# Social Preferences : A Discussion of Social Divisions and Early Childcare

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The focus of this article is social divisions among preschool children in daycare centers. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in three daycare centers in Denmark, the analysis concerns young children's social preferences. The ethnographic material shows that despite an explicit political ambition of daycares as means for social and cultural integration, lines of division do exist amongst the children. Such divisions are established in the daily interactions of the daycare, but they also reflect those of the broader society. With a focus on children's interactions and social preferences, the material indicates that children's choices of playmates run along lines of ethnic and class divisions. The article will address this pattern and analyze its causes in order to understand why such lines of divisions are to be found in an institutional context designed to overcome social inequality and prevent social fragmentation.

## 1. Introduction

Throughout recent decades, there has been a rising political interest in preschool arrangements and early childcare in several European countries. Though the area of early childcare is characterized by a variety of institutions and arrangements in various

countries, an intensified political interest can be noticed even in countries with a long tradition of early childhood education, e.g., France, Italy, Spain, and the Scandinavian countries. Young children and early childcare have moved from being a subject in the margins of public administration to the center of the political debate. This renewed and intensified interest in the youngest children reflects political and economic changes over the last decades. An increased global competition over market shares and the educated labor force alongside further political and economic integration among the countries in the EU are but some of the factors that have turned childhood into an object of high political priority and long-term investment. Other factors relate to more internal national orientations. The report from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) *Starting Strong* explains the reasons for the growing interest in several countries as wishes to increase women's labor-market participation, to confront the demographic challenges faced by most OECD countries, and the need to address issues of child poverty and educational disadvantage (OECD 2006: 1). Thus, the institutionalization of childcare is closely related to larger political issues such as demography, gender equality, the need for staffing in the labor market, and also a growing concern for social security and social cohesion. In political discourses in several countries—amongst these the Scandinavian ones[1]—there seems to be a strong and generally held belief that early intervention is a way to meet and minimize the risk of future social problems. Positioned in the front rank of the welfare state, childcare institutions are expected to discover and address social problems of families, and children specifically, as early as possible, and to guide children and parents to correlate with the aims of the state.

In Denmark, where state involvement in the upbringing of preschool children is pronounced, this development is very explicit. The investment in public daycare institutions is much higher than most other countries in Europe (Bennett 2005), as is the percentage of small children enrolled in them. This reflects that public childcare has a long history. In a sense, one can say that early childcare has been foundational for the form of welfare state which took shape in the decades following the Second World War. From being a place where particular children of deprived families could be developmentally stimulated and looked after while their parents were at work, childcare institutions gradually became a universal offer for all children. Not only were they seen as a prerequisite for the participation of women in the labor market, they were also regarded as an important tool to ensure society's social cohesion. Although there have been many changes in the perception of the welfare state, this view of public childcare remains in force. Early childcare is generally regarded as an investment in human resources and an outpost combating, and hopefully reducing, inequality and social disintegration. With an explicit ambition of enrolling children from all kinds of religious, economic, educational, and cultural backgrounds in the same institutional settings, the daycare is viewed as a social equalizer, able to integrate and overcome otherwise divided groups.

In this article[2], I will discuss whether or not this ambition is fulfilled. The anthropology of education in Scandinavia has a long tradition of studying the ways in

which mechanisms of dominance subtly play out in everyday practices (for an overview, see Anderson et al. 2011). In line with this tradition, the focus of the article is on everyday interactions and social balance, studied through long-term daily observations and qualitative interviews with administrators, parents, teachers, and children. Based on two ethnographic fieldworks[3] in three different childcare institutions in Denmark, I have followed the interplay between children, staff, and parents, with a special interest in relations amongst the children. The three daycares were located in two rather diverse areas, two of them being in an environment of council housing in a minor town, the third in a rather run-down inner-city neighborhood. Though varying in housing style, the number of playgrounds, and recreational facilities, the two areas were similar in being highly socially, culturally, and ethnically diverse. For this reason, overcoming social barriers was a pronounced objective in all three daycares—and the reason that these institutions were chosen as field sites. In this article, I will not deal with the differences between the three daycares; rather, I will analyze principles for social preferences identifiable in the overall data material.

