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**CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON DANISH EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE
- BETWEEN THE TECHNICAL AND THE POLITICAL**

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The definitive version was published in Early Years, Volume 30 Issue 3, October 2010.

doi:10.1080/09575146.2010.506599

(<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2010.506599>)

Abstract

This paper discusses trends in contemporary Danish early childhood education and care (ECEC). Data are various policy documents, along with material from ongoing research projects in which the authors are involved. It is claimed that contemporary policy on Danish day care services has a tendency to emphasize narrow curriculum improvements and standardized testing. The democratic dimensions are still relatively strong, but at the moment these dimensions are interpreted within a skills-and-testing framework, which is leading to a situation where the political masquerades as the technical.

Keywords: Denmark; policy; day care services; curriculum; social pedagogy

The claims and viewpoints in this paper are linked to research projects and paradigms that we, as a research unit, are currently involved in. We will start by sketching this material to provide a research context for the debate that follows.

Two distinct approaches to early childhood education and care can be identified (OECD, 2001, 2006): the early education approach and the social pedagogy approach. The early education approach generally results in a more centralizing and academic strategy towards curriculum content and methodology, while the social pedagogy tradition remains more local, child-centered and holistic.

Broström (Broström, 2002, 2006a, 2006b, 2009b) is working to develop a possible new paradigm in early childhood education and care. Departing from a traditional Danish perspective of social pedagogy, Broström is reaching for curriculum objectives such as children's all-round personal development, well-being, participation and critical thinking by bridging the concepts of care, upbringing and teaching into a critical framework oriented towards education for democracy. He does not shrink from understanding his proposal for an ECEC curriculum theory in relation to the teaching of con-

tent, and thus points toward the early education position, but at the same time, he brings care and children's perspectives to the forefront. This rethinking of the social pedagogy approach is consistent with the policy statements made by the Danish committee on starting school (Skolestartsudvalget, 2006), and both challenges day care professionals to reflect on curriculum theory and challenges primary school teachers to maintain and nurture a caring dimension in their teaching practices.

Recent developments in several fields of research including social and cultural psychology, critical sociology and neuropsychology suggest that young children are biologically prepared for life and yet they are shaped by and completed through each person's active participation in socio-cultural environments and activities (Bråten, 2009; Stern, 2004)

This provides postmodern research with the following ground rules:

- 1) To conduct research into the daily life of children - to theorize, investigate and experiment - is to interact simultaneously as an element of the phenomenon that is being investigated.
- 2) The daily life of the child materializes ontologically through the making of contextualized meaning.
- 3) The daily life of the child cannot be separated from normative conditions. Therefore the research must take into account all the ontological, epistemological and ethical elements that constitute the way a child 'comes to matter' (Barad, 2007; Hansen, 2010).

Against this background, new research seeks to identify criteria for a multi-scientific concept, conceiving the child's language constructions as complex interactions between ontogenetic instincts, matter, culture and policy. Children's agency and the neuronal components that constitute the self have become important fields of research (Barad, 2007; Broström, 2009a; Burman, 2008a, 2008b; Hansen, 2010; Haan & Gunnar, 2009).

This research aims to respond to the problem of inequality in the Danish education system by investigating whether day care centers for infants are able to compensate for the relatively low language abilities of children from less language-privileged homes, by trying to identify patterns of care, educational relations and joint attention (Hansen, 2010; Stern, 2004; Tomasello, 2003a).

In order to become an active participant and a creative learner, the child must develop linguistic nuances and learn the rules of language (Bateson, 2002; Tomasello, 2003b). This process can however be problematic if reflective day care workers who deliberately interact and create the proper conditions for learning do not expose the child to challenges. If this does not happen, children from less language-privileged homes will gradually experience the world as more and more incomprehensible; they will become unable to negotiate their social position and to express desires and needs, and they will become mere spectators as others seize the moment. The differences between children who are recognized for their abilities and those who are less stimulated will grow (Hansen, 2010).

It seems that one great challenge for the professionals working in current Danish transition practices is to be able to create and maintain democratic, pedagogic spaces for the continuing exploration and pursuit of children's meaning-making, well-being, and overall readiness to embark upon life as pupils in the school system. The EASE project (EASE, 2009) – a recently completed European collaborative research effort, aimed at just that: through Learning Stories (Carr, 2005) as vehicles of documentation of early literacy “events”, staff from day care centers for preschoolers and from kindergartens

were brought together and trained in a holistic, meaning-making oriented approach to early literacy as a transition phenomenon.

