

Making children 'social': Civilising institutions in the Danish welfare state

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Abstract: This article focuses on the role of child institutions in forming and disseminating ideas about what it means to be a civilised person in the Danish welfare state. The argument is that child institutions – kindergartens and schools – have been central to the integrating and civilising processes of the last century. To a wide extent these processes can be described as a state project, as the means and aims of childcare and education have been part and parcel of the expanding Danish welfare state. However, our ethnographic material from Danish kindergartens and schools shows that these child institutions are not merely executing a civilising project on behalf of the state, but have themselves been highly influential in defining and disseminating norms of civilised behaviour.

Keywords: Civilising projects, child institutions, schools, child-rearing, welfare state, classroom ethnography

Introduction

The child institutions of the Danish welfare state are an interesting case for the discussion of civilising processes. The massive and prolonged institutionalisation of childhood in Denmark – lasting from when children enter nursery at the age of six to twelve months until they leave compulsory school at the age of sixteen – is not merely a practical arrangement or an investment in the future workforce of the nation. The extensive focus on children and the investment of time and money that is put into their care and upbringing reflect how the Danish welfare state is unwilling to leave the practice of child-rearing to random parents, but must ensure and control the proper civilising of the up-coming generation. Norbert Elias has argued for and demonstrated the non-intended character of civilising processes, and showed how these were instead carried forth by increasing integration and interdependence among social groups in the Northern European states (Elias 1994 [1939]: 366, 429). In this article, we will focus on the civilising projects of the child institutions of the state, to analyse their role as civilising institutions. Choosing the term 'civilising projects' rather than the related 'civilising offensives' (eg. van Krieken 1999; Powell 2007) we aim to describe civilising intentions and practices, which are not necessarily targeted at specific groups regarded as uncivilised, but are more generalised and institutionalised civilising efforts.

We will examine the issue in two ways. In the first part of the article, we will sketch the history of Danish child institutions, in particular schools. We want to show how such institutions are means and targets for alternating civilising projects, reflecting changing views of the challenges facing the Danish nation, as well as shifting structures of dominance in the social figurations. On the basis of ethnographic material, the second half of the article more specifically concentrates on the civilising norms and values displayed in daily educational practice. The aim of this part is to extend the argument by pointing out that child institutions do not only reflect dominant interests and civilising projects. The institutions also influence what it means to be civilised, as the institutional condition of spending long hours in large groups in restricted spaces establishes

its own demands and process of integration. Through the daily formative work with children, norms of social interactions are thus institutionalised in two ways: they are imposed and standardised as the proper ways to behave, but they are also moulded and defined in accordance with the conditions of everyday institutional life. Once incorporated into children, such norms are disseminated in wider society as a well-established understanding of how to behave and evaluate the behaviour of others. In this way, child institutions are themselves highly influential in defining and spreading notions of the civilised.

Thus, combining historical analysis with ethnographic material, our aim is to show the intrinsic intertwinement of child institutions, civilising ideals and the project of the Danish welfare state. It is our argument that during the development of the welfare state and the dual 'institutionalisation' of behavioural norms, child institutions and ideals of civilised conduct in Danish society have influenced each other to such an extent, and align so neatly today, that it is impossible to disentangle whether societal norms of civilised interaction define the conditions of child institutions or whether it is the other way around.

The article is based on material from a larger study on child institutions in the Danish welfare state, in which we explored civilising ideals and practices in Danish kindergartens, schools and families [1],[#N1]. In this project we treat the formal institutions of Danish society as institutions in the sociological sense of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), Mary Douglas (1986), Richard Jenkins (1996) and Richard Scott (2001). In accordance with this approach, we regard institutions as predictable and well-established practices, routinised as 'how things are done' (Berger and Luckman 1966: 59-60). They can be formal institutions upheld by law, buildings or economic structures, such as the child institutions we discuss in this article. But they can also be informal institutions, in the shape of practices that have acquired such a routinised form that they seem objective facts of social life – such as the family. Formalised or not, institutions have aims and purposes, agendas and priorities. Within institutions, activities and behaviour are regulated and coordinated, routines establish a predictable structure of events and norms, and categories uphold a social order. In this sociological sense, institutions establish notions of the way things should be done and are thus – often unacknowledged – highly influential in defining people's social orientation and the way they interact and see themselves. When this approach is applied to state-regulated welfare institutions, such as kindergartens and schools, the analytical emphasis is on the way institutions are part of and contribute to social order, by institutionalising and disseminating behavioural norms.

