

Review of Danish research on social inclusion in early childhood education

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Introduction

This review offers an overview of Danish research on social inclusion in early childhood education. The review includes research focused on social inclusion as a concept, approach and practice. Wider discussions of children and vulnerability, which are extensively covered in the Danish research (see e.g. Ertman, 2016; Jespersen, 2006) have not been included in the review. The review is based on searches in forskningsbasen.dk and biblioteksbasen.dk, as well as on recommended literature from a number of experts in the field and the snow-balling method¹. We have included research literature as well as some literature written by researchers addressing practitioners and students.

The section following the introduction provides a brief background to the political agenda for inclusion in Denmark. Hereafter, we introduce some general theoretical perspectives on inclusion, which have characterised the Danish research. In the last section, we present research literature which focus on exclusion in day care institutions, and research literature on inclusion focusing on children's communities, on parents cooperation, on the wider community, and, finally, research literature discussing professional competences and cross-professional cooperation.

Early childhood education and the political agenda for social inclusion in Denmark

In Denmark, the majority of the children are cared for outside their homes. Early Childhood Education is managed by day care institutions or -homes for 0-3 years old children (*vuggestue* or *dagpleje*) and in kindergartens for 3-6 years old children (*børnehave*). Both types of day care is referred to as '*dagtilbud*', in this review translated as day care. With the introduction of a day care curriculum (*læreplaner*) in 2004, an increased emphasis was put on children's learning, rather than on their general development. The current law on day care "The Act of Day Care" (*dagtilbudsloven*) aims to further children's well-being, learning and development, to provide work-life flexibilities for families, to prevent negative social heritage and exclusion, and to ensure continuity and coherent transitions in an out of day care institutions².

¹ In this context, snowballing refers to following relevant references in articles and books identified in the search or recommended by experts.

²<https://www.retsinformation.dk/forms/r0710.aspx?id=182051#id542bd80a-fb0d-481f-861c-bcbaf3605796>

Denmark signed the Salamanca Declaration in 1994, but the inclusion agenda has primarily gained force in the recent decade, as for instance indicated by the establishment of a 'National Research Centre for Inclusion and Exclusion' (NVIE) in 2005 by the Ministry of Education and two university colleges. The centre worked with development and support to day care institutions in Denmark.

While most discussions on inclusion have focused on primary school, in recent years more attention has been drawn to inclusion in the day care context. This is reflected, for instance, in an increasing number of articles on inclusion in the journal '0-14', which addresses pedagogues, pedagogical leaders, teachers and consultants, and in a number of new textbooks and manuals addressed at day care staff and municipalities (e.g. Andersen & Tranum Thomsen, 2014; Clausen & Sørensen, 2012; Danmarks Evalueringsinstitut, 2014; Linder & Gregersen, 2013; Rådet for børns læring, 2014; Sørensen, 2015).

The Danish Ministry of Education highlights inclusion as a main pedagogical tool in Danish day care (0-6 years old). According to the ministry, 'the aim of inclusion is that every child feels accepted and participate in the communities of the day care. This contributes to development and acquirement of competences important for their future lives' (our translation). The ministry further notes that the municipal council is responsible for formulating a 'coherent child policy' and describing the role of day cares in preventing exclusion³.

In the day care system, inclusion is primarily addressed, not through special intervention but within and through the general pedagogical practice, with a key concept in the policy framework being 'inclusive children's communities'. Since 2012, the ministry's department for inclusion has offered support to municipalities in their work with inclusion. According to a report from the Danish Evaluation Institute (Danmarks Evalueringsinstitut, 2014), in 98% of the Danish municipalities, inclusion has been on the agenda (*et indsatsområde*) with a strategy developed or in the process of being developed.

Theoretical perspectives on social inclusion in day care

In Denmark, social inclusion in day care is often understood as children's possibilities to participate in different communities in the institution, and thus contains a focus on participation and mechanisms of exclusion. The focus on communities is reflecting the assumption that participation in communities are key for children's possibilities to learn, to develop social competencies, and to become a social human being. Researchers have addressed social inclusion from different theoretical perspectives, including sociological, psychological, linguistic and anthropological ones.

