



Day-Care in Denmark
The Key to Social Integration

Bundgaard, Helle

Published in:
The question of integration

Publication date:
2011

Document version
Early version, also known as pre-print

Citation for published version (APA):
Bundgaard, H. (2011). Day-Care in Denmark: The Key to Social Integration. In K. Fog Olwig, & K. Pærregaard (Eds.), *The question of integration: Immigration, exclusion and the Danish welfare state* (pp. 150-166). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

DAY-CARE IN DENMARK: THE KEY TO
SOCIAL INTEGRATION

Helle Bundgaard

ISBN: 978-1-4438-2795-9

Publication date: 2011

Citation for published version (APA): Bundgaard, H. (2011). 'Day-care in Denmark: The key to social integration', in: *The Question of Integration, Immigration, Exclusion and the Danish Welfare State, paes: 150-167*. 1. ed. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing

This paper has been accepted for publication in *The Question of Integration, Immigration, Exclusion and the Danish Welfare State* and the final (edited, revised and typeset) version of this paper will be published in *The Question of Integration, Immigration, Exclusion and the Danish Welfare State, eds. Karen Fog Olwig and Karsten Pærregaard*, by Newcastle upon Tyne, All rights reserved. ©Newcastle upon Tyne

**DAY-CARE IN DENMARK: THE KEY TO
SOCIAL INTEGRATION**

Helle Bundgaard

Introduction

This chapter explores central notions of appropriate social behavior in what is arguably the most important institution in Denmark when it comes to social integration, namely day-care also known as pre-school.¹ Young children spend the major part of their day five days a week in day-care. Here they learn to argue for their wants and interact with other children in socially acceptable ways; crucial skills for citizens in a welfare society. Moreover they are trained in verbalizing their feelings, (*sætte ord på sine følelser*). Children as young as three are expected to explain what they feel about things: "I can see that you are angry, but it makes me sad when you hit me." It is not only children, however, but also their parents who learn or are reminded about what is considered appropriate. Parents are encouraged to ask staff for advice regarding matters of upbringing and for their part staff are obliged to address problems thought to be potentially harmful for a child.

Moral values guiding everyday practices are generally taken for granted. When interacting with ethnic minority children and their parents, however, staff are occasionally forced to make explicit the reasoning behind their actions. A focus on the interaction of ethnic minority children and their parents in day-cares therefore provides insights into the cultural beliefs and values which structure daily socialization practices in a Danish day-care, and by implication in Danish society.

Through a narrative approach, this chapter presents an experience-near analysis of incidents related to the introduction of an ethnic minority child to a Danish day-care institution. The chapter focuses on dominant conceptions in relation to, firstly, whether it is appropriate to give children responsibility for looking after other children and, secondly, the extent to which the institution can draw on family relations. The analysis shows that distinct conceptions of the independence and responsibility of children are at play and discusses what consequences this has for the process of *settling in*. It will be seen that misunderstandings and communication gaps result because of well-established, but unspoken, conceptions of the role of parents in a day-care and what children are able to and, not least, allowed to do in relation to other people.

The chapter is written on the basis of six months of ethnographic fieldwork carried out in 2002-3 amongst people of different social and cultural background in an area in Zealand with social housing as well as single-family houses (see Bundgaard and Gulløv 2008).ⁱⁱ

The social institution of day-care

The majority of parents in Denmark work full-time even when their children are very young. This is reflected in the fact that 96 percent of all children between three and five attend day-care (Statistisk Årbog 2007: 162). Day-care institutions are part of a system of non-compulsory, early childhood programs, which include *vuggestuer* (nurseries) that serve children from six months to the age of three, and *børnehaver* (pre-schools or kindergartens) for children between the ages of three and six or seven, when compulsory school begins. Children younger than six thus spend between five and eleven hours a day in institutions (Winther 1999 in Gulløv 2009), where professional staff are responsible for care-giving and arranging activities in line with educational goals. In Denmark day-care thus plays a crucial role in the organization of family life and in shaping future citizens. This is particularly evident when it comes to low-income families and families with immigrant backgrounds. Despite the fact that the former might be on unemployment benefits or social welfare, and therefore not in obvious need of child-care, they will often be offered a place in a day-care institution free of charge to ensure that their children get social stimulation. This is thought to be crucial if the children are to stand a chance breaking their so-called (negative) social heritage. When it comes to immigrant families, visiting nurses employed by the municipality often advise parents to sign up their children for day-care, so that they can become exposed to Danish social norms and cultural values and the Danish language.ⁱⁱⁱ It is commonly agreed that immigrant children should attend day-care sooner rather than later, and it is considered preferable that they are enrolled when they are between 6 and 18 months old.