The institutionalisation of childhood in Denmark

The emergence of common schooling at the beginning of the nineteenth century can be seen as the first move towards the institutionalisation of childhood and child-rearing in Denmark. Though the declarations in 1814 of compulsory education for all children neither gained immediate popular support or had a profound effect on children's lives, they did signify a formalisation of the state's influence on child-rearing. For the first time, it was explicitly formulated as a responsibility of the state to cultivate good, enlightened and righteous people (Skovgaard-Petersen 1985: 149–153).

This new interest of the state (which at the time amounted to the absolute monarch and a circle of powerful landowners) in encompassing all young citizens in an educational project was not a national vision from the outset. On the contrary, it was part of an attempt to consolidate the united monarchy and weaken the spread of national ideas that flourished among the increasingly influential bourgeoisie in the towns (Korsgaard 2004: 198). As power-balances shifted through the nineteenth century, so did the perception of school, however. It gradually became linked to ideas of the nation, which became increasingly influential, partly pushed forward by intellectual circles in Europe, partly reflecting the abolition of the absolute monarchy in 1848 (completed

with the loss of Schleswig and Holstein in 1864). As tensions within the regional figuration tightened and the idea of Denmark as a homogenous nation developed, the whole national body of citizens became an object of political interest. The dissemination of compulsory education thus reflects a growing consciousness of the nation and, one could argue, its interdependent status vis-à-vis other nations. It also reveals an increasing concern about the homogeneity and enlightenment of Danish citizens, although the role of the state in ensuring this enlightenment was highly contested [2],[#N2].(see discussion in Korsgaard 2004: 333–339).

At first, many parents resisted sending their children to school, as they neither saw the need nor could do without the labour of their children (Coninck-Smith 2002). Nevertheless, once established, the school gradually gained influence and contributed to the institutionalisation of its own expediency. As children's schooling gradually became the everyday occupation of the child and their involvement in work was reduced, children's economic dependence was increasingly taken for granted and came to influence the perception of their nature (Ariés 1962; Hendrick 1990: 46). They were considered ignorant, vulnerable, in need of guidance and protection. These changes also weakened the customary ties of dependence between parents and child, or, one could argue, helped shift them in a more emotional direction, as Elias also observed (Elias 1998: 208).

Pushed ahead by these changes in generational bonds and by the increasing industrialisation and urbanisation of the period, the institutionalisation of Danish children gained momentum from the late nineteenth century. In the meantime, there had been many struggles over the rights and responsibilities to educate children resulting in a wide range of different types of school, including peasant schools (almueskoler), citizen schools (borgerskoler) and free schools (friskoler), based on the educational ideals of Nicolai Grundtvig and Christian Kold. But in 1894 the various public – i.e. state funded – schools were united and renamed 'Folkeskolen' (the people's school) and around 1900 virtually all Danish children received seven years of schooling (Coninck-Smith 2002). Schooling was gradually democratised [3],[#N3] and over the following decades it extended in weekly hours, number of years and range of disciplines (Coninck-Smith 2000: 183–185). The youngest children were also given more attention by the state. Folk-kindergartens based on Froebel's ideas were introduced around the turn of the century, offering an alternative to the previous asylums for underprivileged children (Sigsgaard 1978: 50–2). In 1919, the Danish state passed, as one of the first in the world, a resolution on economic support to early childcare institutions (Borchorst, 2005: 133–46). Hereby, the state became involved also in care for the youngest children, although in economic terms it was, initially, a minor commitment.

As the welfare state consolidated after World War II and more and more women entered the workforce from 1940 and onwards, nurseries and kindergartens became more widespread and in 1964, they changed from being a complementary option for families in need to a universal pedagogical offer aimed at helping working parents (Borchorst 2000: 2005). This instigated a gradual change in the perception of public child-care as an intrinsic part of early childhood. This perception is now widespread in Danish society and sets it apart from other European countries, such as the Netherlands, Germany and England, which has kept a much stronger domestic tradition of child-rearing (see van Daalen 2010; James 2012; Korsvold 2012).

