

BETWEEN TWO TRADITIONS, TEACHER'S REFLECTIONS ON CONDITIONS FOR PARTICIPATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE FOR CHILDREN USING COCHLEA IMPLANTS

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ABSTRACT

In Norway, most children with cochlea implants participates in kindergarten, and receive support from special needs services within the frame of the kindergarten. The study investigates preschool teachers' experience when a child with cochlea implants enters the kindergarten. The analysis document that child's special/additional support largely is organized as segregated activities. The paper calls for strategies that transcends the traditional division between special and ordinary pedagogies.

INTRODUCTION

In Norway, about 40 children are born with severe and profound hearing loss every year. Most of the children receive a cochlea implants during their first year of life (Kirkhei, Myrhaug, Simonsen & Wie 2011). After the implantation, the government facilitates a range of actions in order to support the child's speech and language development. Some actions are targeted towards the parents as parent support programs, other are targeted towards the child as special/additional education support within the frame of regular kindergartens.

Norway has a comprehensive model for kindergartens for children from 0-6 years of age. All children have a right to participate in kindergartens from the age of 1 year and the majority of children enter either public or private kindergartens. The kindergartens receive funding from the municipality and the parents pay only a minor part of the total costs. Norwegian policy documents emphasizes that Norwegian kindergartens are arenas for inclusive communities: "The kindergarten shall enhance the child's possibilities for learning and active participation in a community of peers" (Ministry of Education and Research 2011:2). When a child with cochlea implants enter a kindergarten, the special/additional education support are organized within the kindergarten. Usually the kindergarten receives support from the special education service at municipal or inter-municipal level and from *Statped*, the national service for special needs education.

When a child with cochlea implants enters a regular kindergarten, this represents a challenge for the preschool teachers. Usually the child is the only child with a hearing loss and the preschool teachers have little or no experience or training regarding children with hearing loss. Before the introduction of cochlea implants at the edge of the new millennium, children with severe or profound hearing loss entered special kindergartens or units in regular kindergartens designed for children with hearing impairments. In these institutions, the staff usually had special training and experiences related to the needs of children with hearing loss. After the general recognition of sign languages in the 1980th, sign language or sign supported speech, become the main modes of communication, and special/additional support concerning the development of speech and communication constituted an integrated part of the everyday life in the kindergarten.

The paper focus on preschool teachers' knowledge and belief, and the implications for everyday practices in regular kindergartens. In particular, the paper seeks to illuminate the interplay between two fields of educational practice; the special needs education and the early childhood education and care. The research questions are: (1) *what are the regular preschool teachers' reflection upon the needs of the child with cochlea implants and* (2) *What are the implications for the educational arrangements in the kindergarten?* Using participation

in everyday activities as the analytical focus, the aim is to explore affordances and constraints for the child's peer interactions. Taking point of departure in interviews with preschool teachers and other staff in kindergartens, the aim of the paper is to explore conditions for peer participation for the youngest children (1-3 years) with cochlear implants in the kindergarten.

THE RESEARCH FIELD

The last 25 years, children's participation in kindergarten is a central focus within research on early childhood education and care (Corsaro, 2011). Within this tradition, the research is focusing encounters in peer interactions (Løkken, 2008) and between children and adults (Bae, 2009). Studies documents that even the youngest children, i.e. aged 1-3 years, are competent participants in peer interactions within the kindergarten. However, several studies indicates that children that are perceived as "different" or "children with disabilities" (Odom et al., 2006), are in danger of being excluded from the community of peers in the kindergarten.

Research on educational "follow up" of children with cochlea implants, have largely been concerned with documenting the effects of cochlea implants on the development of the child's skills on listening and speech development (Thoutenhoofd et al., 2005), and the use of various modes of communication (Kirkehei, et al., 2011). There are only a few studies exploring the child with cochlea implants' participation in peer interactions. A recent study (Hillesøy, Johansson, & Ohna, 2014), document that young children with cochlea implants (1-3 years) participate on equal terms with peers. However, other studies documents that older children (above 3 years), face problems in peer interactions in situations where oral language is the main mode of communication (Antia, Stinson, & Gaustad, 2002; Preisler, Tvingstedt, & Ahlström, 2002).