Day-care institutions have been part of Danish society since the 18th century. As early as 1828 the first *asylum* opened, targeting children from the lower classes whose parents were working. In contrast to the *asylums*,

which were characterized by severe discipline (Coninck-Smith 1995: 10-11), *kindergartens*, inspired by the German pedagogue Friedrich Fröbel (see Sigsgaard 1978), offered stimulation through play to children from wealthy families (Gulløv 2009: x). The first kindergarten opened in 1871. In 1919 the Danish state passed a law granting economic support to day-care institutions (Borchorst 2005: 133-146 in Gulløv 2009) and thus became involved in the care of children, an involvement which has increased significantly since then.

Until the 1960s day-care institutions were not widespread, but with the entrance of women (including mothers) into the labor market this changed radically. The number of day-care institutions increased markedly and they have become a decisive element in the organization of the Danish welfare society (Gulløv 2009). The second part of the 20th century thus has seen an increasing professionalization of children's upbringing in Denmark (ibid.).

Towards individual emancipation

Although it is not possible here to discuss in detail the developments in pedagogy (see Sigsgaard 1978; Vejleskov 1997), a few words on the subject are necessary. In the middle of the 20th century, progressive education changed patterns of upbringing at home and in school towards less authoritarian practices (see Hermann 2007 for a detailed analysis of the development of progressive education in Denmark). Strict discipline was thought to result in orthodoxy and passivity, attributes which were not in demand when constructing a welfare society. The values of emancipation and independence have continued to play an important role up through the last part of the 20th century. In the 1990s, this was reflected in the reception of the book *Dit kompetente barn (Your competent child)* by Juul (1995), who argues for the importance of acknowledging that children generally will behave in a competent manner if only adults will let them.

Until quite recently the main purpose of activities in day-care was to increase the social awareness of children, consequently the focus was on behavior rather than a set curriculum. This is gradually changing, as neo-liberal policies leave their traces also in day-care institutions (see Gulløv 2009 for a discussion of recent changes). In the first decade of the new century, a tendency to increasing state intervention when it comes to determining matters of content in day-care activities can thus be seen. Nevertheless, compared to day-care abroad (see Tobin, Wu & Davidson 1989), day-care in Denmark can still be said to be influenced by the post-60s ideology of emancipation and self-determination. To a large extent children are still free to decide how they want to spend the majority of their day. Adults might decide whether children should be indoors or outdoors, but otherwise it is for the children to decide what they want to do. Adults will not introduce activities during what is known as *free play*. *Free play*

might involve anything from swinging to cycling, from playing a board game to building a house of mud or lego, or dressing up or throwing pillows at each other just to mention a few popular activities.

It is, however, a guarded freedom, a protected existence in which the problems of this world and related responsibilities are classified as belonging to the world of adults. As this chapter shows this understanding occasionally causes problems, not least for ethnic minority parents, some of whom have different notions of what one can expect from children in relation to fellow human beings.

Between two worlds

Amina snuggled up to her mother holding on to her ankle-length coat. It was her third day in the day-care.^{iv} The mother, Kirdan, spoke quietly to her daughter, attempting to guide her to the classroom, but the little body stiffened and Amina clung on to her mother's legs. When Kirdan gently pressed her daughter she began to cry in earnest. The first three years of her life Amina had been at home, but now she had to join a world in which the majority spoke a language she did not understand. From an institutional point of view, Amina would have been better off starting her institutional career earlier in life.

Kirdan chose to sit in the front hall, hoping that the daughter would quiet down. She stroked her hair and spoke soothingly to her. Occasionally the day-care assistant, Anne Mette, entered the front hall indicating with increasing frustration that they should join the group in the classroom, but Amina refused to move. With a gesture of rejection Kirdan signaled that the two of them needed peace. But Anne Mette soon returned to say that Kirdan had to make a decision: either she must bid farewell and leave Amina there or alternatively take her home. Kirdan responded by saying, "I do not understand." To Kirdan's relief, Amina's cousin, Fakhri, passed by while Anne Mette spoke. Kirdan got hold of him and asked him to look after Amina during her day in the day-care. Fakhri, who was two years older than Amina, took her hand and guided her into the classroom. Amina briefly turned to look at her mother but accepted the situation. Shortly after, Kirdan left the institution.

