports on the Internet for all to see how individual institutions are doing in the evaluations. The perception of quality and how to ensure it is embedded in clear principles, precise action instructions and concrete expectations of the individual social worker and in unambiguous objectives. Thus, the public is able to contribute to keeping up the quality by being entitled to complain when things are not going the way they wish to see them go. The regulation reinforces the view that quality and protection of children is a matter of procedure and not of confidence in the professionals.

### **OBSESSED BY FEAR AND MINIMISING RISK**

The professional work with children and young people in the UK, whether it is carried out by social workers or preschool teachers is very much affected by cultural perceptions of children and young people as being on the one hand very vulnerable and potentially always in danger, and on the other hand as being potentially violent, antisocial and dangerous to others. As Tim Gully, senior lecturer at University of Winchester, puts it: ”We are completely obsessed with protecting children against everything we can imagine happening to them”<sup>(21)</sup> An obsession leading to more procedures and safety systems. One example is the so-called touching policies, or rules regarding the touching of children. According to a study from Manchester Metropolitan University, the worry about paedophilia and the ensuing risks of charges and accusations against employees make schools and institutions completely abandon touching children. Instead they teach the children how to put on a plaster themselves and make sure to get the parents’ permission if the children need to be rubbed with sunscreen.<sup>(22)</sup> In practice it is seen by employees within the field as illegal to touch children, because visiting Ofsted inspectors advise them not to – just to be on the

safe side.<sup>(23)</sup> The alternative is a so-called active touching policy for the increasing number of institutions that believe it is detrimental to the children's well-being and learning if you refrain from all physical contact with them. The solution then becomes to describe touching down to the smallest detail as a professional method to be approved by parents' committees and parents: Why are we touching? When? Who? Etc. An active touching policy ensures that you are never alone with a child; that you make sure to change children's napkins in public for all to see what is going on etc. No one need be in doubt about what to do, and the employees will not have to think for themselves.<sup>(24)</sup>

The entire system appears to be based on mistrust in the professionals, perhaps even on fear of the dark sides of human beings in general. The more policies, guidelines, action instructions etc. that tell the professional what is suitable and what is not, the more the employees' own ability to make moral judgments and to judge the intentions of others based on, what is actually going on, is being undermined.<sup>(25)</sup> Mistrust begets uncertainty and worry, which again leads to extra focus on ensuring that the relevant procedures have been complied with, as well as creates a demand from within the profession for greater clarity and more detailed procedures to cover your back and to hedge against all criticism.

## FROM WELFARE STATE TO MARKET WELFARE

It is paradoxical that such radical government control is the result of 30 years of neoliberal-inspired policies that ideally were all about reducing public sector growth and government interference in people's lives in general. Concurrently with this, the British welfare state has been fundamentally changed into a welfare market whose purpose has developed from providing a safety net for the weak over the creation of a common good to its present function as a safety net under the ability to compete. As a consequence, the tasks of welfare professions increasingly become a matter of carrying out government agendas aimed at ensuring the competences of the workforce, which is a common development trait among modern Western welfare states, according to Walter Lorenz.<sup>(26)</sup> A key element of the welfare market is outsourcing to private organizations, NGOs etc. as well as transfer of public funds to pools from which providers apply for funds in competition with other providers, public as well as private. Public funds are a service which is much in demand. The organizations that are able to offer the best service at the lowest rate will win the funds and hence the right to supply the service in question. This means that the organisations must spend time and effort profiling themselves on certain methods, producing results and on applying for funding for specific activities and subsequently reporting to the donors.

”Later in the head educator’s office we get a glimpse of the documentation folders for each child. In these folders the many entries and jottings are collected and organised for each child and with respect to each of the learning goals. The child’s progress is noted and development points are stressed, all of which are assessed in terms of the so-called Stepping Zones of the national curricula. The head educator then hastily talks about the work of establishing the associated Sure Start Centre for exposed families, which is part of the Government’s plan to improve the schooling of exposed children, and to provide the funds to run the activities. The school is guaranteed a basic amount, but beyond that it must apply for additional funding from private and public sources in competition with other preschools, NGOs and private schools. She cannot spend much time on us as she has to hurry out the door to a meeting with the local administration, actually about additional funding for a special project. One of the criteria for being eligible for funding is to be able to display good result in terms of the learning goals of the national curriculum.”<sup>(27)</sup>

### IS THERE ANY ROOM FOR ETHICS?

There isn’t much time to think about BASW’s ethical codes on human dignity and social justice in such a thoroughly organised bureaucracy, whose primary goal for the professional work is easily lost sight of, in favour of maintenance of plans, compliance with budgets and observance of codes of practice and procedures. Nor are there many situations in which the professional is expected to exercise professional judgment. Rather, it would appear that individual judgment is perceived as a threat to quality and safety. Actually, as Stephanie Petrie writes,<sup>(28)</sup> there is a big need for social workers to take the principle of advocacy much more seriously, considering the consequences of the present evolution of the welfare state towards increasing poverty and social exclusion. According to BASW’s ethical codes social workers should: “Bring to the attention of those in power and the general public, and where appropriate challenge ways in which the policies or activities of government, organisations and society create or contribute to structural disadvantage, hardship and suffering and militate against their relief.”<sup>(29)</sup> But they have failed to do that. Instead, social workers have been busy following the clear rules and routines, ensuring that the listed indicators are observed, and fulfilling their role in the welfare market. In this way there is imminent risk that they will be abandoning a professional identity simply by participating in the maintenance of the paradigm of the welfare market. In the words of Stephanie Petrie the ethical codes are as useful as a chocolate teapot.<sup>(30)</sup>