This expansion of institutional childcare and education has continued up to present time where 87 per cent of one-year-old children; 93 per cent of two-year-olds, and 97 per cent of children between three and five spend their daytime in public care; and almost all children attend a private or public schools until they are sixteen years old (Statistics Denmark 2011). This institutionalisation of childhood is supported by a corpus of child specialists and complemented by a variety of child institutions, which cater for different categories of children and their different needs.

Shifting civilising projects

As seen from this outline of developments since 1814, a growing number of children have come to spend an increasing amount of their time outside the home in professionally programmed settings, dedicated to their training in civilised skills and conduct. Yet the content of this training has changed over the same period, reflecting shifting ideas about children, society and the role of the state, influenced by alterations in social figurations. Throughout the nineteenth century, one can observe groups and movements in various social positions fighting over the content and purpose of the school. Religious groups opposed reformers and rationalists influenced by ideas of the Enlightenment; supporters of the monarchy opposed nationalists; the urban bourgeoisie disagreed with influential farmers, critical of the role of the central state in defining school assignments and teaching content (Olsen 1986: 25-37). And reflecting how civilising projects are often rooted in class relations, it is apparent how upper-class groups in general promoted and institutionalised their visions directed towards parents and children of lower-class backgrounds. Amid all these social tensions, the school gradually changed from a broad range of different school-types to a common, state-regulated comprehensive school supplemented by a number of free schools and independent private schools, also subject to state supervision.

As social figurations changed, other ideas of education and child-rearing germinated. Inspired by early pedagogical thinkers such as Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Fröbel and contemporary thinkers, such as Dewey, the dominant perspective on schooling gradually shifted from an emphasis on Christian values, obedience and manners to a focus on the child's individual development and well-being. This understanding gained particular influence between and after the two world wars. Though, it is hard to determine exactly what caused the change, the experience of the two world wars seems to have had a great impact. Initiated by the collapse of the existing 'doxical' order (Bourdieu 1977), which the two world wars brought about, and helped along by the expansion of the middleclass, welfare institutions and the state apparatus, other kinds of knowledge and learning gained authority and other understandings of children and development, manners and child-rearing were gradually established as doxa in the Danish institutions and families. In the following section, we will describe these post-war changes in further detail, as they have been significant for present day civilising ideals and practices.

Contested ideas of children and child-rearing

The proliferation of totalitarianism, the brutality of war and what was perceived as the oppression of rationality, humanity and individual freedom, created an anxiety about de-civilisation which yet again fuelled visions of other forms of societies driven by new generations brought up with freedom, democracy and independent thinking (Nørgaard 2005). United by these visions, a socially engaged group of educators, psychologists, artists and literary scholars referred to as 'reform-pedagogues' ('reformpædagog') came to give voice to alternative ideals for child-rearing and for civilised society (Øland 2010).

Influenced by the movement of cultural radicalism, the reform-pedagogical project challenged the dominant bourgeois norms for the proper person and thus the traditional understandings of civilised behaviour. Yet they did not reject the need to civilise the young. Rather, they had another vision of the civilised person and the process of child-rearing, disavowing ideas of proper manners and strict discipline, which they considered oppressive, as well as an expression of bourgeois conservatism. Their vision was that anti-authoritarian individual liberation, human tolerance and a rejection of violence could form the basis for a more humane society (Thing 1996; Rifbjerg 1969).