Settling in as praxis

In a Danish day-care institution *settling in* is a central concept. First-time parents of a child starting in day-care will only have a vague idea of what the concept entails, whereas parents who have to help their third child *settle in* will be very familiar with what is required. The process of *settling in* is influenced by the institutional framework, including the number of staff. However, the degree of success is mainly understood to be related to the parents' ability to *settle in* their child and their willingness to assume the

responsibility for doing so. Staff will generally expect that one parent spend some days in the institution together with the child and then gradually, as the child gets more comfortable (*er blevet trygt*) with the surroundings, to let her cope (*stå på egne ben* – literally, “stand on her own legs”). This is no easy task, as any parent who has experienced the process will know. One has to strike a balance between, on the one hand, being present and ready to help one’s child and, on the other hand, keeping a distance and not interfering without reason, in order to let the child be part of the social life of the institution. *Settling in* a child gives parents an opportunity to get an impression of everyday life in the institution as well as of the staff. At the same time the staff observes parents in order to decode “signs of care” (Thorne 2001: 368ff) or in other words their competence as parents. Have they “cut the umbilical cord” (*klippet navlestrengen*)? Are they capable of “saying no” (*sige fra*)? Do they take upon themselves their responsibility in an appropriate manner? These are the kinds of evaluations to which parents are subjected and which, among other things, indicate that institutions are guided by a dominant set of norms of behavior (Bundgaard 2004).

There is a conception that a successful institutional stay depends upon close collaboration between parents and institutional staff. In principle, parents have the main responsibility for the wellbeing of their child, although the staff has the responsibility for care-taking during the time the child attends day-care. Three weeks before Amina started day-care, her father spoke with the day-care teacher responsible for the group of children she was going to join. However, the gist of their conversation was never relayed to the assistant who took over during the summer vacation, nor, it seemed, to Amina’s mother. Kirdan did not give the impression of being familiar with the expectations of the staff and seemed at a loss and uncertain of her role.^v As mentioned earlier, Kirdan stayed in the front hall with Amina and thus did not balance appropriately between closeness and distance. This was noticed by staff, who felt that she did not perform well when it came to *settling in* Amina. For weeks, Kirdan sat with her crying daughter in the front hall. Some members of staff felt that Kirdan did not take on her parental responsibility. Staying in the front hall was not considered a fitting alternative to guiding Amina into the classroom.

Staff never explicitly stated what they expected of Kirdan. In this respect day-care resembles other social institutions. Behavioral norms are not explicated, but are nevertheless inherent in the institution as hidden statements to the institutional users, concerning who has what rights and how one behaves responsibly in accordance with the purpose of the institution (cf. Barth 1994: 91-92). As I have shown elsewhere (Bundgaard & Gulløv 2008: 22-25) minority parents and children, who are not familiar with the social codes, may break them and therefore be corrected or commented upon without knowing that they do not follow these implicit

expectations. . They are not able to protest against this treatment in a way that will be acknowledged, and consequently they are cut off from influencing the social norms of interaction. The fact that expectations are implicit therefore enforces the unequal power relation between majority and minority.

Who has the responsibility?

The young assistant, Anne Mette, who due to the summer vacation had the main responsibility for *settling in* Amina felt uncertain about how to handle a situation, which she experienced as extremely difficult due to the language barrier. She was moreover aware of Kirdan's personal insecurity, but did not know how to deal with it. The situation was not taken up during the weekly staff meetings and therefore my impression of how staff responded comes from more spontaneous commentaries. A few staff members expressed increasing frustration, in the beginning evident in ironic or snide remarks and later developing into direct criticism of the mother's and to some extent also the daughter's inability to communicate in Danish. One day-care teacher, Malene, remarked that she simply could not understand how the mother could be so irresponsible as to not learn Danish so that she might understand the world in which her children would grow up. An assistant expressed incomprehension at Amina's lack of Danish, knowing that her elder brother was fluent; and Hanne from yet another class described Amina as "completely blank." She found this incomprehensible when comparing Amina with a boy of similar age and background in her own class, who understood and spoke a little Danish. Hanne seemingly forgot that this boy started day-care when he was one-and-a-half years old.

Despite the great emphasis in the institution on the importance of communication between staff and parents, staff did not request an interpreter. Apparently, the assistant in charge of Amina's class associated the use of an interpreter with official meetings between parents and staff and therefore did not consider the possibility of - or need for - hiring an interpreter. Other staff members in the institution, who had long experience of working with minority parents and therefore might have helped the process, did not intervene, probably because they were generally overworked and had more than enough to do just dealing with their own classes. Furthermore, they were hesitant to interfere in the work in other classes that were the responsibility of another teacher.