According to Nygren (2004), teachers' competence of action is "(...) situated in the teachers cognitive map and the sociocultural context where they are developed and used in practice" (p. 149). In line with this kind of reasoning, the way children's needs are conceptualized and communicated by the preschool teachers, constitute "social technologies codified in language and connected to the distribution of material resources" (Hjörne & Säljö, 2014). The categories and terms the preschool teacher use when accounting for the child and the education practice in the kindergarten, becomes symbolic artefacts that constitute the child and the kindergarten in a special way.

METHODS

The study is located within a socio-cultural theoretical frame. In this perspective, a key idea is that actors, processes and knowledge, is constituted and changed through the use of mediational tools (Wertsch 1998). The mediational tools creates affordances and constraints for the preschool teachers' learning as well as the practices in the kindergarten, and therefore also for the child's participation and learning. Over a period of one year, preschool teachers/assistants from three kindergartens are interviewed. Altogether nine interviews were conducted. The interviews are transcribed and analyzed using an inductive analytic process.

RESULTS

The results of the analysis focus on two issues; how do the teachers account for the child and how is the practice described and justified?

The normal and the special child

When the preschool teachers refer to the child with cochlea implants, it is emphasized that the child is an ordinary child. At the same time, the child is different from the other children, and the differences have consequences for the participation in peer interactions. One of the preschool teachers states that it is nothing special with the child:

“He is very normal, well – except for the hearing loss. So he is not particular demanding in any other ways (laughs) ... No, he is a very normal child.”

When the preschool teacher explain what she means with the term “except for the hearing loss” she says:

“He is a two-year old boy, and he enjoys drumming, singing and shouting. However, when we are trying to talk to him, or involve him in some activity, then he is not connected. You can see it on his body language or his gaze (...) it becomes very wandering.”

The teachers refer to the child with cochlea implants in different and contradictory ways. In general, they describe the child as a normal child. However, when they refer to issues related to participation and interaction with other children, the special child appear, the child that is different from the rest of the children. When the teachers account for the special child, they mention issues relating to noise, social and cultural rules and oral communication. These topics are key elements in the supervision from the special education experts. The consequences of this, as the preschool teacher experiences the child’s situation, are that the child needs something extra: special/additional training and a closer adult support. In this way, there is ambivalence in the way the teachers relate to the child: A statement of the normal child is followed by a moderating explanation, “he is a normal child, well – except for the hearing loss”.

“A segregated activity within the ordinary activity”

A key topic in education is the tension between the individual and the community (Norwich 2008). The essence of this tension relates to considerations of two opposites: the need of the individual without destroying the community, and emphasizing the community without excluding the need of the individual. The main argument in this kind of reasoning is that the tension between a special/additional support strategy and a general education strategy, constitute an ambivalence in how the preschool teacher approaches the child with cochlea implants.

In everyday practices of the kindergarten there are different actions aiming at supporting the learning and development of the child with cochlea implants. Even though the three kindergartens in this study is situated in different municipalities in Norway, the special/additional support have a common pattern. In all of the kindergartens, there is an extra person (‘primary contact’) in 80-100 % position, taking care of the child with cochlea implants. In addition, a special pedagogue from the municipality special support system visits the kindergarten 4-5 times a week. In these sessions, the special pedagogue supervises the staff and train the child in a separate room in the kindergarten. These sessions are scheduled when the other children have “free-play activities”. In addition, the child also participates when the parents receive supervision on how to support the child on listening and language development (1-4 times a month). Altogether, there is a variety of actions, and all of these have consequences for the child’s peer interactions. The preschool teachers comment this as a problem:

He is often out of the group, and it is obvious that this is not good. (...) I think we must balance between all of the special education support, and his need to be an ordinary child in the peer group. Because that is what we are: We are an ordinary kindergarten, and I think he is an ordinary child.

In the kindergarten, there is a division of work and responsibility between the ‘primary contact’ and the preschool teachers. First, the regular preschool teachers design the overall program, then the ‘primary contact’ adapt the activities for the child with a cochlea implants. One of the ‘primary contacts’ express this in the following way:

“First they are planning their day, and then we adapt the child with cochlea implants in this”.

The question is not how to design a program for all, rather it is a question of designing a program for most of the children. The program for the child with cochlea implants becomes something outside the kindergarten, in addition to the regular program.

When the 'primary contact' describes their tasks vis-a-vis the child with cochlea implants, they talk about protecting (from noise), intervention and facilitating peer situation by introducing easier play situations. Even though the kindergarten has policies of non-intervention in the children's free-play situations, the close contact between the 'primary contact' and the child with cochlea implants constrains the child's possibilities for making experiences from authentic peer-interactions.

The preschool teachers emphasize that the various extra support actions (the 'primary contact', the daily visits from a special pedagogue and parent support activities) becomes a challenge for the kindergarten. It is difficult for the kindergarten to integrate these actions within the regular program. Instead, the activities and actions target at the child with cochlea implants are situated at the outside of, segregated from, the regular program.

"There are so many experts"

How do the preschool teachers justify this practice? As stated in the introduction, there are few children with cochlea implants, and most kindergartens have no experience with hearing loss. In the interviews, the preschool teachers report that they have prioritized to gain knowledge about hearing impairment and cochlea implants, through training courses and supervision from external experts.

"But it is a mess when so many people coming in the kindergarten. They are here quite often and it is obvious that this affect both the adults and the children. (...) There are so many that have strong opinions on how we shall work, but we have other children to take care of also, so it is not easy for us. (...) it is not evident that we should treat him so special."

In this quotation the preschool teacher, express that she feels it is a challenge to take care of the child with cochlea implants and the community of children at the same time. She also questions that the individual special needs focus is for the good of the child.

"It is no other children that have it this way (...) he must also be given the opportunity to make experiences and solutions by himself, as the other children. (...) Sometimes it is too much focus on the cochlea implants, it is important to remember that he is an ordinary child and that we are an ordinary kindergarten."

Even though the preschool teachers recognize the relevance of the special/additional support and the external support, there are substantial tensions when implementing this in the daily practice. The special/additional support perspective is given priority at the expense of the tradition and knowledge of the preschool teachers, and there seems to be absence of dialogues between external expert and the preschool teachers.

DISCUSSION

The study investigates preschool teachers' experiences when a child with cochlea implants enters the kindergarten. The main results document that the special/additional support for the child with cochlea implants largely is organized as segregated activities. The following discussion concentrates on the absence of a joint focus and coherent educational practice meeting the needs of all of the children.

The study document how the child with a cochlea implants is described as a different child. It is an ordinary child, but it is constructed as a special child different from the other children. When the preschool teachers are describing the everyday activities, they focus on what they do for the special child. In the interview, there are few, if any, reflections on how to change or adapt the regular activities. The study also document that a child with cochlea implants have

a lot of special/additional support. It is a challenge for the kindergarten to integrate these resources and actions in the regular daily activities. Overall, the descriptions of the child's needs, the accounts and justifications of daily practices, constructs a child with some special needs in an ordinary kindergarten.

In line with earlier research (Antia, et al., 2002), this study give evidence on challenges related to encounters between two traditions, the special education tradition and the early education and care tradition. The findings in the study show that the two traditions contribute to the construction of two separate rooms within the kindergarten. There are few, if any, examples of the construction of new rooms where the two traditions are interacting and enriching each other.

The two traditions represent different values and social technologies, in terms of knowledge and practice. In the study, the special/additional support appear as external to the kindergarten and it seems difficult to integrate within the regular program. Instead, it is located to a segregated space.

Haug (2011) call attention to processes of professionalism and segregated practices. From his perspective, it is a danger that increasing professionalism among regular teachers on the one hand and special pedagogues/teachers on the other, will lead to borders and stronger classification between special and regular education, even though the policies emphasizes the opposite.

Therefore, it is a need for new pedagogies that will transcend the limitations connected to the two traditions. The challenge is to develop educational practices in the kindergartens in order to give the children opportunities for learning experiences, using insights and experiences from special education knowledge without adopting traditional approaches based on segregated practices. Only in this way, it is possible to realize the aim of the curricula on every children's active participation in a peer community.

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