The ethnographic material shows that despite the general ambition of ensuring social and cultural integration, lines of division do exist amongst the children. Such divisions are established in the daily interactions of the daycare, but they also reflect those of the broader society. With a focus on children's interactions and social preferences, the data material indicates that children's choices of playmates run along lines of ethnic and class divisions. I will discuss this pattern and analyze its causes in order to understand why such lines of division are to be found in an institutional context designed to overcome social inequality and prevent social fragmentation. To give a sense of the ethnographic



**Photo 1**   Inside a Daycare center (Photo taken by Claus Jensen)

**Photo 2**   Playground. Daycare center (Photo taken by Claus Jensen)

setting, I will begin by describing the role of daycare institutions for children in contemporary Denmark (See Photos 1 and 2 for examples from daycare settings).

## 2. Early Childcare in Denmark

In broad outline, early childcare in Denmark resembles the care systems of the other Scandinavian countries. In all three countries—Denmark, Norway, and Sweden—childcare is provided or supervised by public authorities, and political interest in the sector has increased significantly throughout the last 10 years. Though priorities vary in practice—not least when it comes to the amount of time spend on educational activities—early childcare has in all the Scandinavian countries become an integral part of the institutional foundations of society. Daycare facilities are regarded as a pivotal factor in the participation of parents in the workforce and an important instrument for ensuring gender equality in relation to the labor market. In numerous policy documents from the three countries, it is furthermore emphasized that good childcare facilities are fundamental for a child's educational achievement—in fact, they are a precondition for it. Equally important, it is stressed that early childcare provides an arena for integration of children of different ethnic backgrounds, languages, and cultures, and helps to promote social equality. Childcare policy, thus, seems to be based on the strong belief that childcare institutions have the capacity to create equality and prepare children for their later roles in the educational system, as citizens and participants in the workforce (Satka and Eydal 2004: 41; Kjørholt 2011).

In Denmark today, 87% of all children between the age of one and three, and 96.1% of children between three and five, are enrolled in daycare (compared to 34% of all children between 0 and 6 in 1977) (Statistical Yearbook 2007). These numbers are the result of a long period of expansion of the daycare sector. The process began as early as the 1960s, correlating with a situation of almost full employment. Unlike most other countries, Denmark's increasing need for labor was covered by women rather than by large-scale immigration, and by 1970, about half of all women of working age had entered the labor market (Borchorst 2000: 60–61). The great expansion of childcare institutions during the 1960s and 1970s allowed women to fill the gap in the labor force (Stenvig et al. 1993). Economic upturn, changes in gender roles, and the structure of the welfare state slowly altered the conception of early childcare. From being an offer mostly for families in need—low-income families and those with single mothers—early childcare has become a non-controversial part of ordinary family life for all kinds of families. A policy of state subsidization has made public childcare a universal provision, to the extent that daycare institutions today are the obvious place to be for children under school age (Borchorst 2000; Gulløv 2008, 2011).

In this way, early childcare is an integrated part of the policy of the welfare state aiming at not only taking care of small children while their parents are working, but also ensuring social integration of the upcoming generations. Thus, public childcare is not regarded as secondary or supplemental to upbringing in the home, but as an integral and necessary part of the development of each individual child. The daycare institution is conceptualized as a prerequisite for individuation processes, social integration and societal coherence, and for the social and educational formation of future citizens. On the whole, institutions must endeavor to create autonomous and responsible individuals, prevent social failure, and ensure homogeneity and social equality by bringing up children in accordance with dominant norms of behavior, social responsibility, and independence. In this sense, the process of institutionalized public civil formation begins long before children enter school (Jenkins 2011: 175, Gilliam and Gulløv 2014).

## 3. Educational Programs

In the legal framework of contemporary daycare institutions, it is emphasized that the child is an active and self-managing human being in need of learning to be part of a social group. A similar view is expressed in policy papers describing aims and objectives of individual institutions. Even the youngest children are considered "competent" persons capable of negotiating and expressing their own intentions and perceptions, but they need to be in an environment facilitating their social development. The educational aim of the daycare is therefore to support the development of the individual child's ability to express and manage itself within a peer group. Children need to be socially aware and able to take other people's viewpoints into consideration. Participation in negotiations, decision-making, and everyday planning appear central to ideological visions of a democratic upbringing.

