

WHY CAN'T I SIT WITH MY FRIEND? THE COMPLEXITY IN DIVERSE ANTI-DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICES IN SCHOOL

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Abstract

This presentation focus on the children's strategies in relation to the actions taken from the school. We will show how on the one hand the school strives to socialize the children, and on the other hand how the children can find refined ways of disregarding the schools organization and in a subtle manner move in accordance with their group belongings. The presentation is based on a study of children's social relations and interactions in a school class of 23 children at the age of 10 years. They were observed and interviewed both individually and in focus groups during one school year.

The study indicates that the formation and maintaining of friendship groups recurrently is in tension with how the school formally structure and organize their social behaviour. The results are interpreted as the school, in its structure, constrains the children's ability to express their rights and frame their agency. By this presentation we will show the complexity in empowering the children and at the same time emphasize the children's rights from their point of view. This not only impact the children's possibility to plan and structure their everyday life in school but influence the ways in which teachers and school social workers can work with social relations and discrimination. In a wider sense it makes the school an arena of different anti-discriminatory practices, where the children and the adults display different strategies. The structures the school has constructed to work against discrimination can as a result become ineffective.

Key words: anti-discriminatory practice, child perspective, child rights, school, socialization.

INTRODUCTION

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child state that in all actions concerning children the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration. Children are capable of forming their own views and have the right to express those views freely. The school plays an important role in empowering children in this socialization process and Swedish schools have in its educational assignment a social undertaking regarding basic values and work against discrimination. This implies the schools to work actively with the children's social relations. "Schools" are not only organizations with plans, schedules and professionals. They are also institutions that carry presumptions, ideas and expectations.

The study presented here was conducted in Sweden and show the interplay

between children and the school, primarily from the perspective of the children.

RESEARCH METHOD

The presentation is based on a study of children's social relations and interactions in a school class of 23 children at the age of 10 years. In the class there were 10 girls and 13 boys. They were observed and interviewed both individually and in focus groups during one school year. In total 333 hours of observations was conducted and it is from them that results are highlighted in this paper.

Doing observations makes it possible to get close to the activities in schools from the children's perspective. These observations had a special focus on group processes and social interaction between the children. Along the way it became obvious that the children did not only interact with each other, but also

in relation to the frame set up by the school and by the teachers.

Doing observations is an ethnographic method that is more direct (you can see what is going on) than interviews (where it is told retrospectively what happened). Silverman (2007), as well as Rapley (2004), says that informants use collective representations to describe their actions and that they give different presentations depending on the one who asks. To observe is to avoid stories formed by the situation and to get first hand data.

Researchers with an interest in children and childhood has pointed at the importance of striving for balance in the asymmetric relationship between children and adults by taking the role as an atypical, less power oriented adult (Corsaro, 2005; James & James, 2004; Mandell, 1991; Mayall, 2008). In the observation, one important step has therefore been to take an "out-of-the-ordinary-adult approach" (Heintz, 2012). The observing researcher has used two main parables in the observations: "I do not know" and "I want to understand" (cf. Mayall, 2008) to express that the researcher was uninformed or unaware of the actual meaning and essence of being a child today. To openly sharing this unawareness with the children was one way of making them understand that they have information and knowledge that an adult do not have. In a school context it is important to be aware of the role the other adults' play, which is often of an authoritarian nature. Being unknowing and interested of the children's perspective opened for being different than the more authoritarian adults from the school, such as the teachers. Being different from the teachers and playing games with the children, in the same way they played with each other, gave both an access to and knowledge of the children's world. And it made the children confident with the researcher.

The school where the study was conducted was selected so that it should be regarded more or less as a "normal school": That mean that it was selected from a statistical analysis of the area for the school, so that the socio-economical aspects did not

show any extremes. Further, the national Swedish database over results from schools was studied and it was made clear that it was neither a school with very high, nor very low, results. All in all, this school was selected to be as close as possible to a "normal school".