In line with findings from the EASE project, socio-cultural approaches to early literacy are gaining in strength (Razfar & Gutiérrez, 2003). These approaches are bringing questions of values, norms, power and identity directly into early literacy as a research and teaching practice (Gee, 2001, 2008; Street, 1995). These critical and inclusion-oriented perspectives at one and the same time complement and challenge the so-called simple view of reading, which interprets reading as the product of two core cognitive skills: decoding and (lexical-) comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Hoover & Gough, 1990). This simple view of reading informs contemporary Danish policy (Søndergaard et al., 2005). Interpreting early literacy through the socio-cultural palette enriches the analytical vocabulary, and might open some new pedagogical spaces in relation to issues of diversity (Jensen, 2010).

Having established the research context, we will now sketch out the landscape of contemporary Danish Early Childhood Education and Care.

Danish Early Childhood Education: The overall framework

With a population of 5.5 million citizens, Denmark is one of the smallest countries in the European Union. Between 1950 and the latest census in 2009, the population increased by 30% and became more culturally diverse. From 1980 to 2010, half a million immigrants of other ethnic origins have become Danish citizens. Of the workforce, 25% have no education above secondary school, 64% have professional education or training

and 7% have a long academic education. In February 2010, 4% of the population were unemployed (Statistik, 2009; Socialministeriet 2000).

Almost equal numbers of women and men make up the labour market. New families are currently offered 52 weeks of paid parental leave. After that period, the local municipalities offer day care.

The political system of government is based on a democratically elected parliament. The parliament [*Folketing*] has the legislative power, and the government [*Regeringen*], has the executive and administrative power. The constitution forms the basis of the Danish democratic system and serves as the basis of the Danish welfare system.

In terms of administration, the country is divided into five politically governed regions [*regioner*] and 98 municipalities [*kommuner*]. Local and regional authorities are responsible for approximately 70% of governmental activities, despite the fact that they only receive about 30% of taxes and excises. The difference is made up by central government grants. The regions have a more general responsibility for hospitals and infrastructure (Socialministeriet, 2000).

Danish day care professionals (pedagogues) have three and a half years of training and graduate as Bachelors. They hold 60% of the positions in day care institutions. Non-qualified staff fill the remaining 40% positions. However private day care homes, governed by the municipalities, provide day care services to 49% of all children from 0 to 3 years old. And if these day care services are included, qualified staff account for 52% and non-qualified staff for 48% (Statistik, 2009)

Private day care providers are not required to have professional training or a specific education and can provide day care services for up to five children in the day care provider's own home.

Day care services and public schools: two laws – common grounds

In Denmark, day care for infants [*vuggestue*] and day care for preschoolers [*børnehave*] are often viewed as a whole and termed day care services, which are subject to the recently revised day care services Act. It is not mandatory for children to attend day care, and they can attend until the age of six.

Denmark has among the world's highest percentages of day care enrollment. Approximately 90% of children aged between one and three attend either a day care institution specifically designed for infants or a mixed-aged institution or receive day care services organized by the municipality in a day care provider's home. About 95% of three to five year-olds are enrolled in day care for preschoolers, and the majority of children (98%) between six and eight years attend after-school centers (Statistik, 2009). Day care for infants and preschoolers is often provided in one institution while leisure time centers belong to the schools.

The year a child turns six, he or she has the right to be enrolled for free in the public school [*Folkeskole*], which in Denmark unifies what is elsewhere known as primary and lower secondary school. Alternatives to the public school do exist – private schools and home schooling – but that the great majority of children attend public schools, which are subject to the public school Act (Retsinformation, 2009).

Although the day care services and the public schools are subject to two different laws, there is ongoing work to inscribe in both laws matters that ease and optimize the transition from day care to school. At present, the two laws contain many similarities and phrases that are intended to promote the transition – and the related pedagogical practices - as joint efforts, involving collaboration between day care staff in day care centers for preschoolers and kindergarten class teachers (who have been educated as day care professionals) and other school staff.