### SO WHAT IS TO BE LEARNED?

Experience from Britain shows that ethical codes are not worth much in themselves and that ethical considerations must be paired with possibilities for exercising judgment as a professional and as a human being with responsibility for doing the right thing in relation to others. In Denmark, early childhood educators still have room to manoeuvre and make a lot

of decisions on a daily basis, even if that room to manoeuvre feels changed and reduced. Curricula are still to be prepared locally in the individual early childhood service, based on the children's background and the educational principles of the individual service. Compared with the UK, there is still a good deal of confidence in, and expectations that, early childhood educators receiving the curricula themes will be able to set relevant goals for the learning of the children concerned and to establish a relevant framework around the learning to ensure that it takes place. Also, it is the services themselves that must carry out the child environment evaluations rather than an external inspectorate. Even if the increasing government control is heavily felt. In addition to considerable differences in the degree of bureaucratisation and manualisation, there is a clear difference in the way control is exercised. In the UK, the curriculum is national and the same for everyone. Like so many other things, it is imposed from the state, and the role of the individual employee is to comply with the directives in practice. In Denmark, the curriculum themes and the demand for documentation and evaluation also come from the state, of course. But in their compliance with the demand that they must produce a curriculum, the role of the employees is to set their own goals and establish their own methods of documentation and evaluation. In other words, there is still need for independently reflecting professionals. In their studies of differences between Denmark and the UK, Pat Petrie et al. specifically stress that the professionalism and ability to create a stimulating and safe social and physical environment of Danish early childhood educators and other employees is seen as the best guarantee for the well-being and safety of the child,<sup>(31)</sup> i.e. quality through professionals rather than quality through procedures. This difference is also found in the educational systems, where preschool teacher training in the UK is as thoroughly manualised as practice. In the Danish education of early childhood educators, reflection and development of critical awareness are still seen as key educational ideals, despite increasing top down control, as a result of the latest reform of the programme,<sup>(32)</sup> and, as in the rest of the educational system, possession of these qualities is still awarded with the highest grades.

Perhaps the basic skill of Danish early childhood educators, if such an entity can be identified, could ideally be defined as the ability to observe the group of children, collectively as well as individually, analyse the observations based on theory and experience, consider possible courses of action in view of the analysis and the desired goal and, based on access to a range of methods and activities, launch activities in an ethically responsible way. An independent, reflecting, responsible and active professional who constantly needs to think carefully and reflect on what benefits children and what is best to do. That is, if she has the time.

”It is difficult to find the time to talk about educational/pedagogical topics. The time set aside for this purpose are never spent on learning more about children and their development. Instead, we prioritise all the external demands from the authorities. I feel that both I and my colleagues are longing to discuss educational matters. We are getting worse at our jobs. As a result the assistants do not acquire the necessary basic knowledge about the importance of children’s development. And then there is the thing that if you get to influence and develop yourself and your work, you will feel happier and more committed, which will rub off on the children. I’m afraid that we are sacrificing our professionalism to curricula, documentation, pre-packaged systems etc. It is as if we are just swimming with the tide and the latest trends, and that no one is paying attention to research about children and their life in the services.”<sup>(33)</sup>

Apparently, there is a feeling that educational professionalism, understood as reflection on practice and knowledge about children’s development and contemporary institutionalised childhood, is not given much space anymore. That early childhood education requires discussion and reflection if you are to be good at it and happy about your job, and if you want to be a professional. And perhaps there is a risk of such a gradual deprofessionalisation of Danish early childhood educators, as was the case with social workers in the UK, if the increasing external control continues along the standardisation path – and the quality assurance path.

## ETHICS AND GOOD JUDGMENT

Is it possible to preserve critical reflection and healthy professional judgment if you have adopted a common ethical basis? Is it precisely the characteristic of being an ongoing discussion that makes it unadoptable? The philosopher Hannah Arendt suggests that good individual judgment is exercised precisely in the open space where people are engaged in dialogue with each other. The point of the dialogue is to make us wiser and more open to new perspectives, but it will lose its significance if its course is set towards adopting a common stance. <sup>(34)</sup> The formulation of a common ethical foundation by BUPL is an opportunity for reminding the members of the importance of ethics, and that ethical reflections are precisely – or should be – a key part of everyday working life. Especially, the emergence of the control paradigm and the scandals of recent years, involving a number of services that had completely deactivated all ethical reflection, call for the importance of ethical reflections. Therefore, it seems relevant to call for an ethical basis for early childhood education to be designed so as to invite continuous discussion. A common ethical basis must be a matter of principles to be used in context-specific ways based on reflection and judgment, rather than being a matter of specific moral injunctions on how to behave in specific situations.<sup>(36)</sup> Moreover, I suggest that the open, reflective space be preserved as an ideal, allowing reflection based on research and experience, but without labelling specific

programmes or methods as THE best practice, because they show evidence based on positivistic, scientific ideals. A basis that also reflects ideals and visions of the good life, the good human being and the good society, one that makes us ask ourselves: To what extent are we working to achieve our goals? This is to be seen as an alternative to British endeavours to completely remove the risk of doubt and the need to reflect. Another suggestion is that instead of allowing the copying machine to unleash a flood of manuals assigning ever more tasks to the educators, the local authorities should establish both collegial and external supervision as standard practice. Rather than spend time filling in more forms, the educators would be able to spend time gaining knowledge about their own practice and reflecting on such things as compassion, dignity and recognition in their encounter with children and their parents. Therefore, a common ethical basis for early education educators should also very much be about how to keep the debate on ethics alive.