The observations were conducted in all places in the school, the classroom, the lobby between the classroom and the school yard, the school yard as well as in the gymnasium and the cantina.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the study by an informed consent letter signed by both the child and the child's legal guardian. Since the study was made within a school class it was important to get all the affected children to consent to the study as well as to get the legal guardians consents as the children were under the age of 18 years old. Confidentiality and the protection of the rights of the participants were ensured and the children are protected by remaining unidentifiable in this presentation. Ethics was viewed as a continuing social practice which means that the researcher had to trust her own judgments regarding ethical decisions throughout the research process.

The study is approved by ethical committee.

THE CONTEXT

The 10 year old children spend approximately six hours per day in school. In the classroom they sit in groups of two or three and the teacher controls what happens in the classroom. The lectures are held by the teacher who also gives the children their assignments to work on in the classroom. It is also the teacher who decides who will work together with whom when the children work in pairs or groups, a frequently applied pedagogical technique.

The Swedish schools are obligated to serve nutritious meals free of charge during the school day (Educational Act 2010:800). Lunch is served in the cantina where the children from each class sit at their assigned tables. There are always teachers present in the cantina and they are also eating their

lunch. This is seen as a pedagogical event compared to the lectures, not as a break. The children have rules to follow about where to sit and how to behave while eating their lunch and the teachers guard and manage the situation.

During a day in school there are three breaks. Two 15-minute breaks, in the morning and in the afternoon, and a longer break after the lunch. During these breaks the children are in the school yard and play. Some children are by themselves, some play in small groups and others play games in larger groups. The children choose themselves with whom they want to spend the break and what they are going to do as long as they stay within the school's area. The observed children frequently played soccer, skipped rope or played other games together.

Thus, the school as a context for the children and their agency fall into different levels of formal organization and structure. The classroom is the most formalized and constraining context where the teacher governs the situation and structures the children's social behaviours. The school yard is the context which is the least structured by the school where the children have the possibility to plan and structure their interplay with friends and express their agency. The canteen is a context "in-between" where the teachers formally organize and manage, but where the children are given more agency than in the classroom.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The school as formal and informal system

Schools are not only organizations with plans, schedules and professionals. They are also institutions that carry presumptions, ideas and expectations. In relation to the children, the teachers represent the system, the school. The teacher's saying and acting becomes the children's understanding of the school as a formal system, as well as of the informal aspects in it.

For the children, the formal organization of the school learns them about superiors and subordination, about the

organizing of time in lectures, breaks etc.. and of course knowledge and skills in reading, writing, maths and so on. The informal system, the school as institution, is learnt through a more subtle system. More generally it is about understanding that you could and should act differently in the classroom and in the schoolyard, and to learn how to act in the different settings. Further, to know the informal system, means to be able to elaborate in-between the formal rules, by navigating in the organized setting with social skills. It is about how to combine the formal rules and the more informal expectations. If these expectations are met, it might be possible to break a rule.

In this setting the children are formed, not only as children in school, but also as individuals that will grow up and use the skills they learnt in school. The formal as well as the informal. It shapes the children's identity (James 2011). In the contemporary society the informal structures in the school are of high importance. In a multifaceted society with influences in many dimensions through a wide variety of sources, the compulsory school has been the only arena where a common ground is given in the local community (Tallberg Broman 2009). The central role for the school as distributor of societal values does not decrease in the digital era. It rather increases as the world becomes more difficult to grasp when all nuances become visible and evident.

As a frame, the actions taken in school are governed by law, regulations and rule set in different levels of society. Further, financial resources, staff and houses, give the setting for the practice (Persson, 2014). What happens in school is formed by this setting, but also by the actors involved and their expectations. The school carries a system of norms, but it also meets actors, as children and teachers, with norms influenced by more than the school. The social setting can therefore not fully be planned and organized, as the involved actors' influence what happens.

While the adults in schools could be occupied with arranging the formal structure according to rules and norms, the children

have their interaction in their relations and form their own perception of school as well as of each other. The children's informal interaction also influences their self-perception and identity formation. When someone retrospectively tell stories about school, the interaction with peers are just as important, or sometimes even more important, as what has happened in the formal setting.

In order to understand what happens in school and how the children form their identity and social skills, we have to focus on the interaction between children in the informal setting and on how they deal with the formal setting.