In this new view, the source of civilised behaviour was to be found in the child – and in 'primitive man' – as these were closer to an unspoiled, original human nature not (yet) destroyed or amputated by society, child-rearing and education (Thing 1996). For reform-pedagogues, this vision demanded a 'mild' disciplining form and a special attention to the individual child (Dolan 2010 discusses a similar vision of childhood in Ireland in the 1960s). Influenced by contemporary psychological science and its paradigm of child development, the notion of the child as a vulnerable creature from psychoanalysis, as well as the educational visions of liberal educationalists stemming back to Rousseau, the proponents argued for a child-centred pedagogy, in which the child should be allowed to be explorative and to express itself freely. The seed of civilised man was, from this perspective, in man's own nature, but it needed to be fostered and released through creative expression, enlightenment and personal initiative (Hoffmeyer 1978[1952]: 112–113; Thing 1996: 81; Øland 2010). According to these ideas, the child should not be institutionalised because of its uncivilised nature, but in order to protect its naturalness and to make it develop through stimuli of its inherent potential. One should create good spaces for childhood – kindergartens and schools – secluded from the more harsh (and in this sense, uncivilised) adult world. Thus institutionalising children – in more child friendly institutions – should pave the way for a better, less violent and more civilised society.

What is evident in this civilising project is the move towards the informalisation of social conduct which Cas Wouters (1986, 2011) and Norbert Elias describe (1998). Along with the disavowing of bourgeois discipline came a challenging of other standards, such as standards of modesty, sexual restraints, dresscodes, expressions of authority and thresholds for decency and shame. A more informal, less form-oriented social norm including more balanced power-relations between men and women, children and adults was advocated and gradually gained influence. Elias and Wouters describe informalisation as a consequence of the democratisation of manners that follows along with the closer interdependency and influence between high and low classes (Elias 1994[1939]: 382–387, 430; Wouters 2011). This interpretation could also be of relevance in Denmark. Following the continuous industrialisation and urbanisation, Danish society had become increasingly interdependent and class-integrated. Furthermore, informalisation was an explicit goal for new influential groups such as the reform pedagogues in the aftermath of war. Supported by the obvious failure of former norms of civilité and discipline, intellectuals, artists, former resistance fighters and educationalists advocated a more integrated, less distinctive society, particularly carried forward by the spread of public institutions such as libraries, theatres, museums, broadcasting companies and, above all, by education.

Visions of society translated into school

While these new educational visions gained ground during the 1950s, the teaching guide for the common public school – *Folkeskolen* – of 1960 stands as a milestone in this endeavour. This guide to teachers was the first of its sort to describe didactic considerations in relation to individual subjects, emphasising motivational teaching methods that involved the child's own life and experiences, and implicitly criticising rote learning, formal skills and exam preparation (Undervisningsvejledning for Folkeskolen 1960). The new values were, correspondingly, seen in the description of the purposes of the subjects, which, unlike the earlier focus on skills, focused on the child's self-expression, imagination and development of a sound emotional life. This approach was also reflected in the reformulation of the official purposes of the public school. Schools should not only ensure children's formal qualifications, but first and foremost 'promote all opportunities for children to grow up as a harmonious, happy and good people' and ensure that 'it becomes natural for them to consider other people's welfare' (Undervisningsvejledning for Folkeskolen 1960: 29 and 24, our translation). We see here a new understanding of the role of the school in the emerging welfare state of the 1950 and 1960s. The

public school should contribute to a better, more harmonious and democratic society and, thus, its remit was extended. The school should take care of the whole person and provide for his or her physical and mental health, and, particularly, their sound socialisation (Pedersen 2011: 179; Hermann 2007: 71–72).

Although altered and stripped of its critical sting, the reform pedagogical view on children, child-rearing and societal cohesion thus became the dominant perspective of educational institutions in the decades following the war. What this change brought about was, however, not only a new perception of the child and a more informalised relationship between generations, but also new ideas about the role and purpose of child institutions and education for society. As the welfare state developed, kindergartens and schools became fundamental for the organisation of society; at once a precondition for parents' (particular mothers') participation in the labour-market and a pivotal factor for maintaining an educated workforce and a non-violent, stable and well-functioning society. Thus, the educational institutions became central for the dominant post-war understanding of what it means to be civilised. They were part of a pronounced and influential civilising project which still – as will become apparent from our ethnographic material later in the article – characterises the ideological basis of Danish child institutions.