From a sociological perspective, childhood is seen as a relation between children and a society, addressed as historical context or social, cultural and economic structure. Sociologically oriented studies of inclusion and day care include Kampmann (2003), Larsen (Hamre & Larsen, 2016; Larsen, 2010), and Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgritta, & Wintersberger (1994), but also anthropological research, such as Gulløv (Bundgaard & Gulløv, 2008; Gilliam, Gulløv, Bach, & Olwig, 2012) and Palludan (2005, 2007). The National Research Centre for Inclusion and Exclusion was inspired by the sociological perspective and has had a great impact on the ways in which inclusion is

³ <https://www.uvm.dk/Dagtilbud/Paedagogiske-redskaber/Inklusion>

discussed in practice, in education, and in research. The centre problematized viewing inclusion as an individual problem connected to a deficit of the child, and promoted a focus on the wider learning environment and the pedagogical practice (see e.g. Pedersen, Larsen, Kornerup, & Madsen, 2009).

In anthropological studies of day care institutions, the focus has been on how processes of inclusion and exclusion of children are related to wider social and cultural processes in the institutional context. Anthropological studies have explored exclusionary mechanisms and their consequences for children with minority background (e.g. Bundgaard & Gulløv, 2008; Palludan, 2007) or children with special needs (Kjær, 2010).

Psychological research on inclusion has mainly taken a critical psychological perspective, which focuses on the investigation of children's everyday life, thereby rethinking early childhood education. The research has problematized the dominant way of understanding children and children's lives as isolated from the social world around them, and children's development as internal and psychological, resulting in powerful categorizations. Instead, the critical psychological perspective regard children as participant in a historical social practice and shed light on children's lives as connected to other arenas, such as family, community and other children (see e.g. Højholt & Røn Larsen, 2015; Højholt, Røn Larsen, & Stanek, 2014; Juhl, 2014; Kousholt, 2011; Røn Larsen, 2012; Munck, 2016; Schwartz & Reynisdóttir, 2015).

In the linguistic research, the focus is on the relations between language development and the possibility to participate in different social relations or communities in the institution (e.g. Karrebæk, 2012; Svinth, 2013).

A recent anthology on inclusion, vulnerability and cross-professional cooperation include perspectives from different lines of research. The editors, Hamre & Larsen, underline the need for critical exploration of the understandings of inclusion within the political arena as well as among practitioners (Hamre & Larsen, 2016). Korsgaard suggests that the political understanding of inclusion in Denmark is, in many cases, based on an economic rationale by which inclusion of most children into the general educational interventions is preferable to offering special interventions (Korsgaard, 2016, see also Fisker, 2010). Tofteng & Bladt link debates on inclusion in education to larger social critiques of global exclusionary processes, as well as to larger policy processes (2016).

Research on social inclusion in day care in Denmark

In this section, we go through researchbased literature on social inclusion in day care institutions.

Exclusionary mechanisms in day care institutions

A number of critical discussions of the educational field centres on the processes of exclusion created through educational/pedagogical practices. Kjær has discussed the more general mechanisms and consequences of inclusionary and exclusionary process in relation to categories of normality and deviance (Kjær, 2017). Røn Larsen discusses the rationality of apparently paradoxical practices in educational institutions where inclusive approaches and an increasing tendency to individualising problems through diagnosis appear to work against each other (Røn Larsen, 2012). Jensen, Brandt and Haahr-Pedersen point to deficit discourse (*mangelsyn*), lacking

recognition, language use, social positions and positionings as exclusionary processes within day cares. The authors suggest that interventions addressed at vulnerable children risk to become stigmatizing. Danish early childhood pedagogies aim for children's competence development and self-development, and vulnerable children are often unable to meet the expectations of this pedagogical frame, if pedagogical staff are not aware of the risks of exclusion (Jensen, Brandi, & Haahr-Pedersen, 2011). Warming provides a critical discourse analysis of the ways in which pedagogical staff through conflicting discourses construct the pedagogical challenges presented by an inclusive pedagogy. The two main conflicting discourses, Warming suggest, is, on the one hand, an essentialist rationale, and, on the other hand, a relational one. While the essentialist rationale dominates practice and constitutes a barrier to inclusive practice, the relational rationale dominates the vision and values for pedagogical work and promotes inclusive practices (Warming, 2011).