It was not only Kirdan's lack of competence in Danish which brought critical attention from the staff, but her behavior more generally. And this might have been another reason why an interpreter was not thought to be the solution to the problem of settling in Kirdan. When asked about Amina's problems at *settling in* Kirdan a few months after she had started day-care a member of staff replied, "She [Kirdan] was not there, was she?"

But she clearly thought that not only she but also Amina's cousin had responsibility for Amina. It is a heavy burden for Fakhri and so unlike our way of thinking." This last remark indicates that the social interaction taking place in the front hall not only represented an encounter between single human beings but, as we shall see, a meeting between two stereotyped groups. The remark also suggests how categories are always ready to be activated in response to behavior that is not considered normal (McDermott 1993).

It was the explicit aim of staff that all children should have a pleasant start in the day-care. It is therefore not surprising that the assistant in charge of Kirdan experienced great frustration and powerlessness when she did not succeed in her attempt to reach the child. A sympathetic colleague in charge of the class next to Amina's explained that the deadlocked situation was due to Kirdan being a "bilingual foreigner."^{vi} To this more critical member of staff, Amina's *settling in* exemplified how certain minority parents relegate their parental responsibility to staff when their children are enrolled in an institution. This might lead to the conclusion that two distinct cultural models concerning childcare were at play.^{vii} However, it is not that simple, as will be evident in the following.

A relationship is strengthened

As mentioned, Kirdan's response to the problem of *settling in* Amina was to ask Fakhri to take care of the girl. This solved the problem to the extent that Amina stopped crying and agreed to leave her mother. She followed Fakhri wherever he chose to go, first to the playground, where she sat on a bicycle and watched her cousin's ball game with a male employee, and later in the classroom, where Fakhri showed her how she had to find her lunch box herself in the fridge. Then they had lunch together. After lunch, Fakhri returned to the playground, while Amina was washing her hands in the bathroom. Entering the classroom, she realized he had gone and immediately started calling him. Anne Mette felt sorry for her and helped her find Fakhri in the playground. Fakhri, however, was on his way to the bathroom and Amina was exceptionally allowed to follow him.^{viii} While he used the bathroom, he supervised her examination of the water taps. They spoke in Arabic only interrupted when Fakhri declared in Danish that he was done. Later, he showed her where her mug was located and how she should open the taps to fill it. This was followed by instructions about where outdoor toys, the sand pit, and the swings were located. When Amina was picked up after lunch, Fakhri had guided her through the practical aspects of everyday life in the institution and had thus fully fulfilled Kirdan's expectations of him as an elder cousin.

It was quite clear that Amina was content the first day as long as she was allowed to follow Fakhri. Her role as "follower" made her familiar with the routines of everyday life. For his part, Fakhri did not seem

bothered by the task, which he carried out without any protest. Nevertheless Fakhri's role was met with skepticism. During the first days several members of staff pointed out that "after all it was not his responsibility." Despite these objections, there were occasions in the beginning of Amina's stay in the day-care when staff asked Fakhri to carry out tasks related to Amina, even if he did not at first want to. For example, an employee, Lise, unsuccessfully attempted to guide Amina to the bathroom - she was jumping up and down with crossed legs and a tense expression. Amina, however, refused to follow her and Lise then asked Fakhri to take her. But he was busy and did not want to take his cousin. After a while, however, he agreed and they went together.

The teachers' skepticism in relation to Fakhri's assumption of responsibility for Amina was caused by their concern for whether Fakhri would be able to "say no" (*sige fra*) if he felt this was too heavy a burden. At a point in time when the book *Your Competent Child (Dit kompetente barn)*, mentioned above, still was highly influential, it is noteworthy that the staff did not trust Fakhri to be able to handle his task in a way which would be acceptable to both his cousin and himself. How does the institutional aim (stated explicitly in the institutional management plan) that children must be supported in developing responsibility relate to the idea that they must be able to "say no" (*sige fra*)?

To be able to "say no"

Amina had been in the day-care for a week and continued to follow Fakhri. Sometimes they conversed, but generally she simply followed him either to do what he was doing or watch him at a close distance. One afternoon they were joined by four-year-old Mitra. He was from another class but they both knew him well. They shared their mother tongue and he lived in the same area of town. Shortly after he had joined them, Fakhri moved slightly away soon leaving them on their own. Rather than "saying no," he had passed his task to another child for a while. Mitra walked while he quietly spoke to Amina in Arabic. She gave the impression of listening but did not reply. Ibrahim joined them and the boys entered a shed, while Amina sat on a bicycle Mitra had pointed out to her. She did not at any point stop watching Mitra, and when he returned they continued their quiet walk on the playground, punctuated by Mitra's occasional comments and interrupted by breaks in which they quietly watched other children, adults, or things. Mitra's best friend in the day-care, Umar, had his third birthday that day and his father brought a big cake for the children in Umar's class. On his way through the playground he saw Amina with Mitra and stopped to have a little chat, he stroked her chin and then proceeded to hand over the cake.