Noteworthy in this historical development are the shifts in what counts as civilised conduct, but also the social changes in who defines it. While the bourgeois elite had had the symbolic capital to define norms of civilité before the two world wars, the mixed group of artists, intellectuals and educationalists who constituted the pedagogical reform movement, were generally rooted in educated families equipped with cultural capital, yet, as cultural radicals, many of them were highly critical of bourgeois culture (Øland 2010). A few decades after the war the social pattern had changed again. The ongoing processes of democratisation and informalisation, propelled by the economic growth of the 1960s, had given a large part of the working class a leap into the middle class, and students from lower class backgrounds entrance into secondary and tertiary education. This resulted in further social re-configurations as people from non-educated families became teachers and politicians. As the labour market expanded during the 1960s, the demand for manpower was to a large extent met by married women; by 1970 about half of all married women had entered the labour market (Borchorst 2000). The expanding welfare state helped this along by establishing early childcare institutions, the number of which surged in these decades. In this process, the responsibility for public childcare was transferred to middle- and lower-class women who became employed in the childcare sector. In this way, the position to influence what it meant to be civilised, gradually changed from a defining bourgeois elite reproducing its own codes of conduct, to professional – often middle-class – pedagogues' and teachers' more informal and anti-authoritarian notions of civil conduct.

Whether the change in the social profile of the teaching profession contributed to this is difficult to assess, but during the 1970s a new awareness arose of how early childcare institutions and schools could contribute to social equality, bringing together children from all walks of life to pass through the same universal education and thus giving them equal opportunities (U90 1978: 128). [41][#N41] For many politically-engaged teachers and left-wing politicians, the school was regarded a training ground for a better and fairer society and the classroom a particular suitable environment for practicing democracy (Hermann 2007: 74–79). Democracy should be learned through participation, not through formal teaching (Korsgaard 1999: 97; Kampmann 2007: 408). This also meant that democracy was no longer simply considered a form of governance, it was a culture, a certain – civilised – way for people to be together, which the child institutions should cultivate in order to bring about a sound, democratic society.

Global dependencies and new civilising ideals

Since the 1970s, this ideological understanding of the school's role has been somewhat challenged by other visions of Danish society. Two trends in particular have influenced the field of education: the increasing focus on the skills of the individual child and a strong focus on national culture. The economic crisis and unemployment boom of the late 1970s and 1980s; Denmark's involvement in European Union; the increased immigration of non-western immigrants; and the closer social, cultural and economic interdependencies between states referred to as 'globalisation', have given rise to concerns about the future state of Denmark and its citizens, in terms of culture, social stability and economy (Pedersen 2011: 186–198).

Once again larger changes in society had consequences for the role and aims of child institutions. After the economic recession of the 1970s, trust in the institutions of the welfare state declined, leading conservative politicians in government in the 1980s to want changes to schools. Rather than simply ensuring the establishment of a just and democratic society, the school should secure the future of the economy; that is serve the labour market (Pedersen 2011: 186–188). What we see in this period, is a strong attempt to refocus attention to the academic competences of the individual child, now as a person who should make the most of its opportunities and take a personal responsibility for learning (Pedersen 2011: 190–191). In the kindergarten and school, the child was still understood as naturally capable, but what can be seen is a slight shift from a belief in the child's innate competences to a demand for children to be competent in ever more predefined academic and social skills (Bundgaard, Gilliam & Gulløv 2007).

These trends have amplified in recent decades. In a time of increased international integration, dependency and competition, one can observe a greater political awareness of national cohesion and competences, again emphasising the role of educational institutions (Bennett 2005). Child institutions are now generally considered as a societal investment in individual human resources, in national culture and as a bulwark against social unrest (Gulløv 2011a). This tendency has led to a renewed attention from authorities on behaviour and attitudes, as well as on the development of pedagogical schemes aimed at improving individual skills – both social and academic – and thus what one could term a formalisation of the informal patterns of interaction (Gilliam & Gulløv 2012).