Gilliam, Gulløv, Bach & Olwig use the case of the Danish welfare state to consider the ways in which children are 'civilized' within child-focused institutions, such as schools, day care, and the family unit, in an analysis inspired by Norbert Elias's theoretical framework. Through deep ethnographic studies, they follow children's experiences at a variety of ages, different genders, and from differing ethnic and social backgrounds. They show that even though Danish welfare institutions are marked by a strong egalitarian ideal, they reproduce dominant norms of social class and distinctions of ethnicity and religion which work to identify the children as more or less civilized citizens of the state (Gilliam et al., 2012).

In relation to ethnic minority children, Bundgaard & Gulløv discuss how professionals, children and parents in two multi-ethnic day care institutions construct categories of ethnicity and gender and the consequences of these categories for the children's participation in the community. Although the professionals do their best, conflicts are part of everyday life and has an impact on the processes of social inclusion and exclusion, the authors point out (Bundgaard & Gulløv, 2008). Palludan has brought attention to the ways in which teaching tones reproduce inequalities between ethnic minority and ethnic majority children. Furthermore, Palludan suggests that in order to gain recognition from pedagogues, children need to have a 'respectable body', engaged in a steady pace with a moderate level, rather than being exploratory, or walking around with no apparent purpose and content (Palludan, 2005, 2007). Larsen has discussed why the ethnic minority children keep their position as members of a minority group in the educational system within the kindergarten, while the pedagogical staff works to obtain the opposite. The study concludes that the pedagogy of the kindergarten cannot be understood as an isolated practice but is related to the Danish national welfare state organization, which has an impact on the categories used to in the pedagogical practice. The everyday nationalism produced by these categories work in socially exclusionary ways, yet becomes invisible as it is clogged in terms such as 'development', 'age' and 'social competences' (Larsen, 2010).

Karrebæk's dissertation is based on of a study of linguistic socialization. Karrebæk investigates how social, linguistic and communicative factors are interrelated and problematizes the assumption of a 1-to-1 relationship between language and social development. Children do not necessarily gain a more inclusive position in the children's community of practice and a more advantageous position in play activities with greater linguistic experience, the author suggests (Karrebæk, 2012).

Exclusion and exclusionary mechanisms in day care institutions, in other words, is a relatively well-researched area in the Danish context and form an important background for discussions on approaches to social inclusion. Research focusing on exclusion in most cases draw attention to the ways in which pedagogical practices and institutional rationales create or strengthen exclusionary patterns.

Social inclusion as supporting children's participation in children's communities

A number of studies of inclusion in early childhood education underline the importance of children's participation in children's communities. Thus, Kragh-Müller and Isbell report from a study of children's daily life in day care that playing with friends, and in particular playing outside is the pre-school activity most valued by children, while experiences of exclusion are considered by children as the worst aspects of the everyday life in day care (Kragh-Müller & Isbell, 2011).

A book by Ytterhus (2003) is based on research in Norway, but has been included here, as it is one of the first books published in Danish on inclusion and exclusion in day care. Ytterhus describes children's social interactions and the processes of qualifying and positioning to be part of children's social communities in the day care institution. Ytterhus emphasizes that children have different capacities for participating in these processes; hence, adults need to support children in different ways to ensure their participation. This does not necessarily mean to strive towards harmony and find solutions to all conflicts, Ytterhus stresses; a different perspective is to see conflict and change as natural parts of everyday life and to support children's initiatives.

