Specialised kindergartens and the value of children

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Abstract
There has been a change in recent years in the way in which we view children in developed areas. One way of describing this change is by focussing on various aspects associated with the value of children. It has been argued that there has been a development from the utility- to the exchange-child. After introducing the concepts of utility- and exchange-children, I will apply them in a discussion of possible differences regarding views of children in different kinds of Norwegian kindergartens.

Keywords: value, children, kindergarden

1. Introduction
How we evaluate children should be an ultra important question in society. According to different socio-economic conditions we would expect differences in the way children are looked upon. There has been a shift in the economic and sentimental evaluation of children. We have got the economically “worthless” but emotionally “priceless” child (Zelizer, 1994). One arena where we might expect careful consideration about the way we look on children would be kindergartens. In this article I will introduce the theory of utility- and exchange-children (Jensen, 1996, 2003). Then I will try to use this way of thinking in discussing possible differences regarding views on children in different kinds of Norwegian kindergartens.

2. Fertility and value of children
On a global level we have seen a shift towards lower fertility rates during the last few decades. This affects both the developed and the developing world. Total fertility rates continue to drop faster than anticipated in the developing world. The UN predicts that most developing countries will reach fertility levels that are below the replacement level before the end of the 21st century. In parts of the developed world, for example in Europe, total fertility rate is already below the replacement level (UN 2006).

It is likely that low fertility over time will influence the way we look at children. In China, the One-Child Policy is a core stone in the attempt to control population growth. “In China, demographic decisions are never individual. Decisions require careful considerations of collective needs at both ends of the social spectrum: the family and the state.” (Lee & Feng, 1999:10). The One-Child Policy has paved the way for the expression “little emperors”. This refers to the danger of getting spoilt when you have two parents and four grandparents all for yourself. Is there the same tendency in Europe? Nearly all countries in Europe have fertility rates well below replacement level, which in Europe means a total fertility rate of 2.1. In fact several European countries have a total fertility rate below 1.3 (Eurostat 2006). It would not be surprising if the demographic changes also affect the view of children in general.
Historically children in most societies have contributed to the family’s means of support. The production has traditionally been highly labour-intensive, and children were able to do several tasks when they were quite young. Just one example would be looking after younger siblings; in that way the adults could be free to perform other tasks. Children were useful for the family’s daily striving for survival (Fauske & Øia, 2003; Jensen, 2003). This is still the case in the developing world. In rich areas, like Europe, there has been a change so that most children do not contribute to production in the traditional way. This change could also easily be suspected of having an influence on how we perceive children.

To sum up, there has possibly been a change in recent years towards a different view of children in developed areas. At least two features make a different way of seeing children likely. The first one is that with only one or two children per family each child is much more in focus than before. The second is that we do not need their labour force to the same extent as before. In the next sections we will present a theory of the value of children, and then discuss whether it might be fruitful to apply the theory to different kinds of kindergartens in Norway.

3. The value of children

Children are synonymous with the continuity of humanity, which is their ultimate value (Arnold et al., 1975). Using economic terms in discussing the value of children is disputed. The title of V. A. Zelizer’s book “Pricing the priceless child” (Zelizer, 1994) highlights the point. Zelizer writes about the shift in our view of children: from “object of utility” to object of sentiment. Zelizer argues that the exclusively emotional valuation of children paradoxically has led to an increasing monetisation and commercialisation of children’s lives.

The levels of fertility differ globally. To simplify we could state that women in poor countries get many children, women in rich countries few. As already mentioned, today in fact we see falling fertility rates all over the world (UN 2006), but to go into this is beyond the scope of this article. What is the interconnection between fertility and social change? Is fertility an outcome of economic conditions? Is fertility a consequence of new values and beliefs among people? The answer could be influenced by different theoretical approaches. Marx and Durkheim would probably both emphasise the societal impact, the consequences of societal structures, while Weber certainly would have looked on intentions, into the mind of the individual actor. “In Weber’s view, economic factors are important, but ideas and values have just as much impact on social change.” (Giddens, 2001:13).