In general, the educational programs are characterized by an open and flexible

structure, providing opportunities for children themselves to plan their doings. Most activities are thus play-based, with an absence of teacher-directed learning. Group-oriented activities, as well as scheduled meals, make up the planned elements of the day, and the rest of the day is loosely and flexibly structured according to the children's play desires. Thus, children themselves decide which activities to join, and in practice they



**Photo 3**   Children playing outside (Photo taken by Claus Jensen)



**Photo 4**   Children drawing pictures (Photo taken by Søren Kjær)

spend most of the day playing with each other in smaller self-defined groups (Photos 3 and 4). Autonomy and independence are supported (3-year-olds are permitted to play in small groups with no adults present; 5-year-olds are permitted to go to the playground outside when nobody else is there), and cooperative play and socially inclusive group activities are highly emphasized. With a long tradition of reform pedagogy dating back to the German educationalist Friedrich Fröbel, the vision is of child-initiated learning where the role of the teachers is to support, stimulate, and comfort rather than instruct or teach specific topics. The idea is that children themselves learn about subjects and experience social rules through self-directed activity rather than following an agenda set by staff.

The main educational priority is on children's social learning, with particular attention to the ways children communicate and interact with each other. A particular effort is placed on children's verbalization of their feelings and intentions, as well as on their abilities to negotiate and compromise as a premise for interaction. There is a strong bias against any form of social exclusion, either as a tool of correction used by teachers or as a practice occurring amongst children. Rather than being sent out of the room, for instance, "difficult" children are repressed by being placed on the lap of the teacher, or they receive special attention. Staff generally considers the practice of "time-outs" or isolation of misbehaving children unacceptable. Instead, it is underlined that the pedagogical aim is to teach children how to behave in a group; they have to learn and incorporate the implicit rules of social life. Such perceptions and practices of discipline and child management techniques are quite widespread, and reflect a certain notion of socialization and vision of institutional upbringing. It is, of course, not the case that children are never scolded or criticized, but this does not occur often, as a strong idea of the gentle, balanced, and anti-authoritarian teacher prevails. Thus, the main objective is to bring up children to be self-managing, able to raise their voices, allowed to argue and negotiate, and at the same time be able to compromise and be considerate and inclusive toward others.

This ambition is, however, a matter of intensive public debate, as critical voices claim that children are not taught enough to match the demands of global competition, nor do they learn to be respectful, and end up caring only for themselves. Defenders argue that children actually do learn important lessons, including teamwork, negotiation, and engagement in decision-making—all important qualifications for participation in the contemporary labor market as well as in a democratic society. The discussion concerns whether the institutional upbringing can ensure a population of engaged and responsible citizens who are able to meet national expectations in the era of globalization. Despite the debates, the thrust in the formative potential of daycare as a prerequisite for formal schooling and a well-integrated society seems to be both high and widespread.

## 4. Social Preferences

The professional self-image is based on a well-established humanistic tradition emphasizing tolerance, inclusiveness, and democracy. Employees in all three investigated institutions express a firm belief that all children are equal and should be treated as such.

In contrast to, for example, the British tradition of multicultural education, this ideological stand has led to a muting of differences rather than an effort to represent the children's diverse backgrounds. Differences are rarely pointed out in public, because equality is understood as homogeneity and, to some extent, also similarity (Gullestad 1992). For this reason the families' backgrounds, resources, mother tongue, or religion are not an active part of the educational framing. Differences are underplayed in an effort to establish the group of children as a community of equals.

