Exploring implementation of an new innovative ECE-intervention

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Abstract
A new and innovative effort in the Danish day-care has achieved positive effects for all children in general and more specifically for socially endangered children. This effort disturbs the established everyday routine in the pedagogical practice and more particularly the often predominant ‘deficient culture’ which research has found to be predominant in the Danish public day-care. Interventions that focus on and seek to reduce the children’s problematic behaviour or possible ‘deficiencies’ are also often at the core of other international ECE-programmes. Danish survey studies show that the work with socially disadvantaged children in the public sector is characteristic of inertia which calls for new work procedures. On the basis of experiences from the ASP-project (from 2006-09), this paper explores possibilities of turning inertia into social innovation in the public sector? And in that process, the paper also discusses the pitfalls of this work.

CONTENT (rel t. PPT)
1. The ASP - an innovative approach to ECE-programmes, aims and concepts
2. Theoretical and empirical starting points
3. Research methods
4. Main findings: Approaches to innovation, internal & external conditions, the role of management
5. Discussion and conclusion: ‘Looking for opportunities rather than a threat’ (Drucker, 1984, 183) combined with critical realism. A welfare state under pressure (may) put the employees under pressure.

Key Words:
ECE-based intervention, implementation, social innovation, organizational learning.

[Introduction OH 2 + The aim of the ASP-project OH 3]
Introduction
Research in Danish relations in general day-care shows sign of some degree of inertia in relation to efforts targeting socially endangered children. The claim is, however, that by seeking to generate social innovation in the public day-care institutions, we can counteract ‘negative social inheritance’ in the long and short run. Here, social innovation is defined as “renewal aimed at improving the social services”. International research has shown that if a society employs early efforts for endangered children in day-care it can achieve positive results, and the earlier the effort of fighting negative social inheritance the better results for the children, their family and various
socio-economical factors. Today, we have evidence that an early effort also generates positive effects in a Danish context. 60 day-care centres and 3000 children in two Danish municipalities have tested a new effort introduced by the ASP-programme from 2006-2009. ASP stands for Action Competence in Social Pedagogical Work with Socially Endangered Children in Day-care. The ASP-programme has generated positive effects when measured on the day-care children’s social competences and learning.

[The concept of socially disadvantaged children OH 4:]

Socially disadvantaged children (the target group) can be defined as:

› Children with a socially impaired background
  (poverty, unemployment among parents, short or no education, parents on welfare payment and/or difficult divorces)
› These children are at risk of being socially disadvantaged put in a vulnerable position, i.e. excluded from the children’s community.
  The problem lies in the tendency to ‘individualize’ and work with compensation rather than innovation (see also Jensen, 2005)

Need for social innovation as an effort targeting this problem

[The theoretical and empirical starting point OH 5:]

ASP is inspired by previous intervention and effect studies, e.g. Perry Preschool (cf. Heckmann, 2008).

The novelty is:

› ASP draws on theories of Innovation and Organizational learning (OL) - learning is seen as situated, social and tied to communities of practices. It is a precondition for innovation.
› ASP is an experimental study & based on data about the individual AND the institutional level - contrary to other experimental ECE-intervention studies.
› General public day-care means no selection of children for a certain ‘special pedagogical’ effort focussing on individuals & no selection of particularly dedicated or especially educated preschool teachers.

[Theoretical framework of social innovation OH 6]

The American Professor in social science and management, Peter Drucker (1985), has found that one explanation to inertia in the public sector may be that the employees have no incentive to be innovative as there is no tradition for working towards new achievements but rather keeping one’s work within a set (budgetary) framework. Another explanation may be that new initiatives are not welcomed; task performance seems to be more tied to conventions and traditions. It is difficult to break with such a tradition which fundamentally is in opposition to the practice of social innovation. As a third and possibly most essential explanation Drucker points to the basic principle of work in the public sector which is “to do a good mission”. As a consequence, it often become difficult to set attainable or measurable goals as one is expected to achieve no less than the optimal.