Last, but not least, there is an important ideal to be inspired by from the UK, i.e. in BASW's principle that the social worker must point out negative consequences of the development of society for children, users and people in general, even if, as mentioned, the British social workers have not been 'tweeting' much in practice. Should it be part of early education educators' common ethical basis in the future, to articulate the problems of increasing inequality and unfair conditions for children, young and old to the authorities in charge? Are the educators public employees or are they the children's advocates? At any rate, a critical response to the paradigm of New Public Management and the neoliberal-inspired policy is needed.

### THE OPEN SPACE AS HALLMARK OF THE PROFESSION

A common ethical basis for early childhood professionals as for professionals in general, should be used actively to maintain that doubts about how to do the right thing in practice will always exist, and that this is precisely what characterises the welfare professions: that in principle each situation or challenge is unique and that the employees must use their professional judgment to reflect on what is right in the open field between science, experience, observations and normative ideals of what is best. Precisely this open space must be the hallmark of the profession and stands in contrast to one of the infatuations of the age – i.e. the obsession with so-called evidence-based knowledge.

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1. BUPL 2010
  2. Pia Svendsen (2010), student of early childhood education, on her internship in an early childhood institution
  - 2a. In Denmark 68% of all children between 0-2 yrs attend nursery, and 97% of Children between 3-5 yrs are in kindergarten in an average of 7 hrs. a day, 5 days a week(BUPL 2013). Almost all early education institutions (nursery/kindergarten) are public and run by local municipalities. Parents pay a monthly fee of approximately 25% of the cost. Low income families/single parents etc. pay a reduced fee according to their income.
  3. FOA 2010
  4. Andersen 2009
  5. International Federation of Social Workers
  6. Banks 2006
  7. According to Sarah Banks 8. BASW 2002
  9. BASW 2002
  10. BASW 2002
  11. Petrie 2009
  12. A government agency under the UK Ministry of Social Affairs. This was in 2012 followed by the Health and Care Professional Council and a new professional capability framework, that included a stronger focus on ethical reflections.
  13. [www.gsc.org.uk](http://www.gsc.org.uk)
  14. GSCC 2002, p. 2
  15. How a social worker should behave towards you. GSCC 2002
  16. Gully, 2010
  17. Lord Laming 2010
  18. Includes the first year in school, reception class
  19. Own diary notes from visit to Brambles Preschool, Portsmouth 2007
  20. The Children Act 2004, National Service Framework for Children, Young People and maternity Services (DCSF 2004), The Common Assessment Framework 2007 etc.
  21. Gully 2010
  22. Piper and Stronach 2008
  23. Piper and Stronach 2008
  24. See Skilts School, [www.skiltsschool.net](http://www.skiltsschool.net), among others
  25. Piper and Stronach 2008
  26. Lorenz 2006
  27. Own diary notes from visit to Brambles Preschool, Portsmouth 2005
  28. Petrie 2009
  29. BASW 2002
  30. Petrie 2009
  31. Pat Petrie et al. 2004
  32. For instance in the form of detailed descriptions of all courses, bureaucratisation of practical training, specification of ECTS for parts of modules, control of exams etc
  33. Sol Attas, early childhood educator at Trekroner Børnehus (early childhood service)
  34. See 'The Human Condition'
  35. Claus Holm uses Lars Henrik Schmidt's terms 'roundabout ethics' and 'situation-specific', where reflection and evaluation will determine how ethical principles are to be implemented in practice, and traffic light ethics, involving precise regulations of specific actions in practice.





# 5 ETHICS AS AN ALTERNATIVE?



**BY PETER ØSTERGAARD ANDERSEN**

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**The point of departure of this chapter is that, increasingly, early educational practice is contingent upon bureaucratic and system-administrative agendas, and that social interactions and relations are turned into units to be valued in the market. Through concrete, critical analysis of a book by Dahlberg and Moss, the author shows how it may be possible to establish an ethical alternative to the dominant rationale.**

Increasingly, evaluation, documentation and control are seen as bureaucratic and system-administrative requirements as well as limitations that stand in opposition to, and tend to suppress, the professionalism of early childhood educators. There is an attempt to control educational activities by setting goals and targets and by introducing all manner of testing activities. This has become clear through the introduction of educational curricula, language testing of children and child-environment evaluations. In this way, early childhood education almost becomes a matter of technique; a tool, primarily for achieving political and, especially, financial targets. The question is now whether alternative ethical and political statements and proposals will be able to exert any counter influence? In this context, alternative ethical and political proposals are about defining another perspective from which to articulate your ideas, i.e. a perspective that breaks with the one that currently dominates.

I intend to go about this task by presenting and discussing a specific, well-researched proposal for alternative ethical and political evaluation and action within the field of early childhood education based on Dahlberg and Moss' 'Ethics and Politics in Early Childhood Education'.<sup>(1)</sup> This book was chosen because it includes a number of clear and valuable analyses whose conclusions I generally support. At the same time, the authors place considerably greater emphasis on being generally descriptive and on discussing specific educational alternatives than I would prefer. Thus, I share with the authors a considerable part of the analytical and theoretical assumptions, but, apparently, Dahlberg and Moss see part of their task as going considerably further in the direction of what ought to be done, ideally speaking. On the one hand, that is interesting and valuable, on the other it gives rise to discussing a number of related factors. It may seem odd to us a book as take-off for the purpose of presenting and criticising it. However, I have chosen this ap-

proach, because it is expedient to build on the results of other researchers rather than inventing everything all over again. Furthermore, the position and reflection that this book epitomises are representative of something exemplary for this theme. Not only exemplary in terms of the substance of the theme, the potential strength of ethics, but also as regards the unfortunate tendency to move away from an analytical-descriptive mode in favour of a normative-prescriptive one, without reflecting on this change of perspective or on its practical implications.