Mitra and Amina were sitting on a bench looking at the passers-by, now and then Amina sobbed. "Amina cries," Mitra said quietly maybe to

himself, maybe to me. He found a ball and threw it to her; she hesitantly picked it up to throw it back to him but it never really developed into a game, as Amina let many balls go by. They then clambered a fence to sit on without saying anything. Mathias who was five-years-old placed himself next to Mitra and the two boys began an intense discussion. It was quite clear that the conversation engaged Mitra much more than the game with Amina had done. She went off the fence and placed herself with her back to the boys. When Mathias left, Mitra joined Amina and they went into the institution together. Shortly afterwards Mitra came out again alone having handed over his task to a grown-up.

The descriptions indicate that the boys handled the responsibility related to Amina in a way, which allowed them to act also without her being present. When Mitra appeared, Fakhri saw a possibility for having a break; without refusing the responsibility he simply shared the task with someone else. Mitra who had never been instructed to take care of Amina did not at any time leave Amina, but handed her over to an adult when he did not want to have her around anymore.

Responsibility and degrees of relatedness

Amina had been in the day-care for two weeks. The children were at the playground. One of the older girls, Nana, crossed the lawn closely followed by Amina. Fakhri appeared calling “Amina, Amina.” They stopped and looked at him. A short conversation followed in Danish.

Fakhri (to Amina): What a nice necklace you are wearing.

Nana: It’s a bracelet, not a necklace.

Fakhri: I don’t care.

The girls sat on a blanket and were joined by Signe and Sarah.

Signe (to Nana): Are you her friend?

Nana: No, I am not her friend. I take care of her.

One of the members of staff from Nana’s class had asked her to take care of Amina, a task she had proudly accepted. The task marked her position as one of the older children in the day-care. She accepted her role with great empathy for the little girl she had been asked to take care of. Amina on her side, clearly understood, that it was Nana who was supposed to take care of her and she followed Nana wherever she went.

Nana and Fakhri were about the same age and they both were in the same class as Amina. What then caused several staff members to conceive it problematic that one of the two, Fakhri, was given responsibility for Amina, while they themselves asked the other, Nana, to carry out the same task? The main difference between Nana and Fakhri was gender. Gender might therefore be one possible explanation, but this is not borne out by the

staff's emphasis on gender equality in the day-care center. Staff were especially careful not to give minority girls roles considered traditionally female. For example it was common to perceive minority girls' wish to help lay the table as an indication of their familiarity with this kind of task in their homes, while nobody took any notice of the boys' eager participation in the same activity. From a gender perspective one would therefore expect that the staff would prefer Fakhri as the child minder. To understand why the staff regarded Nana as more suitable to take care of Amina, I suggest that we turn our attention towards the relations between the children. Whereas Nana's relation to Amina was purely one of friendship, based on their attending the same institution, Fakhri and Amina's relation was grounded in kinship. For this reason, staff conceived of Nana's task minding Amina as voluntary, as she could say no at any time, if she did not wish to continue doing so. When it came to Fakhri, however, staff thought that he as Amina's cousin would find it difficult to say no. Since it was Amina's mother who had asked him to look after Amina, it would not have been possible for him to stop carrying out the task without disclaiming the responsibility he had been given by an adult family member. Asking a child to be responsible for a younger relative would not have been acceptable to the staff. This is borne out by the fact that it is very common in day-care institutions to put siblings in different classes so that the elder sibling will not be laden with responsibility of looking after the younger sibling, because this kind of responsibility is considered "too heavy a burden for a child."

However, it was not only the familial relationship, which was considered problematic. During fieldwork, staff mentioned several times that when minority children start day-care their parents often expect that older children, who have the same mother tongue, will look after the child. What staff found problematic was not so much the family relationship as the strong bonds of social affinity resulting from common language, neighborhood, area of origin, etc. While Amina's social bond to Nana was relatively weak, her bond to Fakhri was strong. In the institutional context this meant that it was not considered problematic to ask Nana to take care of Amina because she, unlike Fakhri, was understood to be able to "say no." Fakhri, on the other hand, who knew Amina from home, was tied to her in a way which made it too difficult for him to say no.