Do children represent a resource or a burden? When we talk about children they can contribute to the family’s wellbeing directly by working, by representing (future) social security, or by adding social prestige and happiness. The burdens consist of expenses to food and clothes, and the use of time for child rearing (instead of paid labour) (Jensen 2003). “It is obvious that children serve many functions for parents and fulfil many needs. Satisfactions and costs are therefore conceived broadly to encompass economic, social, and psychological dimensions.” (Arnold et al., 1975).

A-M. Jensen (Jensen, 1996, 2003) makes a distinction between traditional and modern societies. In traditional societies there are a lot of advantages of having many children, associated to the factors mentioned above. Among other things children are welcome as labour force, and they also represent social security and a source of joy. In modern, industrialised societies, parents experience reduced economic advantages of having children...
combined with higher expenses. Especially expenses connected to education may be considerable. This is then combined with the reduced possibility for children to contribute to family-production.

In developed societies there has been a development from the economic to the emotional value of children. In countries where children do not contribute economically through wage- and domestic labour, the parents tend to describe children in emotional “terms”.

Jensen (2003) applies the expression “the virtual child” to describe common ideas about children. “The virtual child” implies the actual idea about the child, our mental image. According to Jensen our culture is filled with attention and thought for children. But her next point is that the real, physical child often represents a hindrance to the adults. To stay at home with a baby may affect your career, it may be difficult to take care of a sick child, leisure activities for the children may conflict with the parents’ own interests etc. Inter-role conflicts are queuing up.

As a consequence of these possible conflicts between parents, Jensen (ibid) introduces the concept exchange-child. By this she means children who are handed over from one parent to the other according to what is most practical for the adults. The exchange-child is a solution to the time-squeeze experienced by a lot of western parents today. Most spectacular is the exchange-child when the parents are divorced/live apart, but the concept is fully applicable to many children living with both parents too. To the contrary we do still have the utility-child in less developed areas. Historically the child has been a utility-child. It was important to have many of them. In today’s Europe the child is both an economic and in some ways a social burden.

But children in the rich world today still are of extreme importance on a societal level. They qualify for contributions in production, they represent our future in all ways. On a societal level children are still utility-children, but we do not see their collective value as easily as before. The expenses are to a high degree left to the parents; the utility is more or less on a societal level.

I will try to use the concepts about utility- and exchange-children in discussing possible differences regarding views on children in different kinds of Norwegian kindergartens. First I will give a short introduction to what is meant by specialised kindergartens.

4. Specialised kindergartens in Norway
There has been a great expansion of kindergartens in Norway during the last decades, and a growth in enrolment rates (Statistisk sentralbyrå 2005b). Apart from some exceptions, for example Sami-kindergartens, Rudolf Steiner-kindergartens and kindergartens with a special religious emphasis, the main impression is that the kindergartens have in many respects been very much like each other. During the last decade there has been a shift, away from this overwhelming likeness. What types of kindergartens have we got, and how many are they?

One way of categorising kindergartens is to investigate type of organising. In this respect we have standard kindergartens, family kindergartens (run in a private home by an assistant but fulfilling regulations for example regarding teaching guidance) and open kindergartens (kindergartens where one of the parents, or another person who is responsible for the child,
has to be present). Here the focus will be on the growing specialisation among “standard” kindergartens, like kindergartens focusing on farming activities, music or outdoor life.

What do we know about this kind of specialisation of kindergartens from a research point of view? Very little. There are no statistics relating to this phenomenon (Gulbrandsen, Johansson, & Nilsen, 2002). It seems that kindergartens focusing on outdoor life are becoming more numerous (Fiskum, 2004). In a recent study more than 100 kindergartens were categorised as nature- and outdoor-kindergartens (Lysklett, Emilsen, & Hagen, 2003). Vedum et al. (Vedum, Dullerud, & Ødegaard, 2005) present in their book Natur- og gaardsbarnehagen (Kindergartens focusing on outdoor life and farming, my translation) a list of 210 kindergartens of this special type, referring to the number in November 2004. Compared to the total number of kindergartens in Norway in 2004, 6035 (Statistisk sentralbyrå 2005a), we see that 3-4 per cent of the kindergartens were focusing on outdoor life and farming.