In spite of discussions and critique of documentation, evaluation and the new forms of control, no well-researched alternatives to the dominant trend have been articulated in Denmark. The critique has primarily been a matter of defending existing traditions and has been based on assumptions or claims about the qualities of early childhood education, which in the encounter with new forms of control is weakened and repressed.<sup>(2)</sup> As against this, Dahlberg and Moss base their analysis on the claim that, historically, the societal reality has changed and that, consequently, early childhood education and its forms of control now exist within a changed societal reality.

The majority of Dahlberg and Moss' recommendations refer directly to early childhood education carried out in northern Italian municipalities, of which Reggio Emilia is the most well known and important. This has given Dahlberg and Moss access to extensive documentation of practice. However, they do appear conspicuously uncritical of this material and refrain from discussing it. This is one among several points that I wish to discuss following the presentation of their book.

## AN ETHICAL AND POLITICAL ALTERNATIVE

Dahlberg and Moss characterise society's currently dominant approach to early childhood education as being under the imprint of technology. The field has been conceptualised in instrumental ways with a view to producing predetermined and predictable targets and fulfilling them by means of the most efficient methods.<sup>(3)</sup> They suggest that in the past 200 years, a cognitive-instrumental form of rationality has dominated over other forms of rationality. Dahlberg and Moss believe that parts of the foundation underpinning this form of rationality are now eroding. This is going on while, at the same time, its position is more important than ever before. The age of modernity is almost over and is being replaced by postmodernity. It is this fact that prompts more intensive preoccupation with alternatives on the assumption that possibilities of potentially great practical importance will appear.

Dahlberg and Moss base their conclusions on the current dominance of technologically-oriented rationality, explaining that it is caused by the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism. They describe this form of capitalism as characterized by an indomitable pursuit of profit. Everything is reduced to a matter of economics and attempts are made to use an economic terminology for purposes of description and evaluation. This goes for human val-

ues, too, and for the relationship with children. The ideal is a market that allows everything to be reduced to the same formula, i.e. an economic one. The market is the place where the values are defined and realised.

Social interaction and relations are also turned into units to be valued in the market. In this way relations and relationships become contingent on the market. As a result they are influenced by the idea that it should be possible to describe them unambiguously, and that they should be predictable and assume a contract-like nature.

The market requires a suitable supply of subjects that are able to control their own subject construction to match the expectations of the market. This presupposes institutions that provide opportunities for this form of convenient subjectivization, including early childhood services. In this context, the discourses around the competent child with rights of its own develop in the direction of the autonomous child – individualistic, self-regulating and problem-solving – who as a consumer makes personal choices and must learn to be responsible for them.

With Dean (1999), Dahlberg and Moss stress that the subject must be formed, guided and influenced with a view to becoming a free subject who is able to handle the freedom, i.e. that the subject is ‘dominated into’ becoming free. The advanced liberal regimes, as they call the present state of the society, are functioning by means of instrumentally and technically oriented forms of practice. The subjects are created and controlled through a combination of decentralisation initiatives and a government that demands evaluations with a view to controlling, legitimising and reforming.

In Dahlberg and Moss’ perspective, it is assumed that the project of modernity to achieve rational control is at its zenith. This nourishes high hopes that it is possible to plan upbringing, education and learning based on instrumental reason, supported by precautionary thinking and information campaigns. However, there are many indications that several fields, including the field of early childhood and youth education, are very difficult, or even impossible, to control in this way. Also, it is reported that neoliberalism as ideology and general form of control is encountering increasing opposition. The idea of the autonomous subject may be perceived as increasingly unreliable in an uncertain world. Dahlberg and Moss argue that there are sufficient indications to suggest that the time is ripe to abandon the modernistic, rationalistic and instrumental form of rationality, characterised by uniformity and closedness, in favour of a postmodernistic rationality characterized by multiple perspectives and involving greater potential for defining and stressing ambivalences, the context bound and the transitional. With this changeabout in favour of diversity, ambiguity and uncertainty, a field of possibilities opens up to allow for considerations of the ethical and political practice, which is to replace instrumental rationality. It is important to stress that terms such as ambiguity and uncertainty are not to be perceived negatively or as indications that something is missing. With difficulties resulting from technological practice, a space for alternative, ethical and politically reflected practice opens up.

Dahlberg and Moss wish to discuss how to interpret the ambition to articulate and practice ethical visions in early childhood services. However, before doing that, they believe we must abandon the view of ethics as something universal. Based on a universal definition, it is possible to establish ethical guidelines that are independent of social and historical contexts and circumstances. The ethics may be articulated in a common set of rules, standards and principles, which are seen as relevant to all rationally thinking people. Ethics, in other words, is universal in the sense that it is imagined to apply to all, irrespective of historical, geographical and social position and interests. It is articulated without being consciously linked to any specific, well-defined perspective.

## A POSTMODERN ETHIC

In the existing capitalist system, a characteristic of ethical relations is an attempt to establish a balance between the rights and duties of the individual. It is attempted to define what is to be seen as right, good and normal by a super-individual authority – the universal ethic. Accordingly, it is not the single individual who is expected to engage in ethical reflection. Rather it is a matter of the individual knowing about and complying with the universal ethical rules. In the words of Zygmunt Bauman, ethics will appear as an objective, transnational and impersonal truth.