Dealing with the social micro-processes of everyday interactions, the ethnographic approach reveals, however, that these efforts do not always work as inclusively as intended. Despite wishes and actions by staff, children's choices of playmates correlate with ethnic and socioeconomic divisions in broader society. Children's preferences tend to run along lines of gender, class, and ethnicity, so ethnic Danish middle-class children, for instance, more often play with each other, and likewise, ethnic minority children tend to prefer each other's company. This tendency is particularly evident when it comes to ethnic minority boys. Interestingly, there do not seem to be groupings around specific ethnic or linguistic backgrounds. Rather, it seems to be the minority status vis-à-vis the majority status which form the line. But how can such patterns be explained? What are the causes behind social preferences? In an institution intended to create social integration, it appears to be a paradox that social divisions of broader society can be found on a small scale in the interactions of these very young children. Several different factors seem to come together to produce this social pattern, which, despite the best intentions of the staff, reproduces well-known lines of division. In the following sections, I will discuss some of the social conditions that can explain children's social preferences.

## 5. The Emphasis on Verbal Interactions

Despite a strong belief in equality on the part of staff, organized activities and norms of interaction in practice favor middle-class children who are already familiar with the same kinds of activities, norms of communication, and interaction at home. The overlaps between middle-class home and daycare centers in modes of communication, adult-child interactions, authority structure, educational activities, materials, and decoration are profound. Consequently, children coming from such homes more easily meet staff expectations and are generally more eager to participate in the teacher-initiated activities. Since these children are in the majority, their experiences and knowledge in practice set the norm.

This observation is quite parallel to what sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1977) show in their classic book on the social and cultural reproduction of the French school system. They point out how ways of communicating, in particular the use of language, are loaded with social codes and function as markers of social distinctions in the evaluative processes of school. The interesting point in relation to this is that the Danish educational system—especially the pedagogy of early childcare—in many ways differs radically from the French system. In Danish (and Scandinavian) educational thinking, the emphasis is on the child's self-expression and motivation to

learn rather than pre-defined curricula—at least for the youngest school grades. Precisely to counteract social reproduction and overcome inequalities between children, the spirit behind this system is to work with the individual child's motivation to learn, at the same time engaging the child in a functional and inclusive social context.

One of the means of promoting social cohesion is developing children's abilities to verbalize their intentions and viewpoints. Children are taught to tell about experiences, to solve conflicts by words, and they are encouraged to express their views and argue for their standpoints. In practice, however, this tends to support the competencies and influence of the Danish middle-class children who are familiar with this mode of communication. In the many daily negotiations over what to do and who should be included in the activities, children who are used to speaking and arguing in Danish at home have significantly better opportunities to set the agenda. Children not mastering the skill of negotiation or a sufficient vocabulary are given far fewer opportunities to decide or define activities and relations. Thus, a downside of the child-friendly approach is that children who master the recognized modes of expression and speak Danish fluently have far more influence, while children less competent or fluent in Danish are relegated to more peripheral positions.

A further component is the fact that children often choose for themselves what to do, and with whom. Personal initiatives and decision-making are regarded as key elements of democratic upbringing. For this reason, children are generally allowed to choose whether they want to participate in the common activities, play on their own, or play in a smaller group. This, however, has the consequence that children actually do different things; they divide in small groups over the playground area or the available inside space. Looking more carefully at this division, a linguistic aspect becomes apparent. Children in the linguistic minority—especially the boys in the investigated institutions—prefer each other's company to that of the majority middle-class children. One explanation for this is that the middle-class children will often be occupied with educational activities or ways of playing which demand a certain level of fluency in Danish. Children who do not have the same level of fluency in Danish, or the experiences required for participating in these activities, find themselves less attractive as playmates, and therefore prefer to do something else rather than risking being corrected or met with refusal by other children.

Thus, ethnic Danish middle-class children have an advantage in negotiations with other children, a factor that can explain why minority children prefer each other's company across different mothertongues. As they cannot obtain equal status among Danish children, they seek playmates with language skills and status similar to their own, though not necessarily sharing the same mother tongue. As the language spoken in daycare is Danish, children don't cluster on the basis of various language groups. Rather, they group with others mastering Danish to the same degree. So, mother tongue does not in itself explain children's social preferences or the observed social fragmentation. Rather, a child's social position and relations are dependent on fluency in Danish, as verbal communication in the majority language is the recognized and legitimate form of social interaction in the context of the daycare.