An anti-discriminatory practice for socialization

To mediate and establish norms and basic values has always been a part of the Swedish schools assignment. The emphasis on rights and basic values and work against discrimination has in addition increased as a result of a change in the Curriculum (Skolverket, 2011). The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child state that in all actions concerning children the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration. That includes all children to have basic democratic rights. This implies the schools to work actively with the children's social relations. In almost all actions taken by the school the children's social relations are a part of the formal organization of the everyday life.

On the door that leads in to the classroom a list of rules is posted. This is a list that states rules the children and the teachers have agreed upon. One of the most central rules is "everyone may join" which refers to the principle of solidarity that is stated in both the Educational Act (2010:800) and the Curriculum (Skolverket, 2011). The rule implies the children to let anyone join in play during the breaks. No child should be excluded. The teachers use a considerable amount of time working on this rule to create a fellowship in-between the children in the class. This work is done both in the classroom during lectures, at lunch and during breaks. One way "everyone may join"

is brought forward is to articulate the rule in discussions with the children. It is a continuously recurring practice and much time in the classroom is spent discussing incidents where a child feels excluded from play during the break. At some occasions the discussions end up in new rules for playing games. As a consequence the break time games get structured by the teacher, not the children which are the instance otherwise. Subsequently the children often quit playing that game for a while. This active work to bring the school class together is one of the school's anti-discriminatory practices to protect a child against discrimination and exclusion. It is moreover a way for the teacher to bring social order into the classroom and socialize the children.

Furthermore the school works more formalized with the children's social behaviours and interactions in the spatial arrangements in the classroom and the cantina and in the pedagogical work in socio-emotional programs. One way to spatially structure the children's social behaviours and interactions is to arrange the seating in the classroom and in the cantina. As described above the children sit in groups of two or three in the classroom, which is a fairly classical seating organization in Swedish schools. Who sits with who seems to be quite important for the social interactions in the classroom. The teacher is the one arranging the seating and during the school year this study was conducted the teacher changed the seating eight times. The articulated purpose was to bring order and silence into the classroom so the children can concentrate on school work. The teacher tries different strategies in the seating arrangements and one strategy is to place friends next to each other so that they could talk more quietly and not talk across the classroom. This strategy was not successful since the interactions across the classroom continued. Another strategy was to seat children who usually don't play during break next to each other to enable a better working environment. None of the strategies seem more successful than another and the teacher kept changing seats until the end of the study.

The seating arrangement in the cantina is another spatial organization of the children's social interaction. Even though there are no assigned seats as in the classroom, each school class has their own assigned tables where the children should be seated. The children are supposed to sit next to the one who they were standing next in line to get lunch. This rule is another of the school's anti-discriminatory practices, created to avoid any one child being excluded and seated by themselves. School lunch is viewed as an important context in which the teachers work with anti-discriminatory values as well as other basic values through conversations with the children. Hence it is important to include all children and to direct the children to interact with everyone in the school class regardless of friendship group belonging.

According to the curriculum all children should be involved in their own education and disciplining which has led the school to work with basic values through socio-emotional programs. These programs include exercises and discussions where different social and emotional issues are dealt with together with and in interaction with the children. Through the understanding of themselves in relation to others and through learning about their emotions the children are expected to govern themselves and internalize the basic values.

One example of exercises the teacher use is "the daily mission" when the children get a secret notecard each with a mission stated on it, for example: a) today I will say something really nice to someone, b) today I will play with someone I usually don't play with during break, c) today I will say "hi" to someone I don't usually greet. The children then are supposed to do the mission during the school day and at the end of the day evaluate how they felt and if they succeeded on their mission. They write it all down in a notebook which is handed over to the teacher. The teacher then collects the notebooks to check whether the children done their missions or not and what they wrote about it. The children completed the missions to a various degree, some children take the mission very seriously while some children

get on with it to have it done and yet other children don't finish the mission during the day. The missions could also be used as material for discussion in the classroom.

To conclude, the school's basic values such as democracy, equality and solidarity affects the teachers' everyday treatment of and response to the children. The school and the teachers actively work with the children's social behaviours and interactions through several anti-discriminatory practices both systematically, as with the socio-emotional programs and the spatial arrangements, and more spontaneously through everyday conversations in the cantina or in emphasising the rule of "everyone may join" in break time conflicts between children.