As an alternative to this modern ethic, Dahlberg and Moss discuss a postmodern ethic. In their view, it is not a matter of striving for ethical truth. Instead, ethics is perceived as the active practice springing from the need to decide what is best to do in specific situations. This also involves feelings rather than the focus on the cognitive-instrumental of modernist ethics, based on the lack of certainty and clarity characterising life in the post-modern era and, hence, the provisionality characterising priorities and decisions. The individual can no longer merely follow universal and predetermined ethical guidelines but must actively develop competences for continuous evaluation of concrete situations. Reference is made to Bauman's claim that, fundamentally, the modern, universal ethic is based on mistrust of people's spontaneity and instincts and seeks to ignore them and replace them with the guidelines of universal reason.

With postmodern ethics it becomes possible to make ethics concretely relevant for the single individual in connection with his or her responsibility when choices must be made in the encounter with other people. Rarely will it be possible for these choices to follow unequivocal and clear guidelines. Rather, they will be characterised by ambivalences and ambiguities. They will often be temporary and uncertain. No guarantees may be given that we will make the unequivocally right choice. What appears to be the right thing to do from one perspective will seem wrong from other perspectives. The ethic of the choice depends on the position from which the choice is viewed and is bound to be characterised by uncertainty, ambiguity and ambivalence. According to Bauman, it will often be difficult to

account for the specific ethical choices. They are more intuitive than based on reason and, consequently, it will often be difficult to justify or explain any specific action-based choice.

## THE RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Dahlberg and Moss subsequently describe the ethics of care. The term 'care' is difficult to define, and at the same time, in an Anglo-Saxon context, it does not quite match the meaning and usage it has attained in the Scandinavian languages. Discussions about the ethics of care have typically been conducted within the context of reflections about a specific female ethic. This does not refer to a type of ethic that exclusively focuses on women and their life contexts. Rather, it means that the ethic reflects and provides space for a female-dominated rationality. In the ethics of care, importance is attached to clarifying the possibilities of, and the justification for, specific action. It is to do with empathy, intuition, commitment, love, relational capabilities, communication and obligations. Tronto (1993) stresses both the human relations and a more general attentiveness to everything it takes to make the world a good place to live in. Another important writer, Sevenhuijsen (1998), who has inspired Dahlberg and Moss, accentuates the ability to enter into relations and communication as key values. The ethics of care requires reflection on the best ways to act in specific situations. In this context the self is not described as an autonomous individual with a permanent core and identity. Rather, the self is seen as relational and embedded in concrete social circumstances. The focus is on the processes of the self and on the course of life, which may develop in unexpected ways as an alternative to the modern idea of the self as stable, based round a central core and characterized by linear development.

Tronto (1993) stresses the relational perspective that allows us to discover differences between ourselves and others with whom we have formed a relationship. It is about discovering and respecting that others are different from ourselves and have other needs and views than us. It is a precondition for avoiding to transfer our own assumptions on to others and thereby allowing us to identify our own perceptions and those of others. This ability to live with differences is not just to do with relations between individuals and groups but also extends to the self: Since the self is no longer perceived as consistent but as complex, it will be possible to experience differences, ruptures and ambivalences without interpreting these as unnormal or threatening.

Furthermore, Dahlberg and Moss draw on Levinas (1989) for the purpose of underlining the relational perspective. In general, Levinas dissociates himself from the trend in Western thinking to perceive other human beings as belonging to all-encompassing compartments. Through fixed definitions, categories and standards all differences are reduced to a matter of more or less of the same. Also that which is unfamiliar and strange is reduced to becoming parts of something already known. To Levinas alternative ethics is based on recognition of the centrality of relations. To this comes that relations are a matter of facing something different that you are not really expected to understand in its different-

ness. Nevertheless, you have obligations to 'the other' and even a responsibility for that person. Instead of autonomy, Levinas speaks of heteronomy, i.e. a community of mutual dependence rather than independence and self-determination. The relational association is not played out primarily through cognitive recognition but relies on sense-based close encounters between people, face to face. Such relations encompass considerable elements of uncertainty, diversity, interruption etc.

In three points Dahlberg and Moss sum up the key constituents of an alternative, practical ethic. The first point is about entering into relations and taking responsibility for others. The second point concerns showing respect for diversity and otherness. The third is to reject the calculating and rationalist way of thinking in the encounter with the other.

## EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES AS SITE OF ETHICAL PRACTICE

So far I have accounted for Dahlberg and Moss' description of the transformation of society from modern to postmodern. They believe that in general this transformation has created opportunities for new forms of ethical practice. Moreover, they launch a discussion of the significance of this change, specifically for early childhood education. They ask whether the institutions can avoid operating with fixed categories and definitions for the children and reducing differences to degrees of the same, and how the early childhood services may be more accommodating to the children. In this connection they point to the fact that considerable parts of the evaluation activities carried out in early childhood services are based on the universal ethic. An active, context-related ethic is not practiced. Quality descriptions are used to define quality as a predetermined standard, a chosen best practice or a third form of predetermined, universal and seemingly objective standard that has been adopted as benchmark without any open and democratic discussion. The person responsible for the evaluation is expected to be rational and objective. Consequently, the dominant forms of evaluation of educational activities are more characterised by what was earlier described as technical or technological practice than by ethically reflected practice.