## 6. Social Implications of Educational Activities

In relation to the educational activities of the daycare, a similar pattern can be identified. Parallel to findings made by other educational researchers in several countries (e.g., Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, Willis 1977, Heath 2000 [1986], Lareau 2003, Kusserow 2004), children's participation and engagement in the staff-arranged activities correlates with their familiarity with materials and tasks. This familiarity often reflects experiences from home, where children in the majority already know the toys and tasks presented in daycare and can more easily understand what is demanded. This pattern is particularly evident when it comes to the use of books. When interviewing parents on their educational priorities on behalf of their children, it becomes clear that practices and viewpoints in the families have a say in children's interests. In families concerned with children's reading skills and ability to enjoy a book, books are often part of social interactions, either because parents read to children, or they are used more implicitly as references in other kind of situations. This interest is reflected in the social pattern of everyday life in daycare whenever a situation includes books. Children who are used to looking  at books and having stories read aloud to them are more eager to participate when staff members begin to read to the group. Children not trained to listen often lose interest and will soon leave the activity, looking for more engaging things to do. They prefer to play with children who, like themselves, have no at-home experiences with reading.

In general, children participate in educational activities if they feel included. Children who have no experiences with an activity might prefer to do something else, particularly if they feel disregarded by others due to their apparent ignorance. Thus, they look for company among children with similar experiences, in some cases developing a more general resistance toward staff-initiated activities. As there are no demands on presence, one social consequence can be that children split up in different groups that, in practice, reflect their different home experiences.

Although unintended, educational practices therefore reflect and, to some extent, reproduce differences in parent's educational backgrounds, as staff members take their cue from the motivations of children, without taking into account the ways in which these are stimulated. In this sense, activities and norms for interactions favor middle-class children familiar with activities, materials, and norms of communication and interaction from home. Children's social preferences seem to reflect this valorization.

## 7. Common Experiences

Looking more carefully at daily interactions, it becomes apparent that expressions of both recognition and the lack thereof, either by staff or other children, have a considerable impact on social relations. This is for example seen in face-to-face interactions in which some children's stories of their experiences are met with greater enthusiasm than others. In daily sessions in which children are asked to form a circle and tell the others about their doings and thoughts, some narratives immediately receive more attention as they

refer to well-known activities or childhood experiences. Stories about visits to toy stores, watching television programs for children, trips to the forest, or visiting grandparents often lead to eager and interested questions by staff or other children. The themes are easy to relate to and acknowledge as significant. Other kinds of experiences are not recognizable in the same sense, and will not take up as much time or attract as much attention. Descriptions of religious—but not Christian—events are, for example, rarely followed by further questions. This is not due to a lack of interest by staff members, but to the distance a lack of insight can introduce, or to a concern that the child may be regarded as different by the other children. In general, then, uncommon experiences, or experiences specific to cultural, religious, or linguistic minorities are rarely part of conversations or activities, nor are they integrated as part of the educational program.

This observation is parallel to one made by Swedish ethnologist Billy Ehn (1986), who, on the basis of a study of a Swedish pre-school, demonstrates just how little cultural backgrounds and practices, as well as differences in customs, religion, and language are brought into focus in the educational program. He argues that this is related to an explicit strategy which strives for equality amongst the children, none of whom should therefore be marked within the institutional context (Ehn 1986: 128–135). In support of this argument, several of the teachers in the investigated daycares stressed the importance of treating all children similarly (Bundgaard and Gulløv 2006). They stated that they made an effort to ensure equality and homogeneity within the group of children, and this priority seemed to correspond with a general cultural ideology of equality in which equality is understood as similarity. Several anthropologists have argued that a notion of equality seems to characterize Scandinavian social interactions, in which similarities are stressed and differences downplayed (Gullestad 1984, 1992; Salamon 1992; Liep and Olwig 1994). In the daycare setting, this translates to an emphasis on homogeneity, whereas variety and difference, as well as nuances, are downplayed.