State and institutions

As the above historical sketch has at least hinted, the development of institutional child-rearing cannot be seen as a mere indication of state interests imposed on families, social control of lower classes, nor as a political project aimed at institutionalising childhood. Rather, it reflects altered cultural perceptions of children, education and the responsibility of child-rearing generally shared by parents. As schools and kindergartens became more widespread and established, so did the ideas of normal childhood, of proper child-rearing and of the civilised conduct they were based on and aimed to promote. At their most influential, this is the way state institutions work. Both Pierre Bourdieu and Norbert Elias argue that the state has a standardising effect, in that it – in Bourdieu's terms – produces categories and dominant understandings and – in Elias terms – coordinates the interaction and relations of citizens (Bourdieu 1997: 97–101, Elias 1994[1939]: 369). As we have previously described, an effect of all social institutions is thus particular true for state-institutions, namely that they are based on widespread understandings, but also that they standardise the way people think and interact, and establish and institutionalise certain practices as objective and indisputable good (Berger & Luckman 1966: 54–55). In the case of Danish child institutions, this is illustrated by parents' support for institutional child-rearing. Parents gradually found that children had to attend school and later on kindergartens in order to learn how to behave in socially recognised ways. Thus, child institutions became the indisputable means to ensure the required social development.

This process was arguably underpinned by increasing social integration in society. As Elias (1994 [1939]) and Wouters (2011) have argued, integration of social groups implies that people experience a pressing need to know how to conduct themselves – and their children – in reliable and recognised ways in order to be socially accepted. This seems a relevant perspective on Danish society, which as mentioned above, became increasingly interdependent and class-integrated in the second half of the twentieth century. Yet as most parents became part of the workforce; the welfare state expanded, and laws consolidated the undifferentiated educational system, an increasing number of children from various backgrounds also had to interact on a daily basis in public institutions. This made the institutions the perfect place to learn acceptable behaviour, and parents increasingly perceived them as an indispensable means of ensuring the social development of their children. As pointed out by sociologist Robert van Krieken in a critique of the dogma presenting child welfare as mere social control of the working class and its offsprings, parents are not just complying with state regulation. They have their own motives and send their children to child-institutions to ensure their moral improvement, respectability, education and social mobility (van Krieken 1986).

In this way, neither the state nor its civilising project can be reduced to a top-down regulating power. The state is composed of a variety of institutions with quite diverse aims and objectives. The organisational effectiveness and impact depends on their ability to cooperate and, not least, on people's general belief in the relevance of the organisation, means and aims of the state (Bourdieu 1990: 192; 1991: 43–50; 1997: 97–101). The large multifaceted civilising projects of the Danish state institutions are likewise not organised by any specific groups of persons autocratically imposing their views on the population. Rather, it reflects how ordinary people have increasingly sent their children to early childcare, schools and leisure-time organisations based on their belief in the necessity for learning and social conduct, thereby confirming and supporting the institutional civilising projects.

Child institutions as a means of civilising

As seen in the historical sketch presented here, perceptions of children, institutional assignments, and ideas of civilised behaviour have changed in accordance with new social constellations, power relations and conflicts. In spite of this continuous negotiation, however, Danish society has been characterised by a high degree of social stability since the establishment of the welfare state after World War II. We will argue that child institutions have played a significant role in these processes – the alterations as well as the stability. Being in charge of teaching children norms of conduct, relevant knowledge and ways of interacting, such institutions have been authorised to bring up children in accordance with dominant – though changing – notions of behaviour. As they encompass almost all children, they are all exposed to similar institutional organisations, routines, demands, knowledge and norms. Over the years, such routines and norms form perceptions of proper behaviour thereby contributing to a widespread generational understanding of codes of conduct and ideal sociality. In this way norms of behaviour have become institutionalised in two senses: child institutions contribute to the standardisation of societal norms by inculcating them in all children, yet the practical and social necessities of the institutions themselves – how things have to be organised and people have to behave for institutional life to function – also come to define these norms, as they influence what behaviour is presented as proper and improper in the institution. As we have argued elsewhere, this has the consequence that child institutions function as the social equalisers they were intended to be as part of the welfare vision, but they also produce their own distinctions between those mastering the norms of institutional behaviour and those who don't (Gilliam 2009; Gilliam & Gulløv 2012). In this article we will leave aside this discussion of processes of distinction and inequality. Instead, we will turn to our ethnographic material in order to investigate the norms of behaviour, inculcated in children in contemporary institutional

practice. This approach will serve the further analysis of the civilising role of child institutions by exploring the way the organisation of institutional practices – partly shaped by practical conditions, partly by civilising projects – contributes to forming and standardising norms of civilised behaviour.