On the following two points, the laws are especially congruent:

- Both the day care services and the public schools strive to provide children with academic skills, general competences and opportunities for diverse, personal development. Both settings are focused on the well-being of children.
- The democratic dimension is clearly stated in both acts. Day care services and schools must, by law, provide children with an understanding of the key components of participatory democracy, and facilitate an atmosphere of equality and freedom of spirit in the everyday practices (this last part is explicitly stated in the public schools Act)

As a final note on the legislative phrases, the day care services – in collaboration with the parents – are responsible for facilitating a “good transition to school”. The nurturing of 1) basic competences and 2) general motivation towards learning is thought to do this.

In the following sections we will discuss how this continuity-oriented policy is being implemented on the municipality-level by a quality assurance system of educational and psychological counsellors. The best practice and learning-dimensions of ECEC will be emphasized, leading to a discussion of a national day care service curriculum.

Quality Assurance

Every municipality provides educational and psychological counselling for day care center workers. These services are meant as a form of quality assurance; the aim is to ensure similar standards for all day care centers in the nationwide system. There is no specific legislation on these services, but they are governed by an amendment to the public school act.

The counselling services are also used as an intermediary between the political system and the day care centers in order to inspire and regulate the day care centers according to contemporary national policy, for example, to focus on language abilities, to implement standardized curricula or to spread so-called “best practice” across the nation.

Best practice is a concept that promotes pedagogical methods that have proved effective. The promotion of these ‘proven methods’ often takes the form of nationwide dissemination without taking context or theory much into account. It is of secondary importance why a specific practice seems to have a beneficial effect in one particular context. In other words, pedagogical methods and forms of practice are transferred and used due to notions of best practice rather than theoretical considerations. One of the implications is that pedagogical practice is contextualized, and only to a certain degree can be transferred to a different practice, without modifications (Burman, 2008b). As a result best practice as a conceptualized principle in some cases can end up being part of an exclusion-process, especially for socially exposed children, (Madsen, 2005; Burman, 2008b). This way, by claiming that it is both possible and reasonable to compare performance anywhere in the world, irrespective of context, best practice is a powerful

tool for governing at a distance (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007), bringing what Jensen (2005) calls ‘the discourse of manuals’ into the day care and teaching professions.

Best practice appeals to politicians, probably because the concept has substantial impact as common sense; everybody wants pedagogy that ‘works’. Therefore, best practice is often used as an argument for legislation, especially in pedagogical contexts where theoretical evidence is considered of minor importance compared to practice-based evidence. It is clear that education is not a purely technocratic matter, but if we are serious about education as a profound moral and political practice, we as researchers (and as citizens in a democracy), must not refrain from contesting such attempts to mask the political as the technical (Biesta, 2007; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Dahlberg et al., 2007).

A national day care service curriculum

The implementation of a learning dimension in the early years paved the way for a national curriculum, so in 2004 the Educational Curricula Act was passed by the Danish parliament. The curriculum requires all day care centers for preschoolers to implement six dimensions of aims and content, which are expressed as general themes: 1) Personal competences, 2) social competences, 3) language, 4) body and movement, 5) nature and natural phenomena, and 6) cultural forms of expression and values (Folketinget, 2003). The parents and staff of the individual day care center must discuss and interpret these themes, and once a year the day care center staff create their own curriculum based on their own specific needs and circumstances.

The above six dimensions of the curriculum must be seen in the light of the overall aims mentioned in the act including, first and foremost, the perspective of democracy and of seeing the child as an active member of society, who participates in democracy and contributes to the development of culture and society, thereby obtaining knowledge of and insight into society. However, it is left to the discretion of the day care professionals themselves to interpret these general objectives.

One can argue that the act promotes day care centers as democratic meeting places, where children can be active participants and have positive experiences with each other and the adults (day care workers, teachers). Based on such a fundamental democratic everyday life, children will ideally be exposed to pedagogical practices that have both caring and educational dimensions (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005).

However, descriptions of practices in day care centers indicate a number of challenges, the first of which is that day care center staff have to draw up a curriculum each year focusing on the six dimensions of goals and content and describing the methods used. There is a tendency to narrow down goals and objectives, which results in a mechanical practice of teaching basic skills rather than a vital lived practice. And the care dimension in many day care centers is still seen as custodial safekeeping of children, and not as a mutual relationship between the day care worker and the child, characterized by a child's perspective and empathy, and focusing on the child's well-being, learning and development.