As an alternative, Dahlberg and Moss suggest that the purpose of evaluation is not to hide or cover up your ethical attitudes. They suggest focusing, at the basic level, on what creates meaning. If you do that, you will immediately be compelled to take a position on the interpretations employed. Such interpretations will be diverse and complex, depending on time, place, individual perspective etc. Evaluation activities that in this way focus on the creation of meaning will be open to subjectivity, complexity and ambiguity. They will be activities that are undertaken together with others. It is not to be expected that we will reach lasting conclusions as evaluations will always be of a provisional nature, influenced by current social and historical conditions. Importance is attached to ongoing discussions of what seems to make sense and, consequently, not on plotting your own evaluations into predetermined grading scales. Such a type of evaluation activity will form part of the democratic work that is otherwise going on in the institution. It will concern questions as to

how we perceive children and childhood, children's needs and responsibility, the societal role and significance of the early childhood service, the understanding of education, care, knowledge etc.

Seen in this way, evaluation is understood as an active practice based on ethical considerations and sensitivity. It is about assessments that are always context-related, provisional and open to interpretation. This allows for visibility, reflection and interpretation, according to Dahlberg and Moss. And this again calls for being able to state arguments for the prioritised assessments. No one is equipped for making such assessments and evaluations as a matter of course. But it is an ability that can be developed and something you can become better at doing. In other words, it is something that needs to be practised and cultivated on an ongoing basis. Dahlberg and Moss quote the following statement: "We should not stop evaluating but be aware of the frailness and provisional nature of all assessments."<sup>(4)</sup> They point out that a key element of the efforts to observe this form of active, practiced ethic, are the opportunities for listening, creating relations and commitment to others. Especially important are the opportunities for listening to the other, precisely as another than yourself, i.e. operating consciously and in a reflected manner with productive differences between people and groups of people.

## THE EXAMPLE OF REGGIO EMILIA

Dahlberg and Moss exemplify this pedagogy of listening with experience from the Reggio Emilia province in northern Italy. Over a number of decades, this region has developed a form of early childhood education that has attracted lots of interest and recognition internationally, resulting in a comprehensive network and providing inspiration to national early childhood services.

According to Dahlberg and Moss, Reggio Emilia is characterised by the pedagogy of listening: To sum up, listening is described as a metaphor for being open and sensitive to others and not just listening with your ears but with all senses. Listening to the hundreds or thousands of languages, symbols and codes that we use to express ourselves and by means of which we communicate. The time of listening is described as different from chronological time. Listening is about emotions and feelings and includes curiosity, wishes, doubt and interests. Listening is open to differences and acknowledges the importance of the views and interpretations of the other. Listening does not lead to answers but to asking questions that arise from doubt and uncertainty. Listening requires profound attention and suspension of prejudice. It requires that we are attentive to the values of the unknown and that we can tolerate experiencing the challenging of what we consider to be self-evident. Listening is the foundation for establishing learning relations and promoting children as learning subjects.

Children are most open to learning when we listen to their thoughts and ideas. It is a matter of what is considered meaningful for the child. The child constantly produces drafts



that testify to its understanding of the world, and this is what the early childhood educator must use as point of departure in an ongoing process consisting of articulation and re-articulation and scrutiny. The early childhood educator must be an intellectually-minded individual who, like the child, strives to establish meaning. Together with the child, the educator must act in an active and investigative manner based on a broad psychological, pedagogical and cultural overview. The early education service must function as a 'studio' or 'workshop', where action, reflection, sensory observations and experience complement the virtual, the local and the global.

In practice Dahlberg and Moss believe that this early childhood education in Reggio Emilia manifests itself in the form of project work. They take exception to the idea of a curriculum, because it is considered to be normative and unfit for encompassing complexity, unpredictability and respect for the differences they believe characterise the pedagogy of listening. They also distance themselves from the dominant idea of project work, understood as a working method that involves children solving problems given to them by early childhood educators. On the contrary, the project work must include the children's personally experienced and defined problems.

The educational practice must be rendered visible, and thereby the object of interpretation and critique, through documentation. Based on production and well-reasoned choices of video recordings, photos, sound recordings, written notes etc., observations, experience and creation of meaning will be infused with meaning and made available to all, thereby making it possible to discuss and attribute value to opposing interpretations, doubt and uncertainty. In this way, Dahlberg and Moss claim, it will be possible to identify and visualize the dominant discourses and regimes that exercise power over and through us and based on which we have construed the child and ourselves as early childhood educators.

Dahlberg and Moss subsequently discuss similarities and differences between ethics and politics and nuance their understanding of the political dimension by distinguishing between 'major and minor politics. In this context, educational documentation exemplifies small politics, although it is assumed to possess great democratic potential. It is claimed to be able to make learning visible and place it on the political agenda. Furthermore, it is able to challenge dominant discourses and undermine dominant 'governmentality'. It is claimed to be a tool for both ethics and politics. It may further local and liberating learning, open up to dialogue and differences and turn evaluation in the direction of interpretation of what creates meaning and what is meaningful.

## CRITICISM OF THE CRITIQUE

Dahlberg and Moss' text appears as a likeable, analytical and forward-looking proposal for how early childhood education may conquer ground as or re-establish itself as an ethically and politically reflected, critical and democratic activity. It formulates liberating ambitions based partly on postmodernist reasoning, partly on Reggio Emilia as philosophical and

practical educational example material. However, Dahlberg and Moss' proposal for an alternative ethical and political educational practice also involves a number of problems, of which some will be discussed in the following.