Based on a qualitative research project, Fisker has suggested that children with autism sometimes lack the conditions and possibilities for participating in children's communities in pre-schools (Fisker, 2009). According to Fisker, pedagogues' views on handicap, if based on an essentialist rather than a relational perspective, may work as a constraint to children's participation. Fisker argues for a focus on the development of interactional competences.

Juhl's dissertation (Juhl, 2014) draws on a study of children's everyday life across day care contexts and family life. Juhl explores the lives and everyday life contexts of six young children (0-4 year), who for various reasons are defined as being children-at-risk. The study stresses that even small children must be perceived as active participants who act upon and struggle with different conditions and meaning making processes across contexts (home, day care, part-time foster family) and in relation to other co-participants. Furthermore, Juhl points to the importance of including parents and children in the everyday life in the institution.

Approaches to social inclusion which focus on children's communities to a larger degree than research on exclusion focus on children's agency in communities, and on how adults may support this agency.

Social inclusion and transitions

We have been able to identify little literature touching upon inclusion in relation to transition in and out of day care. In an exploration of the characteristics of successful projects for the inclusion of children with special needs, based on a research project working methodologically with narrative workshops, Albertsen & Kjær draw attention to the difference between receiving children at the day care who are already the centre of special attention, and children whose special needs have not yet identified. Furthermore, the research project underlines the need for insuring a transition to school which avoids the loss of knowledge on how to handle the special

needs of the child, for instance through the exchange of personnel between day care and school during shorter periods (Albertsen & Kjær, 2015).

Schwartz and Reynisdóttir have pointed to the importance of exploring how children move between and across different childhood contexts, organized by different institutional rationales, when looking at transitions. Based on a research project studying the cooperation between pedagogues and teachers about children's transition from day care to school, which focused on children's resources and ability to assist each other, the authors suggest that the approach employed assisted children's experience of agency in a social community. At the same time, community-supporting activities also generate dilemmas, as some children need to work harder than others to ensure their participation (Schwartz & Reynisdóttir, 2015).

In a not yet published article, Stanek argues that an understanding of children's participation possibilities in children's communities in day care and in the new school setting is crucial for being able to support children in their transition from one institutional setting to another. Stanek points to the need for cooperation between parents and professionals in school and day care (Stanek, n.d.).

Although transition from day care to school is in the centre of several ongoing research projects, there seems to be space for further research on the social inclusion aspects of these transitions.

Parenting and parent cooperation

Cooperation with parents (*forældresamarbejde*, *forældrepartnerskab* or *forældreinddragelse*) is a key concept in Danish day care institutions and considered particularly important in relation to vulnerable children (see e.g. Kousholt & Berliner, 2013).

Some studies of parenting in relation to social inclusion take the approach of exploring children's lives across day care institutional and family settings. Kousholt investigates family as a conflictual community with a specific starting point in exploring children's lives across day-care institution and home. Children's development is theorized in relation to taking part in different communities across different contexts. The article draws on an ethnographically inspired research project with six families living in a small town in Denmark. The analysis points to the ways in which children's possibilities of participation are created across their different life contexts and that the social interplay and conflicts between the children in the day care institution have impacts on the relation and interaction between parents and children. Thus, parenting reaches far beyond the family and includes taking into account various issues going on in other places, where the children spend their time. The children's developmental possibilities are shaped by the relations and connections between the day-care institution and home, Kousholt suggests (Kousholt, 2011). Stanek & Larsen presents findings from a practice research project dealing with the everyday life of 0–2 year olds across family and different day-care settings. From a critical psychological perspective, they explore three related issues: Young children's conduct of everyday life in and across different institutional settings; professional pedagogical work related to supporting children's conduct of everyday life, and finally, the restricted political and bureaucratic conditions for exactly these forms of pedagogical practice. The article addresses the theoretical challenge of understanding children through their conduct of everyday life in the field of tension between being someone who is dependent on others, being taken care of and arranged for, and, at the same time, someone who is actively

participating, arranging and contributing to the reproduction and change of the collective life conditions in the social practice of day-care (Røn Larsen & Stanek, 2015).

Other studies focus on the pedagogical task and challenge of cooperating with parents in relation to social inclusion. Hence, the research of Albertsen & Kjær points to important differences between collaborations with 'resourceful' parents who recognize the needs of their child and take their own initiatives, and parents who do not recognize the challenges and in some cases therefore come to be seen as a problem by the pedagogues. In the latter case, the structural 'need' for diagnoses of the municipal financial system works against successful cooperation, and, furthermore, the pedagogues lack competences and time for understanding and handling the reactions of parents. Last, authors note the particular challenges in dealing with children from families with special needs. They point to the value of finding ways of supporting parents in working with, for instance, their own traumatic experiences, while simultaneously assisting the child, and to positive experiences with involving a larger parent group in inclusionary activities, supporting an open approach to the child and organizing playdates (Albertsen & Kjær, 2015).

Tireli, writing about inclusion in more general terms, similarly points to differences between parents, and suggests that urban families in Denmark may be categorised into four ideal types according to their ways of parenting. First, parents with democratic ideals for upbringing; second, caring and concerned parents; third, parents valuing multi-cultural competences, and last, parents valuing traditional upbringing. These different parenting styles have consequences for inclusion and exclusion processes in school and day care, and pedagogues need the ability to navigate this diversity. Tireli draws on Epstein's work on parents involvement to suggest that support to parenting, communication (and translation), voluntary work, support to learning and development at homes, participation in decision making and cooperation with the local community are important ways to work with parent inclusion (Tireli, 2014).

Based on research data including qualitative interviews and a quantitative survey, Berliner suggests that leaders of day care institutions consider dialogue in formal and informal situations are key to creating an inclusionary environment. The leaders point to a number of challenges to parents' collaboration, including parents' busy lives, parents prioritising of their own children, some staff members' difficulties with appreciative dialogue with vulnerable families, and the enforcement of negative images of certain parents within a group of staff. Berliner suggests that the interviews point to three interwoven themes related to inclusion through parent cooperation: the discursive, the social and the material. Discursive support to inclusion is about narrating community and diversity, providing insights into other people's action possibilities and focusing on good stories and mutual appreciation. Social support includes building trust and confidence through actions, e.g. activities involving parents, providing possibilities for dialogue between parents and acting solution-oriented. The material support to inclusion consists of practical assistance to transport and food, understanding how social actions are linked to concrete space, and the material aspects of activities (e.g. buildings, materials) (Berliner, 2014).

Research on parenting and parent cooperation thus emphasize the complexities of interactions and movements between home and day care institution and of the pedagogical task of involving parents in activities to support the social inclusion of their children. The perspective of parents on parent cooperation seems to be lacking from most research.

Community perspectives/urban perspectives

Very little literature identified focuses on community perspectives and/or on the specific challenges or opportunities of addressing inclusion in urban areas. As mentioned above, Tireli has discussed minority parenting in urban settings (Tireli, 2014). Jensen et al. report on a qualitative research project on day-care in 'ghetto-like' areas. While young people's lives in ghetto-like areas are quite well-researched, the report points to a lack of research on young children's lives in ghetto-areas, in the Danish context as well as internationally. The authors argue that attention to the places and locations where children grow up are of crucial importance to their possibilities for development. The research of Jensen et al. suggests that pedagogues working in institutions in vulnerable urban areas have a special 'care' tasks in supporting vulnerable children and their families (socially as well as practically), and that the larger groups of ethnic minorities in these areas demands a stronger attention to language development (Rosendal Jensen et al., 2012).

Professional competences and cross-disciplinary cooperation

While, at the day care area, the focus of the larger debate on inclusion is centred on the inclusion of all children into social communities (*sociale fællesskaber*), debates about cross-disciplinarity/cross-professional cooperation address children with specific needs or challenges. In Denmark, the cross-professional space is used to identify problems among children and to attempt to create inclusive solutions. This creates a dilemma, as inclusion and exclusion become complementary processes (Hamre & Larsen, 2016; Røn Larsen, 2012). Røn Larsen has discussed the cross-professional cooperation as a conflictual social practice, underlining the ambivalence created by the way in which cross-professional cooperation often undermines children's own perspectives, while, simultaneously, children and families align their perspectives to the cross-professional cooperation, aiming to influence the process (Røn Larsen, 2012).

Munck has suggested that the cross-professional cooperation focused on preventing exclusion of children with special needs or challenges has become a collaborative effort which emphasizes expert (psychological) knowledge about specific issues. Hence, the general pedagogical competences and everyday pedagogical practices come to be seen as irrelevant (Munck, 2016).

Albertsen & Kjær, in their research on inclusion of children with special needs, have identified a number of challenges to successful cross-disciplinary dialogue on inclusion of children with special needs. These include a too limited focus on costs and resources, resulting demands for diagnoses or elaborate problem descriptions in order to obtain extra resources, leading to a focus on illness and lacking social competences rather than on the possibilities for developing inclusive children's communities and positive parent cooperation. Furthermore, the authors, in line with Munck, point to conflicts between, on the one hand, pedagogues' general pedagogical knowledge and daily experiences with interacting with the children and, on the other hand, the expert knowledge of psychologists employed by the municipality. This, it is suggested, means that it is, in some cases, difficult to establish a common understanding of 'the best interest of the child' (Albertsen & Kjær, 2015)

In a book communicating research results to practitioners, Kjær proposes that 'good practice' in day care institutions (defined as a practice which create the possibilities for personal development, well-being in an institutional set-up and social skills among children with psychosocial challenges) is characterised by certain conditions. First, professionals who produce

good practice are 'reflective methodians', approaching their own and other people's actions to systematic inquiry. Second, they operate in professional environments in which they are supported, challenged and qualified to acting as reflecting methodians. Third, they have access to neutral, professional external supervision (Kjær, 2010: 260-1).

In professional practice in Denmark, cross-professional cooperation is often considered to be crucial for solving the problems of a child. While research to some degree support this assumption, studies also point to numerous challenges and problems related to professional boundaries, professional identities and hierarchies between different groups of professionals.

Finally, a large research project, VIDA, on knowledge-based efforts for socially disadvantaged children in day care have discussed inclusion with point of departure in professionals' approaches to socially disadvantaged children. The project from other research on children and social inclusion, as its aim has been to develop and test a special competence package. The purpose of the VIDA project (2010-2013) was to change practice in the day care settings, as Scandinavian research has demonstrated difficulties with including socially disadvantaged children. Professionals often tend to overlook these children's strengths and resources, the project suggested, and aimed for a situation in which every child be seen, heard and included. 7000 children at 129 day care centers participated in the project and the project investigated in three "package of innovation". One group received what might be termed the basic VIDA package, VIDA-Basis, where staff were specially trained with a view to changing their practices. The second group, VIDA-Basis+, combined this training with a focus on parental involvement. The third group was used as a control group. The results show that VIDA had an effect on the children in terms of well-being and their social-emotional development, and that parental involvement had a positive effect reducing the problems. It also shows that there were no visible effect on the children's cognitive learning (Jensen, 2013).

Final remarks

This brief review has pointed out that social inclusion in early childhood education is a relatively well-covered topic in Danish research. Most research is based on an interest in and assumption of the importance of processes of community, and in particular children's communities. This assumption is seldom the focus of reflection and discussion.

Well-researched themes in the research discussed in this review include exclusionary mechanisms in daily pedagogical practice as well as in wider societal structures, children's participation in children's communities, and parent cooperation.

Less researched themes include parents' perspective on parents' cooperation and transition in and out of day care with a view to social inclusion. Finally, there appears to be a research gap in relation to exploring community perspectives of social inclusion and exclusion, and the perspective of working with social inclusion in urban areas.

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