To sum up, it seems as if the omnipresent challenge for contemporary Danish ECEC is how to respond to policy that influences curricula and pedagogical practices in

potentially narrowing ways. In the following section, we will visit the realms of language acquisition and early literacy to present a more detailed example of policy into practice.

Policy into practice: Language Acquisition and Early Literacy

In an international ranking of children's reading skills performed in 1994, Denmark was ranked relatively low (Mejding, 1994). In the Danish public and professional debates that followed, this was perceived as very embarrassing, and influenced the policy level in a somewhat shock-like way (Laursen & Hildebrandt, 2009). Ten years into the new millennium the shock has worn off, but a discourse on how to respond to the growing influence of cross-national benchmarking projects has established itself in a dominating position. Mirroring contemporary trends in OECD countries, Danish educational policy is inscribed in a regime of accountability, where schools and day care services are expected to explain the so called schooling outcomes in terms of effectiveness and quality (OECD, 2008). This discourse emphasizes a) the standardization of curriculum and b) the competition among schools on the quasi-market of education (Hill, 2009; Rasmussen, 2007). It thus promotes the image of teaching as a transmission of discrete skills (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Dahlberg et al., 2007; Rhedding-Jones, 2007). It is in this light that we view the following initiatives regarding language acquisition and early literacy:

It is part of the legislative framework of the day care services section II § 11, that they must offer to conduct a so-called screening for language deficits the year a child turns three. The information from the screening is to be used for planning and

conducting follow-up or compensatory pedagogical activities if they are deemed necessary by the staff and the parents (Retsinformation, 2007).

The public school must provide children whose primary home language is other than Danish and who have not yet started attending primary school with access to language screening and language stimulation programs, as noted in the public school Act, chapter 2, § 4a (Retsinformation, 2009).

It is stated policy that information on the language skills of the individual child – obtained from screenings and everyday observations and interactions – should be used to plan language stimulation activities both at home and in the day care center. These plans could also be used as a source of information for the post-transition work with language and early literacy acquisition in the first years in school (Retsinformation, 2007, 2009).

Finally, it is relatively recent policy that all public primary and lower secondary schools must give *all* children in kindergarten class a language screening/test, regardless of the results of the screening of three year-olds in the day care centers (mentioned above) or “language-risk” factors such as socio-economic status and/or ethnic background. At the moment (spring 2010) this mandatory kindergarten class language test is heavily contested at all levels from teachers and parents to politicians, due to a revision of the law on day care services and the public school Act § 11 (Retsinformation, 2007, 2009).

Regardless of the effects of these screenings and tests, we claim that this regime is displacing important problems of societal and structural origin. This kind of policy -

emphasizing the curriculum, teaching methods and the individual student's ability and motivation to learn – has a tendency to blur the political and socio-economical aspects of underachievement within the domain of education. 'Dispensing a curriculum' to eradicate illiteracy is an act drawing on the same technocratic logic as a doctor dispensing a pill to control the symptoms of the patient. In research, this is the logic of neoclassical experimentalism (Howe, 2004; Miller & Crabtree, 2005), which might serve some purposes but should be used with caution within the domain of early childhood education and care. As Lenz-Taguchi (2010) points out, it seems as if the more we know about the complexities involved in young children's learning and meaning-making, the more we shape policy around narrow, complexity-reducing curricula and teaching strategies. Degrees of success and failure in language acquisition and early literacy should never be understood solely as symptoms of cognitive and/or motivational dysfunctions of the individual child. We must first and foremost ask what it might mean against a complex, socio-cultural background (Jensen, 2010).

One of the aims of the legislation is that day care must combat exclusion and negative social inheritance (Retsinformation, 2007). Therefore, day care centers are an integrated part of both the public provision for children with special needs and of the provision of social services and care (Retsinformation, 2007). The overall idea is to keep all children in their home environment and to make their upbringing as 'normal' as possible. To see day care centers as an integrated part of the social care system means that day care workers have an important role in spotting children at risk.