Interaction in the cantina

The various contexts in school enable a variety of interactions and social behaviours among the children. The interactions in the classroom are fairly restricted due to the structure of the lectures and the teacher who is in charge of keeping social order and of the school work. The interactions on the school yard, on the other hand, are mainly regulated by the children themselves. They choose games to play and the interaction is structured by the children's friendship group belonging and play references. A context where these two forms of interactions interplay is in the cantina where the children's friendship relations encounter the school's norms and regulations in an explicit fashion. Hereafter one such episode is highlighted to illustrate how the children can act in such an encounter.

The children are walking to the cantina, that is in another house, in pairs of two. They can choose "walking mate" by themselves but must walk in pairs and walk together in a row. Once at the cantina the children form two queues in front of the meal cart to get their lunch. At this point all the children are standing in the queues unrelatedly of friendship group belonging. The children get their trays and plates of food and proceeds in the queues to get their drinks which are placed at another corner of the

cantina. After they have fetched their drinks the children proceed to the assigned tables. This procedure is watched over by the teacher who makes sure the children sit at the right table and that this is done in an orderly manner. As previously stated, each school class has their own assigned tables where the children should be seated. The children are supposed to sit next to the one who they were standing next in line to get lunch.

This day a friendship group of three girls are the focus of the observations. They have walked together with the rest of the school class to the cantina and are standing in line to get their lunch. One of the girls is standing first in one of the queues while the other two girls are standing last and third to last in the other queue. If they had followed the school's regulated seating arrangement in the cantina and proceed as expected, they would have ended up at different tables. But they move in a very subtle manner in a pattern which enables them to sit together. The girl first in line move to go to the drink cart where she lingers until the other two girls proceed to get their drinks. They all look at each other and instead of getting their drinks the two girls move straight to the assigned tables together with the first girl. Since the girls are last in the queue the other children already have their seats and the girls can sit by themselves at a table. After placing their food trays at the table the two girls without drinks walk back to the drink cart and get their drinks. Then they walk back to the table and sit down to have their lunch.

In conversation with the girls about this episode they explicitly stated that this discreet process of opposition to the formal organization of how the procedure should be done was a conscious strategy on their part to enable them to stay together during lunch. This and similar strategies was used by other friendship groups as well and looking at the other children's placement it is possible to conclude that other friendship groups have made sure to sit together.

In the children's intentions to interact with their friends, the schools formal organization of the seating arrangements in the cantina is put aside and the rule of

“everyone may join” is disregarded.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

We have in this presentation shown how the school as an organization and institution formalized structures concerning the children's social behavior and interactions. In accordance with the Swedish schools assignment to mediate and establish norms and basic values the teacher use various anti-discriminatory practices to ensure that the main basic value “everyone may join” is met and no child is excluded.

The teachers actively work on and strive to socialize the children through spatial arrangements in the classroom and the cantina, the systematic work with socio-emotional programs and ongoing discussions with the children about rules of the games played during breaks. This has an impact on the children's possibility to plan and structure their everyday life in school. The children want to be with their friends and interact with them at lunch and during breaks. When the children's structures and social strategies are seen as discriminatory practices diverse from the schools basic value of “everyone may join” the children find refined ways of disregarding the schools organization and, as shown in the example from the cantina, move in subtle manners in accordance with their group belonging.

The schools work to empower the children to grow up and be citizens with sound basic values collide with the children's right to freely express their rights and act on their agency from their point of view. This creates a tension between the children's formation and maintaining of friendship groups and the schools formal structures and organization regarding the children's social behavior.

This tension show the complexity in Swedish schools today where they both have to actively work from out of children's rights as active subjects in their own right and against discrimination which includes working on the children's social relations.

The display of diverse social strategies have an direct impact on the teachers possibility to work with social

relations to include all children and the structures the school has constructed to work against discrimination can as a result become ineffective.

The results from this study emphasize the importance of recognizing the interactions taking place in the school context. It is important to acknowledge the school not only as an structure where things are to be in a certain way, but also as a context where the expectations of the involved actors influence what happens.

A challenge for the schools task to socialize the children is to not only show them how society expects them to act, but also to understand how the interactions between the children work. In understanding how the children themselves experience and express their social interactions of everyday in school the children's agency can be taken seriously.

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