Dahlberg and Moss present what they call the technical or technological educational approach and the alternative, ethical and politically motivated approach as two completely separate and almost independent paradigms. They are even linked, apparently quite specifically, to respectively modernity and postmodernity. Naturally, this may be done if the object is to present two different paradigms in a simple and clear manner. But when you analyse the concrete societal and historical reality, things do tend to get a bit more complicated. What is modern and what is postmodern becomes more intertwined. Nor does what functions as technical practice, respectively ethical and political practice, any longer appear as clear and unequivocal. In other words, there is a danger that the different, clearly defined approaches overlook the many and complicated mixed forms – mixing technique and ethics and politics. It almost appears as if Dahlberg and Moss are falling into the dichotomy trap, i.e. antiquated practice, that which is wrong and open to criticism, is unequivocally juxtaposed with that which belongs in the present, is right and seemingly above criticism. The problem is that this may result in analyses that are not particularly sensitive to the so-called hybrid forms, i.e. amalgamations of older and more recent elements that society may be strongly influenced and governed by. This may lead to overlooking a number of important innovations that fail to be registered in the rigorous, analytical juxtaposition. Furthermore, it may turn out to be quite a convenient juxtaposition, because Dahlberg and Moss only to some degree need to justify the postmodern, ethically and politically reflected proposal in relation to other possibilities, allowing them to a much higher degree to be content with criticising modern perceptions as belonging to the past. It is a question of whether such a radical distinction between the modern and the postmodern is tenable. In postmodern societies, too, it is possible to argue that elements and reminiscences of the modern society are carried on. Perhaps it is even these hybrid forms that dominate today?

Part of the explanation for Dahlberg and Moss' 'blind spot' is that they do not seem to be particularly interested in sociological conditions and theories that offer descriptions of the structures of society. Nor do they appear interested in sociological, empirical surveys dealing with the complexity of society. Moreover, educational research into the complex relations between theory and practice does not seem to have been given prominence. In other words, Dahlberg and Moss predominantly remain within a philosophical, discursive universe. As a result, a number of important matters are left out of Dahlberg and Moss' analyses. With, among others, Niklas Luhmann it would have been possible to describe how different systems have difficulties communicating, and with e.g. Pierre Bourdieu it would have been possible to describe the significance of different social fields, forms of capital and capital placement. These and many other sociological and educational perspectives might have offered other explanations of aspects of the relations between

discourses and societal practice forms. And, above all, as considerably more complex. Naturally, this is not to say that the analyses of Dahlberg and Moss have nothing interesting to contribute. But it needs to be stressed that through their heavy discursive and predominantly philosophical bias, they inevitably end up prioritising away from a number of conditions that might have problematized their very direct transition from postulated new societal possibilities to practised and realised early childhood education.

Dahlberg and Moss wish to show how it is possible to think differently, thereby cancelling out what we consider to be obvious truths. However, it would be possible to ask to what extent their ethical and political alternative actually does constitute an alternative. Descriptions of the post-modern, discourse analyses and construction perspectives are already quite conspicuous at the present time and may today constitute the dominant paradigm? Also, Reggio Emilia's principles of early childhood education have been known for decades in this country.<sup>(6)</sup> Finally, from a historical perspective one may ask whether the view of children, human beings and democracy represented by Reggio Emilia's early childhood education does not to a quite considerable extent repeat the endeavours of reform pedagogy and other educational traditions. Even if reform pedagogy and the educational traditions – interesting in themselves – were based on modernist principles.

Combining this problematisation with the first discussion, it seems relevant to ask whether Dahlberg and Moss are actually "walking on two feet" in the sense of critically analysing the existing state of affairs as well as critically reflecting on future trends and practices. In many ways, Dahlberg and Moss articulate a critique of present educational trends which is very much to the point. But they do not in any way subject their alternative to criticism or discussion. They do not apply their ethical, political frame of understanding to their own alternative. And, incidentally, how can it be explained that Reggio Emilia's early childhood education, which historically emerged before the era of postmodernism, managed to become so relatively dominant in northern Italy and internationally already during modernity – considering that it is now described as a response to the new possibilities offered by postmodernity?

Concrete experience of defining a local Danish form of early childhood education based on Reggio Emilia traditions does not unequivocally lead to something uncomplicated and positive.<sup>(6)</sup> The practical experience of such educational projects shows that individual elements from these educational traditions are adapted to the dominant educational theories and practices and served to reform them by supplying new technical approaches rather than contributing to radical ethical and political renovation.

Contemporary early childhood education definitely needs discussion of alternatives, but it is essential to distinguish between analyses of contemporary philosophies and practices and ideas for innovation. Far too often we have seen a sort of cherry picking of individual elements from large or small Utopian projects, which are subsequently incorporated into the existing forms of power and control, so that the Utopian ideas come to serve as

hothouses for development and refinement of the forms of power and influence of early childhood education. Dahlberg and Moss do not really concern themselves with this, nor do they discuss their own analyses and alternatives based on this perspective.

In conclusion, a more traditional and general set of problems should be mentioned: The difficulties of launching discussions of an ethical nature without almost immediately turning the discussion into a matter of morals and, especially, the 'right morals' and the struggle to introduce them. Dahlberg and Moss quite rightly maintain that ethics is quite different from morals and stress the potential openness, democratic contribution, respect for others etc. of the ethical discussions. However, historically, and in educational practice, it has turned out to be extremely difficult to raise and sustain ethical discussions without slipping into, or being taken over by, discussions about morals. Take the discussion about food policy in early childhood services for example. This shows clearly how difficult it is to discuss openly, in an interested and democratic manner with a view to creating a complex, multi-faceted food policy with respect for what is different. Often the discussion quite quickly turns in the direction of what is best for the children based on the claims of experts, and it is thus dominated by a number of "truths" about children's food, exercise etc. If you respect these so-called truths, but act in contravention of them, the ethics-initiated discussion easily turns into a struggle between good and bad morals. Naturally, this does not mean that what you do is of no importance but that you must try to make allowance for the fact that ethical discussions risk turning into moral or even moralising discussions.

