

Changes and Challenges in Recent ECEC Policy in Norway

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This paper highlights current political changes in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Norway. First, I will discuss new legislation concerning ECEC and the new Norwegian curriculum for kindergartens. I will also comment on the influence that international organisations (OECD and UNESCO) and their educational policies have in Norway and mention briefly why the Norwegian Teachers' Union is in favour of recent changes that have taken place in accordance with these policies. Lastly, the article argues that the new intentions and decisions will drastically change the Norwegian tradition of ECEC.

The Current Context

In Norway, kindergarten is acknowledged as a universal, public good, and this understanding has grown steadily since the 1970s (Ellingsaeter and Gulbrandsen, 2003). In 2006 about 235,000 Norwegian children were in kindergarten. This means that eighty percent of the children from one to five years spend some time in a kindergarten before they start school at the age of six (Statistics Norway, 2006).

The Norwegian kindergarten is rooted in the Nordic tradition of combining education and care, play and learning. The child is at the very centre. The focus is on the child's own activities and natural learning processes, and child empowerment and the well-being of the child are core values.

The main difference between the Norwegian system and that of many other OECD countries has to do with the different provisions for the two age groups birth to three year-olds and the three to six year-olds. In some countries, ECEC provision for the second group is considered to be a part of the initial stage of the educational system. Since time and work is structured with the aim of educating the children, there is less room for the children's own initiatives. In Norway, however, the children's free play has been a key point in the pedagogical approach for both age groups.

Earlier Documents

In Norway, the two following documents regulate the field of ECEC: The Kindergarten Act (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2005) and The Framework Plan (Ministry of Education and Research, 2006). The very first Kindergarten Act was launched in 1975, and very small changes were made between 1975 and 2004. The Act was revised in 1983, in 1995 and in 2005, but, Section 1 in the Act, Purpose, has remained unchanged since 1983:

"Kindergarten shall provide children with sound opportunities for development and activity in close understanding and collaboration with the children's homes.

Kindergarten shall assist in giving the children an upbringing that accords with Christian values. Owners of private kindergartens may in their statutes prescribe that the second paragraph shall not apply.

Private kindergartens owned or run by parishes of the Norwegian State Church may incorporate special provisions with regard to ideological aims into their statutes."

(Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2005: Section 1)

In 1995, the holistic Norwegian kindergarten tradition was, for the first time, expressed in a national Framework Plan. The government decided to revise both the Kindergarten Act and The Framework Plan in 2004 because of changes in Norwegian society and challenges from the international community. The revised Kindergarten Act was approved by the Norwegian Parliament (Stortinget) in June 2005.

The Revised Kindergarten Act

In the Kindergarten Act from 2005 there are two completely new sections, namely Section 2, *Content of the kindergarten*, and Section 3, *Children's right to participate*. In this paper I focus on Section two as it defines the kindergarten, its tasks and its content in a new manner:

"Kindergartens shall be pedagogical undertakings.

Kindergartens shall assist homes with the care and upbringing of their children, and thereby lay a sound foundation for the children's development, life-long learning and active participation in a democratic society.

Care, upbringing and learning in kindergarten shall promote human dignity, equality, intellectual freedom, tolerance, health and appreciation of sustainable development.

The Kindergarten shall provide children with opportunities for play, self-expression and meaningful experiences and activities in safe, yet challenging surroundings (...)"

(Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2005: Section 2)

By placing some of the basic pedagogical principles from the Framework Plan in the Kindergarten Act, Parliament has laid down the main statutory regulations of the content of the kindergarten, instead of delegating the formulation of the intentions and principles of the pedagogical work in the kindergartens to the Ministry of Education. This is of great importance as the Kindergarten Act is the most powerful document in the sector.

The Framework Plan for the Contents and Tasks of Kindergartens (Ministry of Education and Research, 2006) is based on the Kindergarten Act. As a national plan, it is supposed to secure equal rights for all children in kindergartens in Norway. At the same time *"the owner of a kindergarten may adapt the framework plan to local conditions"*, (Ministry of

Children and Family Affairs, 2005, Section 2). The following quotations from the Framework express the function and the intentions of the plan:

"The aim of the Framework Plan is to give head teachers in the kindergartens, pedagogical leaders and other staff a binding framework for the planning, implementation, documentation and assessment of the activities of the kindergartens. The framework plan also provides information to the parents, owners and supervisory authorities.

The Framework Plan (..) describes the societal role of kindergartens. The Kindergarten's programmes shall be built on a holistic pedagogical philosophy, with care, play and learning being at the core of the activities. Social and linguistic skills, as well as seven learning areas, are also important to the pedagogical environment provided by the kindergartens.

The plan emphasises the importance of the adults' attitudes, knowledge and abilities to relate to and understand children, so that they can bring up children to participate actively in a democratic society." (Ministry of Education and Research, 2006)

This plan is shorter and more explicit than the previous plan. It means that the preschool teacher must be trained in the content of the law and of the Framework Plan. He or she must know how to interpret and implement the principles, in order to be able to guide the staff and to inform the parents properly. The child's care, upbringing and learning need to be discussed and agreed upon. The influx in recent years of children one year old or younger is a challenge, both in terms of the tasks and the content of the kindergarten.

New Demands

In accordance with the traditional pedagogical approach in Norway, the Framework Plan is not a school curriculum. Although the term 'learning' is used repeatedly, no specific goals are presented as to what exactly it is that the children are expected to learn. In other words, it is left to the kindergarten as a pedagogical institution and the pedagogical staff to formulate these goals. The authorities also stress the need to maintain a continuity between the Kindergarten and School Curricula. This represents quite a challenge in Norway, where there is a lack of pedagogical staff. While fifty percent of kindergarten staff in Sweden and sixty percent in Denmark have pedagogical education, the percentage in Norway is thirty-two (OECD, 2006).

Scandinavian Neighbours

Most ECEC research comes from countries with different traditions than the Nordic ones (OECD, 2006). The influence of the educational policy of the OECD is obvious, and its emphasis on 'school readiness', seems to be embraced by Nordic policy makers. Thus, the Nordic tradition is under some pressure from the international community.

In 1996 responsibility for kindergartens in Sweden was moved to the Ministry of Education and Research, and a national curriculum for kindergartens was published in 1998. A Swedish evaluation report states that this has brought the pedagogy of the kindergarten in the direction of the school (Taguchi and Munkhammar, 2003). This is understandable, given that the weaker part in an amalgamation process is often in danger of being transformed by the influence from the stronger part (Haug, 1992, 2005).

In Denmark, the Law on Pedagogical Curriculum came into force in 2004. Before the law was passed, there was a discussion about its principles and its consequences, and whether the pedagogical approach in kindergartens might be changed in a school oriented direction or not (Boelskov 2004; Broström, 2004; Sigsgaard, 2003a; 2003b).

American researcher, Judith T. Wagner, who is familiar with the Nordic ECEC tradition and politics, predicts *"that in the short term moderate changes will creep in. (...) In the long term (...) Nordic preschools will become more school-like"* (Wagner, 2006: 303). She indicates the curricular orientation and the formation of preschool teachers as the main agents of change.

A Historical Review

The Norwegian kindergarten has been 'a bottom up' project since the last part of the 19th century, initiated and progressed by women. The day care institutions from 1837 were modelled from the English Children's Asylums, established to relieve some of the great social needs and distress among the poor labour force in industry. The kindergartens were short term institutions, focused on education, often in private homes and grounded on the pedagogy of the philosopher Friedrich Froebel. State funding started in 1963. Thus, the modern Norwegian kindergarten has two roots: a social as well as an educational one.

Historically, kindergartens have been regarded either as a substitute for, or a supplement to, family care. There have been tensions between policy and pedagogy, between the political intentions and the practice by women in kindergartens (Korsvold, 1997). Thirty years ago, Norway was in need of an extended labour force and women were a new possibility. The kindergarten became the solution to allow women with children to access the workforce (Larsen, 2000).

It is clear, then, that the kindergarten can be a tool for different policies. It is a prerequisite for women's participation in the labour market, and it is also important for women's emancipation. It is still a provision for both families and children, and it is entitled to play a vital role in the political work on inter-cultural inclusion. Gender equality, democracy and participation are all qualities of, and expressed goals, of Norwegian society.

Changes

International influence on the 2005 Kindergarten Act is easily visible. Terms such as *'lifelong learning'*, *'active participation in a democratic society'*, *'appreciation of sustainable development'* are international echoes. The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child was implemented into Norwegian law in 2003. Section 3 in the Kindergarten Act, *Children's right to participate*, is an immediate consequence of this.

Education is a vital tool in society-building world-wide, where *'Education for all'* is a key goal and *'Learning begins at birth'* is a common slogan (UNESCO, 1990). Thus, the OECD recommends that kindergartens should be in *"a strong and equal partnership with the educational system"* (OECD, 2001: 11) and that learning should be placed *"at the core of ECEC work"* (OECD, 2006: 4). Education is seen as a competitive advantage, related to the main goal of the OECD, which is

"to achieve the highest sustainable economic growth and employment and a rising standard of living in member countries, while maintaining financial stability, and thus contribute to the development of the economy" (OECD, 2001: 2).

From this point of view, the kindergarten is not only a pedagogical institution and a provision for children and parents, it is also a tool in a competitive society, a current expenditure on children which is seen to be an investment in the future (Korsvold, 2004).

The latest development in the ECEC policy in Norway is hardly visible yet. But there are signs that can be investigated and reflected on. The sector is challenged by a fairly new White Paper, *Early Efforts for Life Long Learning* (St.meld. nr. 16 2006-2007). In this report to the Parliament the Norwegian government affirms that the kindergarten is expected to play an important role in diminishing the social gaps in society, especially where new immigrants are concerned. More attention to the development of language skills, to documentation and to programmes of instruction and testing may be pedagogical consequences. As already indicated, the Framework Plan also seems to emphasise 'learning' possibly at the expense of play and playing (Ministry of Education and Research, 2006).

The Norwegian Teachers' Union has contributed towards the new direction for kindergartens (Thoresen, 2005). The motivation here is the acknowledgement that the preschool teachers have sought for many years. The triangle of the OECD and the international community, the government and the Norwegian Teachers' Union have, seemingly different motives. Despite this, their united efforts will probably mean a change in the pedagogical traditions in Norwegian kindergartens. If the traditional, holistic approach is to survive, this will depend on the kindergartens and the preschool teachers' confidence and qualifications. The question is how sustainable the Nordic pedagogical approach is, in an era where 'learning' and 'knowledge' rather than 'play' is the new mantra for Early Childhood Education and Care.

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