When the term *social-pedagogical provision* is used in the day care services Act, ‘social’ refers to socio-economically defined problems and not, as originally intended, education in *community, fellowship and solidarity* (Natorp, 1904). Therefore, special education practices may have a tendency to focus on socio-economic circumstances and thereby construct problems and ignore the inclusive potential of the day care center as a community.

To make the school system responsible for improving social mobility through accountability is to mask the political as the technical. As Bennett & Moss (2010) argue, it is not possible to tackle exclusion within the educational system without addressing the underlying societal issue of inequality, meaning that political questions of taxation and income inequality go hand in hand with inclusion as ECEC policy.

So far we have discussed some contemporary trends within Danish early childhood education. We have pointed to the continuity-seeking aims in both curricula and in legislative frameworks in day care and school. We have focused on how some fairly recent developments in policy and practices related to language acquisition and early literacy could be seen as unintended displacements of societal problems. The educational system is thought to combat inequality and improve Danish ‘human capital’ in a general way through the introduction of standards and testing. In the following sections, we will first explore these Danish trends in relation to the Treaty of Lisbon, 2000, and then look at how the trends manifest themselves as professional concerns.

Reorganisation and standardization of education

The Treaty of Lisbon, 2000, is about the reorganization and standardization of education. Education should move from general aims and goals like “well-being and personal development” to a description of objectives for areas and subjects with a definition of basic skills expressed in eight so-called key competences. Correspondingly, the two *Starting Strong* reports recommend a number of political and educational strategies in order to support young children’s learning and in a wider context, to create equality and access for all children, in particular, disadvantaged groups whose educational potential requires support.

In addition, all the documents mentioned as well as the report *Efficiency and equity in European education and training systems* (The European Commission, 2006) are not only concerned with education; first and foremost, they all take an economic perspective. This is very clearly expressed in the Treaty of Lisbon, which notes: “During the meeting of the European Council in Lisbon (March 2000), the Heads of State or Government launched a “Lisbon Strategy” aimed at making the European Union (EU) the most competitive economy in the world and achieving full employment by 2010.”

Research shows that early childhood education and care has a positive impact on children’s learning and development (Sammons, Melhuish, Siraj-Blatchford, Taggart and Elliot, 2002, 2003). This is reflected in the following message from the European Commission (2006, p. 5) to the member states:

Pre-primary education has the highest returns in terms of the achievement and social adaptation of children. Member States should invest more in pre-primary education as an effective means to establish the basis for further learning, preventing school drop-out, increasing equity of outcomes and overall skill levels.

Such political statements have a major impact on national initiatives: As we have already touched upon, there is a clear tendency to take an educational approach by distinctly formulating goals and objectives and connecting a number of simplified methods. Moreover, local politicians and administrations add a number of prescribed tests so the day care pedagogues are able to check the extent to which the educational goals and objectives are realized. It is true that the goals and objectives need to be described clearly, but if they are made too specific, there is a risk of making ECEC narrow and lifeless.

In many European countries including Denmark, the following tendencies can be observed:

- an increasing use of standards and manuals
- a use of narrow intermediate aims and indicators to measure children's achievements
- a variety of evaluation and test methods
- the implementation of quality reports, which make preschool teachers and day care professionals responsible for their work – so-called accountability

These developments have been inspired by George Bush's 'No Child Left Behind' Act, which made schools and teachers financially responsible for test results (Noddings, 2007). This seems rather problematic. Professor Davis Berliner from Arizona University has investigated the consequences of using 'high stakes' tests, that is, extreme forms of control and monitoring that make teachers responsible for children's test results. He concludes that such forms of testing often lead to cheating; among other things, teachers help children during the test sessions (Amrein & Berliner, 2003; Nichols & Berliner, 2007).

Danish Professional Concerns: The threat of schoolification

Danish day care workers, loyal to their professional beliefs, have resisted a national or centralized curriculum. However, recent decades have seen a move toward a slightly more formalized curriculum. With the social services Act in 1998, more specific educational objectives were made official policy.

The central concept in this legislative language is *care*. Here, care has a dual meaning, both as the custodial safekeeping of children while their parents are working and as reflection and decision-making based on a professional understanding of children's needs, well-being and development. The day care worker's role is to take the child's needs and perspectives as her starting point and combine these with an empathic and positive attitude toward the child to create environments and activities to meet the child's needs. The second usage is consistent with the usage of early childhood educators in other countries when they refer to the *education* of young children as something beyond mere custodial care. Danish day care workers reject the word "teacher" to describe their roles and "education" to describe their interactions with children. In fact, however, Danish day care workers actually refer to the same level of professionalism when they use the word *care* as do early educators in other parts of the world when they talk about *education*. However, the content of this highly professional level of *care* in Denmark might be considerably different from the content of *education* in other parts of the world.

In another notable break with tradition, the Social Services Act introduced the terms *learning* and *learning processes*, instead of the usual term *development* within the context of Danish day care center goals and outcomes. Before the act was passed in 1998, children had "developed" in day care and "learned" at school; but this document

began, at least on a rhetorical level, to break down this distinction. Among other things the Social Services Act requires that day care workers facilitate experiences and activities likely to stimulate the imagination, creativity and linguistic skills of the child and provide each child with space and opportunities for playing and learning, for physical exercise, for socializing and for exploring their surroundings.

The politicians are not necessarily looking for a learning process characterized by traditional sessions where, for example, day care professionals organize language learning by using special materials in order to support children's social competences. On the contrary, there is an argument for the fact that children's learning comes through all kind of activities during the day: Children's activities inherently involve learning processes. Therefore, day care centers must be aware of possible learning elements that can be included in various activities. Adults must show special awareness when a child asks to learn, or to learn more, or to learn new things.

The language of the legislation does not strictly formulate what should be done in day care centers. The absence of a narrow policy based on specified educational theories, goals and content allows day care workers, parents and children to create their own life in the day care center and promotes individual educational styles. Here, day care workers and parents and, ideally, the children themselves, are able to work together to create the day care center, and by doing so, to pave the way for individually appropriate activities that will foster learning processes and development.

With regards to professional concerns about schoolification, it seems as if although the legislation does not demand a move toward a more formal and teacher-directed practice, there are some tendencies toward this.

A number of factors influence the educational debate and also decisions taken by the municipal authorities, which might move educational practice away from the ‘Nordic model’ and towards a so-called ‘schoolification’.

There is a tendency to understand early years in the light of school and no longer on its own terms. Taking Denmark as an illustrative *national* example, one of the arguments used for the preschool curriculum was that “the increased focus on learning will contribute to a good transition to school and in general a good school experience” (*Comments to the bill*, Folketinget, 2003. Translated by the authors).

The international political focus on learning in early childhood education and care – primarily on language and social competences – aims to bring preschool closer to school. Thus transition activities and strategies like coherence in curricula plus a closer collaboration between preschool teachers and school teachers are tools for realizing the idea of early learning, and probably a more school oriented learning, which we in the Nordic countries (and also in *Starting Strong 2*) term “schoolification”.

Though documents like *Starting Strong 2* (OECD, 2006) warn against such a narrowing of the notion of early childhood care and education, we see an emerging tendency to focus on “readiness for school”, learning standards and the use of narrow goals and objectives followed up by tests. So there is a clear risk of a dominating influence

from school, which can lead to the implementation of effective and quick subject learning and use of methods based on evidence of “what works”.

Concluding remarks

The current strands in Danish ECEC policy emphasize curriculum improvements and standardized testing in relation to language acquisition and early literacy. The democratic dimensions are still relatively strong, but at the moment these dimensions are interpreted within a skills-and-testing framework, which is leading to a situation where the political is masquerading as the technical. By this we mean that deeply political discussions about what content to put into the ECEC curricula, and how to teach that content, are being framed as matters of what works, and how more generally to optimize pedagogic practice in relation to standardized and fixed aims and ends.

The arguments in this paper rest on a firm belief in the importance of rethinking the traditional approaches to early childhood education. We have discussed how transition bridges day care service and school. But this bridge is forged in a time where standardization of curricula and testing is on the rise. Language acquisition and early literacy are examples of ECEC dimensions, which are heavily affected by recent policy. What is sorely needed is a theoretical and practical approach that unifies the concepts of care, upbringing and education, in an attempt to further develop the strengths of the social pedagogy approach, while answering to the challenge of globalization (Broström 2006a, 2006b, 2009; Hansen, 2010; Jensen, 2010; OECD 2001, 2006)

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