In some respects Drucker’s theories may be outdated or irrelevant in a Danish context. Yet, assuming there is a point in his claims and thus allowing ourselves to be inspired by the claimed reasons for inertia, the conclusion must inevitably be that only a system of openness to the task at hand can turned around development.
Based on the findings of the ASP-projects qualitative analyses, the paper argues that this openness concerns a willingness to expose current routines and conventional ways of thinking and acting to new interpretations. The work of looking at own practice, including the understanding of socially disadvantaged children from a social contextual perspective, was at the core of the ASP-programme. Consequently, many Danish institutions already have experience in innovative thinking and being engaged in reconsidering the traditional “compensation and deficient view” on the individual child.

[Theoretical framework of organizational learning (OL) OH 7:]
From a pragmatic perspective (Elkjær, 2004):
› OL processes are triggered when routines and everyday practices are disturbed and challenged.
› The learning process centres around development and testing of new knowledge as the solution to disturbances.
› OL leads to the development of new actions and understandings, which create better everyday practices, innovation.
› OL emerges in interactions between the employees of the organisation and the institutional conditions.

[Methods OH 8:]
Quantitative methods assess the effects on children:
› The sample of institutions follows an RCT-design, the institutions are segmented on the basis of relevant criteria concerning the children’s social background (N=3000, N=60 inst)
Qualitative methods explore learning and innovation:
› Managers from intervention institutions (N=30) - qualitative interviews with managers, phone interview with ‘drop out’ & document analysis

Literature review systematically explores the relationship between the concept of Organizational Learning and Innovation

[Summary of main findings OH 9:]
The ASP-intervention was successful at:
› initiating processes that generate significant effect on children’s competences – socially and in terms of learning (based on the analyses of quantitative data)
› promoting practice that stimulate children’s learning and social competences (resources) through inclusion (based on the analysis of qualitative data)
› raising the professional level through a common language of “attention awareness” and “changed problem awareness” of socially disadvantaged (from an individualistic, deficit/to a social contextual resource approach)

[Being open to innovation OH 10:]
Being open to an innovative approach
Detailed analyses (exploring) of the implementation processes in the ASP-effort shows that the more the institutions work together on creating renewals and the more
innovatively they think, the greater the possibility of turning inertia into social innovation is.

From the ASP-project we have learned that the public sector can make great improvements in the quality of efforts for socially endangered children by focusing more attention on social innovation.

[Knowing and knowledge is not enough OH 11:]

Knowing and knowledge is not enough – innovation is based on three elements of learning

The ASP-qualification process is structured around three consecutive elements: 1) knowledge, 2) reflection and analysis followed by 3) implementation of new actions. The underlying idea of this construction of elements stems from an organizational learning theoretical assumption that knowledge, reflection and actions form a symbiotic unity. Consequently, if educational courses do not allocate time for analysis and reflection, we cannot expect that such courses teaching new knowledge will translate into new practice in the local working environment. Thus, an educational course with focus on innovation must comprise all of the three mentioned elements – either as part of the education or, as in the ASP-project, part of the qualification process.

To be able to implement the newly acquired knowledge in the everyday practice, this new knowledge must be processed, i.e. reflected upon, shared and interpreted with others in relation to previous knowledge and the current practice. The purpose of that process is to ‘disturb’ the local routine practice and trigger new and improved actions.

Often this process is better facilitated by the assistance and possibly critical perspective of outsiders. Without the disturbances, the field, in this case public day-care, runs the risk of continuing inertia. Put differently, without external inspiration, one is likely to continue the routines and conventional ways of thinking and acting.

Yet, implementation and innovation research has also found evidence that designing an as precise as possible intervention aiming at improving practice by way of new knowledge is not a simple task. It is a complex process which requires the involvement of both external and internal factors as they may hold possibilities as well as barriers to the intended implementation of the intervention. Another important factor is the management of the organizational learning and how opportunities are allowed to make an impact on practice. The management must make room for innovative communication, it must support and work towards the active involvement of the employees in the institution and be open to the employees’ diverse competence and appreciate (Easterby-Smith, 1997, Blazevic et al., 2004).