The emphasis on children's commonalities at the expense of their variations constructs an image of a homogeneous social group of children: a micro-community of equals within the walls of the institution. The paradox is that this effort in practice has social consequences. The ambition of avoiding marking some children as different sets an unacknowledged—yet dominant—social and educational agenda. The very muting of differences works as a kind of symbolic recognition of some experiences at the expense of others, and this implicit valorization also has an impact on relations between the children. Children discover that some experiences and narratives are met with great interest by their peers and the staff, while other experiences are of less relevance in this social setting. Taking notice of these reactions, they learn what to share, and with whom, in which type of situation. Thus, as a tendency, children seem to seek the company of others who recognize and acknowledge their references and experiences. When this is not the case in the more public conversation with teachers, they will seek others who share their experiences and know their references, meanings, and values. In this sense, common experiences also become a factor contributing to the fragmentation of the group into smaller groups. Children simply seek company with those who share and recognize the same kind of references and experiences.

## 8. Relations Outside the Institution

A final factor to be mentioned here is play relations outside the daycare institutions. In interviews in the homes of children in two of the three investigated daycares, parents expressed interest in their children's friendships and play relations. In some cases, a relationship gave cause for concern as parents did not find the friend suitable, or did not like their child to visit homes with parents they did not know personally. It became clear that the parents' support of certain social relations reflected their own networks and their feelings of familiarity with some families rather than others. Furthermore, their preferences were rarely interethnic and reflected parallels among parents in their levels of education and economic resources. In addition, a sociocultural match in their perception of children (i.e., their ways of communicating and interacting) seemed to have an impact on which children parents preferred for their own children's playmates.

As children in daycares are quite young (ages 2–6), their parents' choice of contacts has quite an important role to play in their friendships outside of daycare. Parents make contact with other parents to arrange for children to play together; they drop off and pick up children from other households, and children's own arrangements are, therefore, only realized if parents are willing to give practical support. Thus, parents' social sympathies and practical investments in some relations over others are highly relevant for children's contacts and friendships, since children tend to develop friendships accordingly. Parents' choices influence who children see outside of daycare—that is, who they will come to know well and share experiences and references with. And this familiarity has an impact on the pattern of social preferences that can be observed within the daycare setting. It is easier to continue a relationship with someone and engage in activities that are already shared than to develop a relationship with people who have quite different experiences. Thus, parents' social preferences not only set a context for young children's relationships, they have a direct impact on them.

## 9. Conclusion: Relations Between Social Preferences and Lines of Division

All of the above-mentioned factors influence the social patterns children form while attending daycare. As this description shows, the aim of overcoming inequality and social barriers by enrolling preschool children in daycare institutions is not working as straightforwardly as intended. Contact between divided groups does not in itself dissolve social barriers (Connolly 2000). Instead, it depends on the kind of contact, the circumstances in which it takes place, and the broader structural framework to determine whether or not there will be an integrating effect. In order to know whether the institutional effort is fulfilled, it is, as argued by Paul Connolly, necessary to address the complex relationship between the micro-processes at the level of interactions and lived experiences and the broader structural, political, and ideological processes (Connolly 2000: 188).

Early childcare in Denmark is part of a public, institutionalized program for upbringing that aims to teach every child how to become a democratic citizen. The

emphasis is on teaching children to participate, negotiate verbally, and acknowledge others' rights to do the same. In general, this aim works as intended. Teachers support and instruct children in solving conflicts, negotiating, and interacting, irrespective of gender, class, and ethnicity. Nevertheless, social divisions among children do exist. As argued in this article, some children more easily recognize educational demands since they are already familiar with them at home. They enjoy being with staff, attending activities, and doing the tasks required of them. Other children choose to do otherwise, particularly if they feel unable to do as expected. In general, children seem to prefer to be with others who share and acknowledge the same kinds of knowledge, experiences, and references.

In an environment that emphasizes children's personal initiatives and decision-making as core in a democratic upbringing, children are generally allowed to choose whether they want to participate in the common activities or prefer to play on their own or in a smaller group. This, however, has the consequence that children actually take part in different activities and, analyzed over time, establish different groups of peers. Though not fixed—and actually, quite in flux—these groupings pattern in a way that calls for attention.