Interpretations of appropriate responsibility in relation to children

To Amina, Fakhri was a support during the first difficult period in the institution. Fakhri drew on his experience when mediating between Amina and the staff, as well as between a world she knew and the institutional context which was completely foreign to her. Fakhri's central role in her adjustment to the day-care center meant that it was difficult for Amina to get through a day if he was not present. She cried a lot and would not leave

the adults even for a minute. Thus the relation between the two children was not equal, as Fakhri did not depend upon Amina's presence for his well-being, as she did on his.

The two children developed a closer relationship during Amina's period of *settling in*. This closeness consisted of more than mere language dependency. During difficult periods, when she was missing her mother and felt most miserable, only Fakhri was allowed to touch her and she refused the adults' attempts to cuddle her. Their relation thus also contained a bodily dimension. They were emotionally connected to each other in a way which meant that the pain of one of them affected the other. When Amina one day cried in a heart-rending way because her mother was leaving her, Fakhri was so strongly affected by the situation that, quite uncharacteristically for him, he was not able to do anything at all but stand there and watch them, shaken, and motionless. Fakhri, however, was not the only one affected by Amina's sorrow. While Fakhri was incapable of acting, two-year-old Kabir attempted to comfort Amina by showing her the place for her clothing. Several other small children watched silently and unsure while rocking from one foot to another.

This ethnographic case shows that what staff regarded as a "heavy" and inappropriate responsibility for a child can, from the children's perspective, be described as a relationship of great personal commitment, emotional engagement, and strong connectedness. If Fakhri experienced difficulties handling his relationship with Amina this was because of the close emotional relation that it entailed, which made it difficult for him to handle Amina's grief when her mother left. If Fakhri occasionally experienced his responsibility to Amina as "heavy" in the staff's sense, he was, as shown, able to hand over this responsibility to others, just as other children tried to help when asked or when they thought the situation called for this. In an institutional environment which aims at developing the responsibility of children and their ability to enter binding social relations (Law on Social Services, § 8, part 4), it is noteworthy that such displays of responsibility for another human were not praised by the staff, but only considered unfortunate incidents connected with a problematic process of settling in.

The front hall – a neutral place

Amina's mother, Kirdan, came to Denmark to marry when she was 18 years old. Eleven years after her arrival to Denmark, her life was quite full with four children, one on its way and an ill husband. When I spoke with her she had not yet given up hope of learning Danish, and she thought she would begin learning the language when her fifth child entered day-care. Kirdan's personality was restrained. That made it so much more difficult to tackle Amina's negative response to day-care. She explained later in an interview with an interpreter, that she could not face sitting in the

classroom with a screaming child, being watched by others and incapable of understanding anything when people spoke to her. For this reason she preferred the front hall hoping she might get some help while there. The front hall represented to a certain extent a neutral room between the different worlds of the Danish institution and her private home, a place where one could be left in relative peace. Kirdan's encounter with the staff in the day-care was influenced by body language and style of dress and only confirmed mutual stereotypes represented by Kirdan's headscarf and *jelbab* on the one hand, and Anne Mette's bare stomach, small top, and tight jeans on the other. Neither Kirdan nor Anne Mette could go beyond this initial experience and were thus unable to do or say anything, which might have changed things.

Anne Mette could not understand why the mother would choose to say goodbye to her daughter in the front hall. Why did she not do what would be "best" for her child, namely enter the class room with the child to stay there until the child was at relative ease? Kirdan's choice showed her insecurity in relation to the institutional expectations of behavior, but she did also have a vague impression that the classroom was the domain of the head teacher and therefore would have been marked by inequality. Keeping this in mind, Kirdan's choice of the front hall as a place for negotiations with her daughter indicates a certain understanding of institutional ways: here she could to some extent escape the area of authority of the teacher.

Untimely interference – guarding the nuclear family and the peace of private life

Three weeks after Amina began day-care, there were still long sequences in the front hall during which Kirdan unsuccessfully attempted to make her daughter accept that she had to leave. The situation seemed completely at a stand still. The staff was increasingly frustrated as Kirdan continued to linger ineffectually in the front hall. However, nobody took any action. When occasionally staff attempted to explain to Kirdan that she had to take a decision it was in a language she did not understand. As other Arabic-speaking parents of the local area, who had children in the same institution, noticed what was going on, rumors began to circulate about racism as an explanation for what was seen as lack of assistance to Kirdan and Amina.