(The three elements of learning are:

The knowledge element which is based on the material (i.e. the ASP-qualification folder, Jensen et al., 2009c) and the associated documents (www.dpu.dk/hpa) which present aspects of evidence-based knowledge. This type of new (and theoretical) knowledge is brought into play with practice-based knowledge, which is also a very important type of knowledge that tends to form the basis of the local practice. The collective ‘pool’ of
theoretical and practice-based knowledge constitutes the fundamental basis of the ASP-intervention and its implementation.

*The reflection and analysis element.* When the current local practices and understandings are scrutinized in a systematic manner in the ASP-programme, it is perceived as constituting appropriate (or provoking) ‘disturbances’ of the relevant practice in the institution. If these disturbances are met with openness and if the employees, informed by the new knowledge, are not only willing to but also given the opportunity to take a fresh look at and reinterpret their work and task performance, they are likely to generate social innovation as a result of organizational learning.

*The implementation element* is also an element that must be “learned”. And this learning process entails a qualification process in which the institution works on finding its own new ways of working with the development of new ideas, new goals/subsidiary goals and strategies for developing new practices. In this context, the institution may choose to adopt a pure form of employee-driven innovation (see Høyrup, 2010) or a model in which the manager organizes and facilitates the learning process (Easterby-Smith, 1997, Blazevic et al., 2004).

[Three different approaches OH 12:]

**Different approaches and perceptions of opportunities**

The notion of reconsidering the established local understanding of the task performance, and thereby look for new solutions to handling the issue of socially disadvantaged children, often involves some degree of uncertainty and possibly also resistance. This was also the case in the ASP-project; the participating day-care managers who were in charge of implementing the intervention took very different approaches to the tasks presented in the programme.

Overall, three institutional approaches were identified; the innovative, the compliant (but potentially innovative) and the resistant.

Some institutions were used to take an innovation-oriented approach to the issue of socially endangered children (i.e. the innovative) others would traditionally apply a compensation approach (Jensen, 2005) (i.e. the compliant) while others again felt paralyzed by the many new challenges and demands of renewal as there were no concomitant resources (i.e. the resistant). For the two latter types of approaches, the majority managed to turnaround their practice during the project period and only few continued to apply an approach more characteristic of routine than innovation. Their explanation was, among others, a sense of fatigue with the constant external demand of changes presented by the system and the municipalities (see also Jensen et al., 2009). Nevertheless, common for all the institutions were a desire to improve the effort for socially endangered children.

[The innovative approach OH 13:]

**Common challenges:**

- **Externally induced demands** – make sense + ownership
- **Framework conditions** – balance resources & tasks
- **Power dynamics** – interpret & relate to external control/ internal culture
[Discussion OH 14:]
› The collective learning processes and the internal institutions cultural aspects conformed the task, and inertia became manifest (resistance)
› Manager and employees provided important preconditions for collective learning, motivation and openness – enacting for breaking the intertia (innovation)
› Manager tried together with employees to look for opportunities, BUT things takes time, the perceptions and learning approach new – discovering the inertia (compliants)
› Management must be explained further (Blazevic & Lievens, 2004)

[Conclusion OH 15:]
Further perspectives
The analyses have demonstrated a clear need for further exploration of the nature of this kind of ECE-interventions in the public day-care sector that are characterized by inertia and ‘openness to innovation, respectively. On the basis of a post-programme/intervention literature review of the connection between organizational learning and innovation, a number of studies have been found that support the finding in the ASP-project that the role of the way innovation is managed (or even better facilitated) is a hitherto neglected area. As a consequence, innovation management will be covered in the future explorations of our understandings of inertia found in certain areas in the public sector and its interrelation with the identified conceptions of opportunities. In short, we must concentrate our efforts on making room for the employees in the public sector to see the opportunities in working with socially endangered children. Focus should be on the opportunity 'rather than threat', as Drucker (1984, p. 183) phrases it.

[References OH 16:]
References

Epilogue
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The ASP-project homepage: