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A Window of Change: How COVID-19 Disrupted Pedagogical Approaches in Danish Kindergartens

Karen Wistoft¹, Aske Clark² and Lars Qvortrup³

Abstract

COVID-19 disrupted almost all pedagogical activities in Danish kindergartens. Basic principles were challenged because of new demands for hygiene and social and physical distance. More activities were moved outdoors, group sizes were minimized, parents had to stay outside the grounds and kindergarten teachers had to deal with a lot of insecurity. However, after a challenging period, new potentials emerged, and new, promising pedagogical principles were identified. In this article, we present examples of COVID-19 disruption in Danish kindergartens with children aged 2-5, based on a mixed methods study using survey data as background material for qualitative field observations and interviews. The research questions are: What characterizes the learning environments and pedagogical approaches in kindergartens, and how are they redefined over time in response to the two-phase disruption during COVID-19? The article provides four answers concerning: rethinking play activities; rethinking food and meals; rethinking handover and parent relations; and handling insecurity. In addition, two short sections deal with the consequences for management and the kindergarten teachers' professional identity.

Key words: COVID-19 ✕ Kindergartens ✕ Disruption ✕ Rethinking ✕ Pedagogical principles

COVID-19 timeline in Denmark

In order to understand the redefinitions of pedagogical approaches in Danish kindergartens during the COVID-19 period, it is important to understand the social and political context and the timeline of closures and reopenings during COVID-19.

Table 1: COVID-19 timeline in Denmark

Date	Action
27 February 2020	The first Danish person tests positive for COVID-19. Subsequently, Denmark is gradually shut down
11 March 2020	All schools, day-care centres and institutions are shut down
15 April 2020	Nurseries, kindergartens and grades 0-5 are reopened. Many councils allot three-four resources persons to medium-sized institutions. The consequences are fewer children per adult and smaller, fixed groups with each 'their' kindergarten teacher
After 20 May 2020	Gradual normalization; however, many kindergartens maintain the fixed groups based on the children's age and assigned specific teachers
Late summer 2020	Increasing 'Corona weariness' can be observed among children, teachers and principals. Demands change often, and there are many factors to take into consideration. Many activities are put on standby, while new ones emerge

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Autumn 2020 and start 2021	Many principals and staff groups now employ a perspective of 'long hauls', focusing on developing new opportunities and rebuilding professional enthusiasm. Kindergarten teachers and parents express that this ensures more structure and peace of mind for both children and adults
16 December 2020	Schools and other educational institutions are shut down again, but the shut-down does not include nurseries and kindergartens
1 March 2021	Denmark begins a gradual reopening

Research Project

The purpose of the project “A window of change: transformations of playful learning environments in kindergarten and primary school during Covid-19” was to document the complex processes of rethinking playful learning environments in kindergartens and schools in order to learn from experiences with Covid-19, based on the idea of ‘building back better’. The research question was: What are the conditions for playful learning in kindergarten and primary school after the global outbreak of Covid-19?

This research question was divided into three sub-questions:

1. What characterizes the learning environments and pedagogical approaches in kindergarten and primary school, and how are they redefined over time in response to the two-phase disruption during Covid-19?
2. How do these environments and pedagogical approaches affect children’s socio-emotional conditions – positively or negatively?
3. Which early experiences from Covid-19 guide iterations and re-definitions of playful learning environments at later stages, and which resources and strategies, are used to negotiate and establish learning environments and pedagogical approaches?

This article focuses on kindergartens with a starting point in sub-question 1.

Data Basis

The project was carried out as a mixed methods study (Babbie, 2013; Creswell, 2014). Data was collected from five geographically dispersed municipalities of varying sizes. In regard to the day-care area, one survey was completed for the pedagogical staff and one for children (aged 3-5) and their parents. The survey was completed in the period November-December 2020. The survey for the pedagogical staff was completed at the workplace, whereas the survey for children and parents was made available to the parents on a web-based platform. The latter survey was divided into two parts: the first contained questions for the children, the other for the parents. The survey was completed in the manner that the children were helped by their parents in answering their part, while the parents completed the other part on their own. Due to the unusual circumstances, the response rate was low. In order to reduce uncertainty and increase reliability, the following is based on responses from only one of the participating municipalities. Responses from pedagogical staff were 93 out of 659 prospective responses, which gives a response rate of 14.1 %. The child/parent questionnaire was completed by 231 out of 2,624 prospective responses, giving a response rate of 8.8 %. This is generally a relatively low response rate, but compared to similar surveys where the questionnaire is not sent to individual respondents (for instance by email), but distributed in the form of a link on a web-based platform such as the school’s learning management system, the response rate is as could be expected (Carley-Baxter, Hill, Roe, Twiddy, Baxter & Ruppenkamp, 2013). The latter approach, on the other hand, has the

potential of reaching out to a high number of possible respondents and thereby achieving a high frequency of responses, which yields more statistical power.

In total, field observations and interviews were carried out in five institutions, resulting in 12 interviews with 7 kindergarten teachers, 6 interviews with principals and 9 interviews with 5 parents (some teachers, principals and parents were interviewed twice).

The qualitative collection of empirical material that constitutes the basis of this article took place in the last half of 2020, with participant observations in one nature kindergarten and supplementary interviews carried out with kindergarten teachers and principals in two further municipalities.

The aim of the article is, based on the above-listed COVID-19 phases, to investigate which areas saw changes and what they entailed in terms of challenges and new opportunities. The article identifies four themes: rethinking play activities (outdoors, less use of toys); rethinking food and meals (in small groups); rethinking handover and parent relations; and handling insecurity. In addition, two short sections deal with the consequences for management and the kindergarten teachers' professional identity.

Theoretical foundation

The word 'disruption' is a central concept in the research question underlying this study: *how are learning environments and pedagogical approaches in kindergartens redefined over time in response to the two-phase disruption during COVID-19?*

Disruption theory was originally developed in the field of business research. The focus of classical disruption theory is the business process in which a small enterprise targets overlooked customers with a novel but modest offering and gradually moves upmarket to challenge the industry leaders (Christensen, Raynor, and McDonald, 2015). A central concept is the appearance of new technologies that facilitate the business disruption, cf. the book *Seeing What's Next* (Christensen, Scott, and Roth, 2004). Disruption theory aims to predict whether, how and when certain technologies are likely to prove disruptive (or sustaining) in a range of industries in the future.

However, the concept is often employed in a broader sense to describe the phenomenon that new technologies change the market situation significantly and, e.g., result in existing products and businesses becoming superfluous in the field. In an even broader sense, the concept associates to the phenomenon that new circumstances, which may be technological, social or caused by nature, change the conditions of existing approaches. This gives rise to a reaction where new forms of practice are developed with an eye to sustaining the services of the affected businesses or institutions.

It is the latter sense of the concept of disruption that is employed in this article. The pedagogical framework for nurseries and kindergartens changed due to the new circumstances posed by the Corona pandemic, and in order to sustain their core services, these institutions had to reinvent their pedagogical activities. Instead of referring to the narrow conceptual field of the theory, we found it conducive to engage broader concepts from the field of sociological systems theory. Here, social systems, including organizations and businesses, are described as autopoietic, i.e. closed, self-referential and self-sustaining systems that only interact with the surrounding world insofar as it either impedes or facilitates this process of self-preservation. This contact between systems and their surroundings is termed "structural coupling" (Luhmann 1997). Nurseries and kindergartens are dependent on the inflow

of economic resources and usually governed by political objectives. However, as a basic principle, the institutions attempt to maintain the highest possible level of independence from the surrounding environment because their practice is primarily informed by pedagogical principles, customs and ideals. COVID-19 represents a phenomenon in the surrounding world that directly affects the pedagogical practice in day-care, primarily because it entails new conditions for the social interaction between children and adults and mutually between children. This entails a transformation of existing pedagogical principles and habits, which are not evoked but take on new forms.

Method

Survey

As mentioned above, the quantitative part of the article is based on the web survey that was carried out in the municipality with the highest response rate among the six participating municipalities (Callegaro, Manfreda, & Vehovar, 2015; Fink, 2009; Krosnick, 2018; Naithani, 2011; Schrauf, 2016; Sue & Ritter, 2012). 231 responses were received from children and parents, and 93 from staff.

Field Observations and Interviews

The focus of the fieldwork (Barratt and Hacking 2011) was limited to a number of concrete consequences of COVID-19 restrictions. Shortly after we started visiting different kindergartens, the institutions one by one notified us that they had received municipal orders not to accept outside visitors. This meant that observations in the kindergartens had to be postponed or cancelled.

The plan for gaining access to information in the kindergartens consisted of carrying out Go-Along interviews, but this was only possible in the kindergartens we were allowed to visit. If we had studied a different age group, it would have been an option to use audio-visual media, but in this case, the preferred interview form was not translatable to other formats. In several humanities and social sciences fields, Go-Along interviews are a preferred method, especially in regard to understanding informants' relationship to their physical surroundings (Carpiano, 2009; Garcia et. al. 2012).

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with kindergarten teachers, parents and principals. To the extent that it was possible, the informants were interviewed twice with approximately five months between interviews. Like many other forms of interaction in the period, most interviews had to take place via digital media – either over the phone or as video meetings. The upside of this was that it gave more freedom for the kindergarten teachers and principals, who would otherwise have struggled to find the time and opportunity during their busy workday.

Anthropological method

Fieldwork is essential to the anthropological method and can even be termed the cornerstone of the discipline. This includes a vast range of approaches and varieties of interview, observation and different forms of participation. Common to these approaches is the aim of looking behind words and actions, and achieving an outline of the logics that are at play. Fieldwork is thus not a fixed model for data collection that can be employed in the same manner across different contexts, but rather a range of context-dependent approaches to people, into whose 'lived lives' the researcher wishes to gain insight (Ingold, 2013). As this project consists of empirical material collected in different Danish kindergartens in different municipalities, this empirical basis is not classical fieldwork, where researchers make observations for a longer period in the same place, but rather a form of "multi-sited" fieldwork (Marcus, 1995). The informants in the different institutions took part in informal conversations, semi-structured

interviews and – in the children’s case – Go-Along interviews (Carpiano, 2009; Garcia et. al. 2012; Kinney, 2017).

Due to the nature of fieldwork, which often involves a high degree of participation in the field among people whose everyday lives in some way or other are influenced by the researcher’s presence, the ethical aspects will always need to be taken into consideration. This project entailed several ethical aspects, not least because it involved children who had to be approached in a manner that made them feel comfortable (Gulløv & Højlund, 2003).

In the present project, the approach to the field had to be tailored for the concrete circumstances, which included the limitations posed by carrying out fieldwork during a global pandemic, where access to the field at times was significantly hindered.

The collaboration and interviews with the different informants required distinction between children and adults who need to be approached with different means – not least highly different forms of interview. It also entailed distinction between different types of adult informants in the field, including parents, pedagogical staff and institution principals. Each group represented different perspectives because they view the same aim – to ensure the well-being of children in an environment with many changes and readjustments – through different lenses.

Research Ethic

This research project is not political or moral but education scientific, and was based on the criterion that it was to contribute to – or improve – societal conditions with a particular eye to the COVID-19 pandemic. Educational science is an empirical and theoretical form of social science whose relation to ethics can be explained with inspiration from the American sociologist Talcott Parsons (1962 [1947]), who emphasizes that science is in itself a social norm system and that ethics help reflect on these norms as well as adding to the understanding of how science can contribute to a positive development of society.

Therefore, we continuously reflected on the ethical aspects of the research results in terms of positive potentials, e.g. development potentials and new useful knowledge, and negative potentials, e.g. the conflicts of interest and challenges related to COVID-19 restrictions in kindergartens.

In order to achieve validity, we worked with valid general relevance. The criteria of validity employed indicate whether the research is reliable or not, after which the results can be related or compared to other studies.

In order to demonstrate responsibility and ensure the informants’ (children, kindergarten teachers, principals and parents) integrity and confidentiality, all personal data was anonymized to avoid personal identification⁴. The same is the case for the kindergartens, which were also anonymized with regard to common research ethical principles of responsibility, limitation of purpose, data minimization, transparency and compliance. This means that we informed pedagogical staff and principals about the purpose of the study and obtained informed consent from the parents. It also means that we processed

⁴ Because this data is not personally identifiable, we did not have to report the data collection to the Danish Data Protection Agency (Danish Data Protection Agency <https://www.datatilsynet.dk>)

the data specifically with an eye to the research aims. In the data collection process, we went with a “need to have” rather than a “nice to have” approach in order to ensure data minimization. In order to ensure transparency, we used easily comprehensible language in the data reports, which were sent to the six municipalities by the end of the study. If we were unsure of the correctness of, e.g., the citations selected, we asked the individual informant for verification.

Results

The following section will present the main findings of the two surveys, demonstrating how the overall study is indicative of some valid tendencies regarding the effects of COVID-19 for the reopening of the kindergartens. Subsequently, parts of the qualitative analyses will be presented. We make sure that the qualitative analyses are representative by selecting the examples based on the survey results.

Summary of the two Surveys

As mentioned, two surveys were carried out: one for children and parents and one for the staff in the kindergartens.

The survey addressing children and parents indicates that the situation of reopening with restrictions did not impact the perceived quality of the kindergartens – perhaps even the opposite. The analysis of the children’s responses shows that nearly all the children (97 %) during the period of reopening experience having a good friend in kindergarten, just like nearly all (95 %) respond that they like the other children and are happy with their playgroup. Nearly all the children (96 %) also respond that they like the grown-ups in kindergarten, and 96 % go to the grown-ups for comfort if they are feeling sad. 94 % find that a grown-up is available if the need arises. Not all the children seem to have realized that the circumstances have changed, while a small minority, consciously or subconsciously, have challenged the many rules of conduct. 77 % of the children have noticed that there are physical restrictions in the playground, while 23 % do not experience that this is the case. According to 11 % of the children, they sometimes transgress these restrictions, while 89 % report that they do not.

83 % of the parents feel sufficiently informed by the day-care institution in regard to Corona restrictions. 88 % agree or agree completely that the situation has been handled efficiently, while 7 % disagree or disagree completely. 35 % of the parents are nervous that the children will catch Corona in the institution. Only a minority of 20 % respond that they are worried about their children’s learning and development in day-care, while 71 % indicate the opposite. 36 % are worried about how the pandemic affects the children’s mental health, and 42 % are worried about the impact on friendships.

The survey for the pedagogical staff indicates that Coronavirus affects them a lot in their daily lives. Almost half of them are worried about becoming infected. At the same time, a large percentage, 79 %, are worried that their family/friends might become sick. In regard to the pedagogical activities, 85 % of the respondents report that they have had indoor and outdoor areas divided into zones, and 87 % respond that they have had rules about extra hand hygiene. Just over half of the respondents report that parents have been barred from entering the day-care institution, and that days have been organized differently than before the breakout. 75 % respond that there have been more outdoor activities during the reopening phase than before. About two thirds find that the situation has influenced the pedagogical work by reinforcing friendships and creating a better sense of community among the children. Also, 60 % report that the circumstances increase the opportunity to support individual children’s personal and social development.

Rethinking Play Activities

Our study shows that play in the period to a larger degree took place outside, with 'rethinking' of the activities. The immediate reason for this was that toys, due to COVID-19, have to be sterilized, which makes it easier to simply limit the use of toys. Children are divided into small, fixed groups with each 'their' adult, and they are not allowed to play with other children from different groups. The principal in one kindergarten reports that even though the children said that they missed the 'disappeared' toys, the staff noticed positive effects of the limitation:

"The children engage in more roleplay and concentration games, and we see great focus just now; it's amazing to watch."

Even though several of the kindergartens were already used to spending much time outside with the children, the increased focus on hygiene and cleaning influences what activities the children can engage in and what type of toys they have access to. One principal reports:

"We only have toys that are washable. This means that, unfortunately, we don't use things like card games. And they miss that too."

The same principal reports that even though the children miss the toys that were taken away in the period due to hygiene challenges, there were also positive effects of the resulting focus on outdoor activities:

The principal points out here that it is not only the shift from indoors to outdoors that has affected the children's activities. The limitation on toys also encourages other types of activities, which in turn affects the way in which the teachers facilitate play and learning environments. In another kindergarten, the principal reports how a herb patch was established and became part of the pedagogical activities. In another kindergarten, we noticed how some children's interest in the mushrooms growing nearby occasioned a walk in a forest, where the teacher showed and told the children about the diversity of the forest floor. This illustrates how the outside space can function as an arena where the teacher addresses and works with the children's interest in nature.

Nevertheless, in addition to the positive effects of the children spending more time outside, several informants also mention how a number of activity types have become impeded and dropped, and that it is difficult to predict what this means for the children's development. For example, the children in some institutions spend much less time than under normal circumstances drawing and writing, which the pedagogical staff see as a risk because this is part of the usual school-preparatory activities. Despite their concern, however, they also emphasize that the children get to train other competences during the outdoor activities.

All the kindergartens where we carried out fieldwork in this period emphasized that the greatest change was related to staffing, with more kindergarten teachers per child. One principal reports:

"Now, the kindergarten teachers have been set free somehow. They [kindergarten teachers] work with what they [the children] like, and the children also enjoy that because they are working on the children's terms; given that they have been divided into these small groups, they want to fill them with things [activities and games] that make sense to the children."

With a concept from organization psychology children in kindergartens got a better opportunity to “making sense” of play activities. According to organization psychologist Karl Weick this is a basic need for human beings: They want their environment to make sense, and they want themselves to be part of sense making practices (Weick, 1995, 2009). This need was much better fulfilled with smaller groups of children and more kindergarten teachers per child, allowing children to set the agenda.

The existing principles of play relations, learning and of free and guided play (Broström, 2002; Broström et al., 2016; Heiberg and Lyager, 2021; Lyager, M. et al, 2021; Sigurdardottir et al., 2019), become even more relevant with the restrictions. Some of the principles that have already been presented in the previous analysis can be summarized as follows, providing a list of good advice for future pedagogical activities benefiting from the experience of the COVID-19 period:

- Screening off play environments to avoid distractions for children and staff (and limit the risk of infection)
- Setting up smaller, fixed play groups with each ‘their’ teacher
- Making time for play workshops
- Setting up special rooms for physical play
- Reducing the number of toys, which are categorized and displayed in an appealing way in order to spark ideas of how to use them in the small groups
- Maintaining an eye to how children can think differently about the toys and invent uses that the teachers have not imagined, because children sometimes see opportunities for play that adults do not
- Creating functional order and accessibility to materials and tools, and avoiding ‘disturbances’ to increase attention. Making sure to keep materials clean according to the local Corona principles
- Prioritizing time and space to focus in the groups
- Expanding learning environments so they not only include play areas but, e.g., also wardrobe and bathrooms, where the children learn to wash their hands properly. This also, importantly, includes food and meals, which will be elaborated in the next section

Rethinking Food and Meals

The learning environment centred on food and meal, indoors and outdoors, has received much attention. In the beginning of the Corona period, many institutions viewed meals as ‘delimited social activities’, where the children were not allowed to lay out cutlery or plates, pass food or take food from dishes and bowls. Food was served individually, with staff even wearing rubber gloves.

Meals were thus supervised by the adults to avoid the risk of infection. This also meant that eating during that period was not an enjoyable experience. The adults served the children – either food from the kindergarten kitchen or their packed lunches – which sometimes caused rather chaotic situations: the children became noisier, the staff felt stressed and the children’s appetite waned.

In order to minimize the risk of infection, kindergarten teachers had to arrange the children’s food as single servings, which affected the children’s appetite and put further strain on the adults. Apart from the extra work required to prepare and arrange the food for the children, several teachers report that it is important for them that the children make their own experiences of preparing open sandwiches and considering what and how much they would like to eat.

One kindergarten teacher reports:

“We normally sit at tables, and there is bread, butter and toppings. Now, open sandwiches are prepared for them and they’re not allowed to touch anything, so we hand them out. So, it is very different. It used to be very important that they chose the food themselves and judged how much they could eat. There is an element of motor skills training in these exercises, so I think this will make it harder for them when we return to normal.”

The same kindergarten teacher reports that staff are not allowed to sit at the table with the children as they used to, talking with them about their meals, which limits their opportunity to seize the learning potentials offered by meal arrangements.

However, after the first phase, some positive effects of the restrictions also emerged. When each adult started eating with their own, small group, it became a positive experience. After having rethought these scenarios, many kindergartens reorganized food and meal situations. We found several examples of how an adult would eat together with their group, with emphasis on enjoyment, conversation and taste experiences. For the kindergartens that had a lunch arrangement, the meal plan was also made available online, which meant that the parents could prepare the children for the meals in advance.

This led to restructuring of the daily planning: more time was spent on food and meals and less on other activities. Daily plans today also typically include: handwashing before and after the meal, laying and clearing the table, eating in fixed groups with each their adult, and taking time to talk about how the food tastes.

Other kindergartens report that even though they still serve the food as single servings, which is much more time-consuming than the normal arrangement, there is emphasis on the children’s right to choose.

Rethinking handover and parent relations

In the participating kindergartens, the risk of infection entailed rethinking of the parents’ access to the institutions. This is most evident in the descriptions of child handover in the mornings. Principals, teachers and parents stress that handover of children underwent great changes, affecting adults and children in different ways.

Several teachers note that the children act “super independent”, proudly expressing a sense of responsibility when, for instance, they are entrusted with carrying their bags inside and getting out of their coats. One parent reports that even though her daughter was initially sad at the thought of entering the kindergarten on her own, she turned around the situation to an experience of pride, saying: “It’s as if I went to school!”. And when she arrived at the kindergarten, she said that “it was actually pretty cool that I would go in there on my own.”

This image of the children’s positive experiences of entering the kindergarten on their own, and carrying their own bags, is confirmed by the teachers and principals. While the parent above reports that her child’s resistance soon passed, teachers report long-term effects of the changed handover arrangements, e.g. an increased sense of responsibility and independence among the children: “The good thing is that once the children have learned it, they know what to do. They just don’t always get to do it when their parents are there. But we really try to tell the parents that their children need to do things on their own. They can carry their own bags, and they can put on their own shoes.”

Despite the positive effects of the new situation, however, some consequences are still described as less favourable. In two of the involved kindergartens, the teachers report that their daily contact with parents was reduced because the parents during the period were not allowed into the institution to hand over and pick up their children.

In one kindergarten, the principal emphasizes that even though the rule was that parents had to hand over their children at the gate in some periods, and in the wardrobe in others, it remained a priority that parents whose children were new to the institution were invited in for a tour of the kindergarten, so at least they got to see the surroundings where their children would spend so much time. In several institutions, teachers and principals report that the changes impacted the way in which the contact with parents took place. This issue was typically addressed by posting more updates on the intranet forum and making monthly plans available. One teacher reports:

“We spend a lot of time posting messages about what the children have been doing, and we post photos so the parents are well-informed about what is happening during the day. And our unit always makes a monthly plan of all our activities, and where the children will be if we’re going somewhere. It is posted before the start of the month so that the parents have a full overview of our activities down here.”

Handling Insecurity

Many of the children talk about their insecurity regarding Coronavirus. For instance, many of them are afraid of touching other children’s stuff. Many teachers express that they view it as an important task to talk with the children about the virus and what, as a teacher says, “Corona has taken away from them”. In this way, they take the children’s worries seriously at the same time as trying to avoid (over)dramatizing the consequences of the Corona period.

Because the changes that have taken place, and which are the focus of this study, occurred in response to a global pandemic, we asked principals, teachers and parents about their assessment of the children’s well-being, and whether they had experienced insecurity or fear in connection to the pandemic.

One teacher, emphasizing that the children are generally not scared of the pandemic and associated risk of infection, describes how the children in their group are very open to change. However, the teacher stresses:

“All the children know what Corona is, but I don’t experience that they are worried. When they arrive in the morning, they wash their hands, and when their parents arrive, they wear facemasks – so they know that many things are important. I think they handle it really well.”

In one of the involved kindergartens, a teacher talks about a concrete way in which staff have tried to eliminate the children’s insecurity. When the kindergarten started up after the summer holidays, it was a requirement that the teachers wore facemasks in several situations, which they feared would cause insecurity:

“We had a talk with the children, and I showed them what I looked like when I was wearing it and explained that they would still be able to hear what I was saying. It’s very important for the children that they can see my face when I’m talking, so it can make some of them feel really insecure.”

In an everyday situation with increased demands for distance, handovers without parents and frequent handwashing and disinfection, the teachers found that it was hard to compromise in certain situations, for instance when a child needed comforting:

“With this age group, it can be difficult to minimize physical contact, for example in connection with comforting a child. It really can. We can’t compromise there. (...) In general, they’ve needed to keep us close, but in some periods they’ve needed to sit with us more or getting extra hugs. There have been children who were affected and needed a little extra.”

Increased Managerial Demands

It is a demanding task to listen to and accommodate staff insecurities and the many changes at the same time as setting goals and making plans for future action.

One principal reports: “Of course, there is a demand among my staff for feeling secure. That we follow the guidelines and look out for each other, and that the communication is correct in terms of keeping them safe (...). This period is characterized by many unknown Corona factors, which we have to stay alert to: what is happening now that needs to be regulated? And when something has to be regulated, we usually need the new guidelines and reorganizations to be in place within one or two days. And then, obviously, we need to gather the staff and have them understand that this makes sense; this is something new that we must do from tomorrow. (...) The greatest pressure before Christmas was probably that the infection rate went up. We have many members of staff who had to be tested for worrying symptoms. Sore throats, or because they had been in close contact with others. So, we were a few people short almost every week...”

“As a manager, it requires that you stay close and read the barometers so that people can feel safe. But in fact, it’s no different from what we’re used to: organizing, arranging and delegating who does what, so that people have a sense of ownership of the way we try to create new routines; the pedagogical staff should also be involved, so it’s not just me as a leader saying, ‘this is how we do it’.”

Strengthening Kindergarten Teachers’ Professional Identity

Another principal reports, as an example of the positive effects of the Corona period, that professional self-acknowledgement has increased. Staff have become better at mentioning the positive, and the kindergarten and staff have received much positive feedback and recognition from the parents. This has given the staff a greater ‘sense of community’ in relation to their work, which they appreciate.

As researchers, the impression we got from our conversations with teachers and principals was that this is a profession that takes itself seriously, both in relation to the importance of their pedagogical work and the function they serve in society. We will therefore conclude with a citation by a principal that sums up the core societal task and service of Danish kindergarten:

“We have two major tasks that we pride ourselves on. One is to run a day-care institution according to legislation and everything we have to do in relation to the children. Here, formation is the core task. The other is to ensure that we remain open, so that society can continue functioning. There must be no doubt that we are here.”

Conclusion and Discussion

A consistent pattern in the institutions we observed, and where we carried out surveys, was that well-known activities (play, meals, handover and picking up of children) were sustained, albeit in new

formats. In many cases, this entailed pedagogical improvement of activities, e.g. in the form of roleplay and concentration games. Using the concepts of autopoiesis and structural coupling, we might say that the self-preservation of pedagogical practice saw changes caused by the indirect influence of the surrounding world in the form of structural coupling. The changes were not caused in or by the surrounding world, but changes in the surroundings gave rise to self-transformation in and of pedagogical practice.

This is consistent with disruption in the broad sense of the concept. However, our analysis also shows that this type of self-transformation can only happen if there is a surplus of professional competences and resources in the affected institutions. Here, the allocation of extra resources played a central role. Further, the reorganization of pedagogical routines demanded strong leadership. In the many cases where self-transformation had positive effects, these effects strengthened professional self-acknowledgement, which was reinforced through recognition from the surroundings, not least the parents.

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Data Sources

The survey reports from the project can be found at:

https://www.sdu.dk/da/om_sdu/institutter_centre/ikv/forskning/forskningsprojekter/genaabningsprojekt

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