So, we do not know how widespread this phenomenon is. Nevertheless, especially outdoor life kindergartens have been focused in recent research (Berg, 2004; Emilsen, Hagen, & Lysklett, 2004; Fiskum, 2004; Lysklett & Emilsen, 2004; Lysklett et al., 2003). Such aspects as content, motorical development among the children and characteristics of parents and staff have been investigated.

A fundamental difficulty is that there is no agreed definition of what should be the criteria for, for example, an “outdoor-kindergarten”. The concept is normative, the meaning and the practical content differ (Lysklett et al., 2003).

Other types of specialisation are even more difficult to get any quantitative information about. The impression is that the growth of specialised kindergartens has mostly come in the field of outdoor life and farming, and that this development has taken place mostly during the last decade. There is obviously a lack of research in the field. We know little on a national level about specialisation of kindergartens, both regarding quantitative and qualitative respects. That we are observing an ongoing differentiation process is nevertheless quite obvious.

5. Specialised kindergartens and the value of children: Further research

The societal valuation of children can be verified by different sources. One of the most formal information source is the law. By studying the laws you get an interesting glimpse into society. We can see a shift in the views of Norwegian childhood, expressed by the national Kindergarten Act. Last year the Norwegian Parliament passed a new Kindergarten Act (2005). A new section is included, about the children’s right to participate. “Children in kindergartens shall have the right to express their views on the day-to-day activities of the kindergarten” and they shall be given the opportunity to take an active part in planning and assessing the activities of the kindergarten. “The children’s views shall be given due weight according to their age and maturity.” (Kindergarten Act 2005:2). This addition in the act could be discussed as a response to a changed societal discourse. Childhood is definitely not any more just a period of transition; the child of today is subject in its own life.

It would be interesting to focus on the way pre-school teachers perceive children in specialised kindergartens compared to more traditional kindergartens. Could it be fruitful to use the theory of utility- and exchange-children? One of the core stones in this theory is that children in traditional societies are regarded as directly useful, they are needed in production
processes. In rich countries today the situation is different. It is argued that children in these
countries are useful on a societal level, but for the parents they represent actual expenses and
obstacles to carrier, even if they also represent a source of love and joy. As a consequence
children in rich countries to a large extent are looked upon as small beings who should be
cared for, but only to a very little extent are expected to contribute to the family’s or society’s
welfare.

Are there reasons to believe that the ideology in specialised kindergartens emphasises a
different view of the value of children? Do the pre-school teachers stress the importance of
children’s contribution to daily tasks in these types of kindergartens? For example in
kindergartens focusing on farming there are quite a lot of practical tasks which have to be
done daily. As the philosophy is to involve the children in farming activities, this could imply
a different kind of valuation of children, more in the direction utility-children. Hence it would
be interesting to compare the professionals approach to children in different types of
kindergartens, as well as the social roles of the children.

We have got two questions for further research: Do kindergarten employees look differently
on the roles of the children depending on the kind of kindergarten? Do children perform
different kinds and amounts of tasks according to type of kindergarten? It would be necessary
to get different types of data, which could enlighten the research questions from different
angles. One possibility is interviewing or using questionnaires to gain knowledge about how
the staff evaluate the children. Observation of children could complement the picture. What
tasks are they expected to do? How different is a day in a “standard” kindergarten compared
to for example a kindergarten focusing on farming? There may also be implications regarding
pre-school teacher education. In what ways is the value of children expressed during the
education of pre-school teachers?

A study like this would become even more interesting when comparing different countries. In
Europe there are different traditions regarding kindergartens, as content, structure and
education of staff differ. These differences are related to national opinions on the primary goal
of the kindergarten. These considerations could again be seen as linked to different ways of
evaluating children.

**Literature**


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