Within the daycare settings, such preferences are explained in terms of children's different personalities or some children's lack of ability to communicate their intentions and understandings in a socially recognized way—often rooted in an unstimulating background. In other words, social preferences are seen as caused by either individual dispositions or circumstances in the social background, rather than by selective mechanisms resulting from educational priorities and cultural values. When analyzed more carefully, however, it becomes clear that the pattern in children's relations refers to broader structural inequalities and cultural valorizations. The choices of individual children are guided by values, classifications, and principles of recognition in their social environments. Preferences reflect values and priorities that support and valorize modes of interaction in ways not all children are familiar with.

Held up against parents' levels of education, linguistic competencies, and relation to the labor market, it is noteworthy that the patterns of relations among children run along lines of division in broader society as a tendency, but not exclusively. Thus, social preferences reflect a distribution in social and cultural (as well as linguistic) capital in the homes of the children and in the institutional settings. When, for example, teachers stress that one of the purposes of institutional upbringing is to teach children to interact verbally and solve conflicts through negotiation rather than in physical ways, their methods have a clear democratic grounding, but also a class bias. An unintentional impact of this priority is that children trained to express themselves and negotiate are in a much better position to determine both activities and who should be allowed to join them. They master the approved language and the relevant ways of arguing and are, therefore, able to perform in recognized ways, define situations, and set social agendas. They have a feel for the game in the sense described by Pierre Bourdieu (1990: 64), which is a socially-rooted sense of practice rather than an innate capacity. From this perspective, what can count as arguments, as relevant agendas, as recognized and

legitimate modes of expression, is more than a matter of personal assessments, but relates to broader cultural values and structures of dominance. Children's feel for the game reflects the possession of linguistic and cultural capital in their families that is recognized—though unacknowledged—as capital within the educational setting. Their knowledge of materials, activities, and references, their behavior, interactions, and incorporated manners can be seen as resources referring to a much broader context of symbolic capitals and distribution of resources, competencies, and status.

Social preferences will always relate and refer to values in society, distribution of resources, and structures of dominance, even when they play out among very young children in daycares. In this sense, analysis of social preferences provides insight into the social forces that, over time, might divide people into different groupings varying in influence and privilege.

Though Denmark as a society is characterized by a high degree of social equality, social divisions do exist, and they also make an impact on social life in educational institutions. Such lines of division are, however, somewhat hidden behind an explicit political rhetoric of Denmark as an egalitarian society. The role of welfare institutions in the reproduction of such lines is not discussed a great deal, as it contradicts a cultural understanding of the Scandinavian societies as characterized by social equality. Nevertheless, in these highly democratic societies which stress equality and participatory rights, structural inequality and social fragmentation are also realities. The vision of daycares as social equalizers is not always fulfilled, as educational priorities function as de facto cultural capital connecting the broader social stratification with the microcosms of the institution. These broader inequalities are not easily overcome, not even with a child-friendly, democratic pedagogical approach like the one practiced in early childcare institutions in Denmark.

## Notes

1) Denmark is a part of Scandinavia. The three countries comprising this region—Denmark, Norway, and Sweden—are closely tied, linguistically, politically, and culturally. Located on Europe's northern perimeter, they share an interlocking history, and their present political systems, ideological foundations, and social organization bear strong resemblances. All three countries are characterized by long Social Democratic traditions of universal welfare.

2) This article is based on my lecture presented at "Future Society for Children: Scandinavian Thought and Practice," a symposium held on March 6, 2010, at the National Museum of Ethnology (NME). I have conducted the research informing this paper partly as a member of the core research project of NME: "The Anthropology of Care and Education for Life," 2011– 2013 (representative: Nanami Suzuki).

3) Two periods of ethnographic fieldwork in three different daycare institutions form the basis of this argument. The first one was carried out August 2002–February 2003 in two daycare institutions, as well as their intake area in a small Danish city. This fieldwork was conducted with associate professor Helle Bundgaard of the Institute of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen. The second was conducted in an inner-city daycare center of Copenhagen in

August and September 2007, and again in August 2008.

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