One morning, after having watched this painful interplay for several weeks, I spontaneously asked Fakhri's father to explain to Kirdan what the staff wanted her to do. The two spoke quietly together and Kirdan attempted to gently push Amina into the classroom, but the child refused to let go of her mother. Fakhri's father decided to carry Amina swiftly into the classroom, closely followed by Kirdan, who, however, hesitated in the doorway. A member of staff took hold of her arm and gently guided her into the classroom, where she evidently felt ill at ease, and sat her in an

armchair with her daughter in her lap. Half an hour later she left with only a mild protest from Amina, who accepted that her mother had to leave.

Three days later when the staff member Susan was irritated because Amina and her mother again sat in the front hall, I mentioned that Fakhri's father had tried to help. "Yes," she answered, "however, we prefer Mom to do it. Besides he is not part of the family." Slightly confused, I remarked that Amina and Fakhri are cousins. This, however, turned out to be considered irrelevant. Family referred to nuclear family only. Respect for the integrity of individuals meant that staff would not turn to extended family for assistance.

This exchange illustrates the principle that problems must be taken care of by those directly involved, i.e. parents and staff, and if this is not possible by "neutral" professionals such as psychologists or consultants. This logic respects the integrity of individuals but means that no one else can be involved as this would mean mixing lives which otherwise might not intersect.

The fact that staff respected this logic led to difficulties in relation to concrete problem-solving. Despite the fact that the situation with Amina and her mother was not progressing, it did not occur to staff to ask other Arabic-speaking parents present in the institution for help. The conception of staff can be seen as indicating that they guard the integrity of Kirdan. But what does the concept entail in this context? In this situation guarding her integrity meant cutting off relations that might have helped Kirdan to act and thus make a positive difference for her child in a difficult situation. When Kirdan asked Fakhri to help her daughter, she was met with critical looks and comments that signaled that her action was wrong. It was, however, difficult for her to know how she could best deal with the situation, as nobody could tell her what to do in a language she could understand.

If we conceive a human being as a closed entity, or in the words of Michael Jackson "some skin-encapsulated, seamless monad possessed of conceptual unity and continuity" (1998: 6), Kirdan's inaction cannot be understood. However, if we perceive people and their actions as something that come to be in relation with others, then the many occasions of waiting in the front hall are understandable. In an unfamiliar environment, where her use of her family relation is criticized, Kirdan withdrew. There was no room for her extended family network in a cultural context where the only acceptable actors are members of the nuclear family or more precisely the parents of the child.

Conclusion

Amina's experience was in some ways exceptional. The majority of minority children *settled in* much more quickly than she did – and even she was eventually integrated into the social life of the institution. Can racism,

as suggested by some of the other Arabic-speaking parents, explain why *settling in* was so complicated in her case? This explanation would not lead to an understanding of what took place between the persons involved. Nothing in the data suggests that anybody aimed to discriminate. When staff members did not act it was partly due to the language barrier and partly because they, like Kirdan, did not know what to do.

Merleau-Ponty writes that we understand others through “blind recognition” of reciprocal gestures, common metaphors, parallel images, and shared intentions (quoted in Jackson 1998: 12), rather than through cognition and intellectual interpretation. If we accept this, it follows that we decode each other’s body language and statements without further reflection. Just like Kirdan, members of staff were not sure how to tackle the problem and Amina’s *settling in* was therefore affected by insecurity. They each tried to interpret the mime and gestures of the other for want of a common language. In such a situation, an averting gesture to indicate the need of peace to talk with her daughter might be interpreted as a more general rejection of the involvement of staff.

Due to the lack of verbal communication through a common language, body language and other nonverbal signs such as clothing came to play a central role. The distinct clothing practices of Kirdan and the staff might have an alienating effect. Thus, they may have acted as disturbing elements that made it difficult to see an individual and ways of action rooted in personal history rather than a stereotypical cultural category. This unnecessarily complicated the interaction reducing the likelihood of either part taking any action.

The idea of the integrity of the single individual or nuclear family means that staff in day-care institutions generally prefer to solve problems with the people directly involved. Alternatively, professional, so-called “neutral” assistance might be called upon, but in a period marked by continual financial cuts it was not always realistic. The fear of creating relations of dependence among people, who might prefer not to interact, means that members of an extended family network or other parents who have children in the institution and speak the same language will not be called upon to help find a solution. This professionalism hinders unwanted interference but simultaneously also cuts off relations which in some situations might have been crucial for reaching a meaningful understanding between staff, parents, and children.