## CONCLUSION

I began by raising the question whether alternative, ethical and political statements and proposals may influence the perception of evaluation, documentation and control as a predominantly bureaucratic and systems-administrative endeavour. My conclusion is that Dahlberg and Moss' contribution provides opportunities for identifying and understanding what is going on in the present. Furthermore, it provides opportunities for thinking differently. It is arguable whether their analysis of social changes into a postmodern condition, where ethics acquires a new significance, is simplified and fails to see the complex innovations of the historical development. When it comes to the practical realisation of an ethically and politically reflected educational practice, however, their proposal appears far less convincing. It should be seen within the context of the generally widespread inclination to propose prescriptive alternatives in immediate continuation of analytical exercises.

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1. Dahlberg & Moss 2005
  2. Cf. Willig 2009 and others
  3. Dahlberg & Moss 2005:35
  4. Dahlberg & Moss 2005:90
  5. Cf. Mathiassen and Mørck 1988 and others
  6. Cf. Andersen 2002; Andersen, Hjort and Schmidt 2008 and others



# 6 CODE OF ETHICS FOR DANISH EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

**Ethical challenges are an inescapable part of early childhood education, and as a consequence early childhood educators need to take ethics into consideration every day. A code of ethics for early childhood educators is a set of fundamental values intended to raise awareness of the values educators consider to be of importance in working with children, young people and their families.**

**The purpose of a common code of ethics is to improve the quality of the dialogue and reflection on professional ethical challenges. In this way a code of ethics may contribute to raising ethical awareness and to further developing proper, ethical educational practices.**

## THE PURPOSE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

The purpose of early childhood education is to promote the welfare and development of children and young people through care, socialising, education and learning.

This is done by:

- Providing children and young people with equal opportunities regardless of their social or material conditions, ethnicity or religious affiliation, physical or psychological disability
- Providing individual and social support to children and young people in order to strengthen their fitness for life
- Providing the framework for a good and caring childhood and youth that enables everyone to join social communities

## VALUES OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Early childhood education is based on the values of:

- **Care** – fundamental to the work of early childhood educators. Care includes the values of empathy, security, trust and responsibility for others
- **Equality** – educational practice is based on the equality of human beings. Equality in educational relations is characterised by dialogue, appreciation, respect and tolerance
- **Professional integrity** – Professional integrity is characterised by values such as a high level of professionalism, a sense of responsibility, credibility and openness
- **Social justice** – Professional practice promotes social justice and democratic values. It is characterised by values such as inclusion, diversity, community and broadness of mind.

## EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS IN THEIR RELATIONS WITH CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND FAMILIES

The work of early childhood educators is based on the community as well as on the individual and his or her relationship with the community, and therefore early childhood educators must:

- approach children and young people and their families with respect
- approach children, young people and their families with empathy and appreciation
- assume responsibility for establishing good relations with children, young people and their parents
- protect the welfare of children and young people and, if necessary, promote their needs and interests
- adjust practices so as to serve the individual child or young person or the community
- exercise social justice and act in the best interests of the community

### **THIS MEANS THAT THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR MUST:**

- protect the welfare of the individual child or young person in the best possible way in case of conflicts of loyalty between the child/young person and the family
- avoid action or conduct that may be perceived as humiliating and degrading
- protect against offensive conduct
- treat children, young people and families with dignity and respect their right of self-determination and participation in the decision-making
- protect confidential information
- respect the right to privacy
- ensure equal treatment, also when it involves treating two equals differently

## EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS IN THE PROFESSION

The profession must endeavour to create proper ethical practices, and therefore childhood educators must:

- establish a dialogue with colleagues on ethical aspects of their own work and that of others
- demonstrate broadness of mind and an ability to reflect on own prejudices and attitudes
- seek new knowledge and participate constructively in debates on early childhood education
- make ethical choices based on their knowledge and ability to analyse and reflect
- communicate knowledge about early childhood education

### **THIS MEANS THAT EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS MUST:**

- protect the welfare of the individual child or young person in the best possible way in case of conflicts of loyalty between the workplace and the possibility for exercising proper ethical practices
- use their professional discretion and exercise critical judgment, courage and care
- acknowledge their own ethical, professional and personal responsibility for decisions and actions taken
- prioritise the professional values over their own
- cooperate with the proper educational institutions to ensure student access to knowledge and proper ethical practices
- engage in ethical and critical reflection on the methods used
- protect the profession's reputation
- approach other professional groups in a spirit of equality and mutual respect



## EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS IN SOCIETY

As a profession, early childhood educators play an important role in society and have a special responsibility. Therefore early childhood educators must:

- treat everyone equally regardless of gender, religion, nationality, sexual preference or cultural background
- organize their educational work for the purpose of supporting democratic principles and to contribute to preparing children and young people for active citizenship
- discuss their educational work with others in order to develop the profession for the benefit of children and young people
- strive for a high level of professionalism for the benefit of society as a whole
- use their professional knowledge in the public debate to promote social justice and good conditions for children and young people

### **THIS MEANS THAT EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS MUST:**

- protect the welfare of the individual child or young person in the best possible way in case of conflicts of loyalty between the requirements of the system and the possibilities for exercising proper ethical practices
- challenge laws and instructions to the extent that they conflict with the ethical values of the profession
- support priorities that ensure a just and appropriate allocation of resources and favour groups of children and young people that are most in need of early childhood education
- contribute to drawing attention to the consequences of political priorities for early childhood education



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