As this chapter illustrates, it is culturally unacceptable in Denmark to refer responsibility for playmates to other children. A “competent child” is a child who has a strong sense of what she wants, an ability to communicate what she wants, and who knows how she can go about getting what she wants in an acceptable manner. Responsibility for other human beings must not stand in the way. To understand this cultural phenomenon, it is necessary to recall the historical context, specifically the

development in pedagogy and the afore-mentioned post-60s ideology stressing emancipation and self-determination as fundamental to the process of individualization. Seen in this light, it is evident that what in the meeting between staff and ethnic minority parents appears to be fundamental Danish values are in fact a relatively recent product of the Danish welfare state and its emancipatory project of individualization.

References

- Barth, Frederik. 1994. *Manifestasjon og prosess*. Oslo: Det Blå Bibliotek.
- Bundgaard, Helle. 2002. Hvem har ansvaret? En immigrantfamilies møde med den danske institutionsverden. *Tidsskriftet Antropologi* 46: 121-134.
- _____ (2004). Normalitet. Positioner og kategoriseringsprocesser i det institutionelle rum. In *Viden om verden. En grundbog i antropologisk analyse*, ed K. Hastrup, Copenhagen: Hans Reitzel.
- _____ 2006. Et antropologisk blik på kultur. In *Tosprogede børn i det danske samfund*, ed M. Karrebæk. Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Bundgaard, Helle and Eva Gulløv. 2003. Sprog-lighed og ulighed. *Magasinet Humaniora* 2: 18-21.
- _____ 2008. *Forskel og fællesskab. Minoritetsbørns daginstitution*. Copenhagen: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Gulløv, Eva. In press. Kindergartens in Denmark – reflections on continuity and change. In *The Modern Child and the Flexible Labour Market: Child Care Policies and practices at a Crossroads?*, ed. A. T. Kjøholt and J. Qvortrup. Palgrave.
- Hermann, Stefan. 2007. *Magt og oplysning: Folkeskolen 1950-2006*. Copenhagen: Unge pædagoger.
- Jackson, Michael. 1998. *Minima Ethnographica. Intersubjectivity and the Anthropological Project*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Juul, Jesper. 1995. *Dit kompetente barn: På vej mod et nyt værdigrundlag for familien*. Copenhagen: Schønberg.
- Law on social services § 8, part 4.
http://www.social.dk/tvaergaaende_indgange/lovgining/reglerogafgoerelser/allegaeldende/serviceydelser/index.aspx?
- McDermott, Ray. 1993. The acquisition of a child by a learning disability. In *Understanding Practice*, ed. S. Chaiklin and J. Lave. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sigsgaard, Jens. 1978. Folkebørnehaver og social pædagogik. Træk af asyllets og børnehavens historie. [Folkkindergarten and social education . Outline of the history of the asylum and the kindergarten]. Copenhagen: Forlaget Børn og Unge.
- Thorne, Barrie. 2001. Pick-Up Time at Oakdale Elementary School: Work and Family from the Vantage Points of Children. In *Working Families. The*

Transformation of the American Home, ed. R. Hertz and N. Marshall. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Tobin, Joseph. J., David. Y. H. Wu and Dana. H. Davidson. 1989. *Preschool in Three Cultures*. Yale University Press.

Winther, Ida. 1999. *Småbørnsliv i Danmark – anno 2000* [The Life of Young Children in Denmark – anno 2000]. Copenhagen: Danmarks Pædagogiske Institut.

Notes

ⁱ Public school is the only other social institution which can claim a similar key role.

ⁱⁱ The research project was carried out by anthropologist Eva Gulløv and the author and was funded by The Research Council at the time known as Det Humanistiske Forskningsråd.

ⁱⁱⁱ In Denmark, mothers with new born babies receive a number of visits from a nurse who gives advice on care-taking.

^{iv} All names are pseudonyms.

^v In the two institutions attended during fieldwork, only one leaflet was translated to other languages. This leaflet informed readers that it is illegal to beat children according to Danish law and that it can cause psychological damage. There was hardly any information – and then only in Danish – on the purpose of an institutional stay, apart from care-taking, or for that matter practical information on opening hours, holidays, lunch boxes or *settling in*.

^{vi} In Denmark, “bilingual” is an official term used for people whose parents do not have Danish as their mother tongue.

^{vii} See Bundgaard (2006) for a critique of the inherent concept of culture.

^{viii} The bathroom was placed right next to the classroom. The children did not close the door separating the bathroom from the classroom, giving me an opportunity to follow their interaction at a distance.