The social ethos of kindergartens and schools

Our ethnographic material was collected from fieldwork in three kindergartens catering for three- to six-year-olds, (conducted by Eva Gulløv) and two schools teaching six- to fifteen-year-olds (conducted by Laura Gilliam). During the fieldwork we participated in teaching activities, social gatherings, children's and teachers' break time and meetings, and conducted ethnographic interviews with children and teachers.

In all three kindergartens, in rather different social areas, the children were organised into groups of 20 to 25 which engaged in collective activities. Although the increasing focus on the child's individual learning can be witnessed in the demands of 'learning plans', thematic programs and documentation of activities, Danish kindergartens do not have a regular academic curriculum. In the three kindergartens, children engaged in activities involving nature, arts and sport, but most of the time was used for *free play* and the careful monitoring of children's interaction (Gulløv 2011a). When the staff described the first educational priority of kindergartens, they pointed to their effort to make children *social*. One of the teachers explained what she meant in this way: 'We're working on teaching them to be social. They have to learn to be aware of what others think and feel.' Watching a group of children drawing at a table, another teacher stated that the most important outcome of attending kindergarten is that, 'the children experience that it is nice to be together and to do something together. Then it is of less importance what exactly they do.' A third teacher explained her efforts by saying: 'It's not so much that they must obey or be "trained". For me it's more about some basic social skills; to show respect for others and not just get all the attention yourself.'

What might strike the observer as a rather 'loose' setting, the teachers saw as a suitable context for developing these social skills. Observing the children in interaction with others, the teachers constantly asked individual children to be considerate, share objects, include others, to collaborate, find solutions and negotiate. The children were encouraged to argue for their viewpoints and verbalise ideas and intentions. Being seen as not-yet-civilised, the children were allowed feelings and acts unacceptable for adults (Olwig 2012). However, although negative emotions such as anger and rage were accepted, the teachers saw it as one of their main tasks to teach the children to express such emotions in a controlled and, preferably, verbal way. Being physically aggressive, loud or dominant toward others was immediately stopped. Thus, systematic efforts were made to familiarise children with social norms, in particular, with balanced group behaviour, self-control and verbal expression:

In a sense you can say that what I – or we – work with is to teach kids to be nice to others – yes, behave decently towards each other – [...] to teach them to speak nicely to each other, not to fight, to resolve conflicts and, yes, to be good friends. That it is not nice to say 'damn' or 'hell'. But in the sense, not offending each other. It's not because everyone has to be good friends, or that you are not allowed to feel anger or irritation [...] But to learn that, even though we are different, we can talk to each other and be all right (Dencik 1989; Gulløv 2011b).

In schools, and especially in the first years of school, we also registered this emphasis on teaching children social norms. [5][#N5] This fieldwork was conducted in two 'o' grades of six-year-olds, in two schools in two suburbs of Copenhagen – one in an upper middle-class area and one in a lower class area, with a mixture of

ethnic minority and ethnic Danish families (Gilliam 2012). In both classes, the teachers stressed that they had two tasks – to work with *the academic* and *the social*. *The academic* has recently received more attention and time in the schedule due to the increased political focus on individual achievements, and it was evident that there was more attention on children's academic skills in the more senior grades. Yet in this first year of school, the teachers still focused most of the pedagogical work on children's social skills. To 'work with the social' referred to moulding and influencing children's behaviour and social relationships. Whereas two hours were spent each day on teaching reading and maths, a considerable amount of time was spent on '*working with the social*'. Both classes had a daily *play lesson* to help the children to form good social relationships, just like they had a daily 'get-together' where the children and teachers sat down in a circle to talk about various issues. In these get-togethers the children were encouraged to take turns, listen to each other and discuss in a 'proper manner'. Although the topic was not always related to social norms, the teachers took every opportunity to tell the children how to behave towards each other and other people. Often the teachers brought up a recent incident or conflict within the class and demonstrated – often through small role plays – how it could be solved in a good way and how it should not be handled. In the lower class school, the teacher Sanne used the learning material, *Step by Step*, to improve the children's empathetic abilities. In the following situation she gathered the children in a circle around her and showed them a picture of two boys:

Sanne: How do you think this boy is feeling?

Troels: He's a bit bored, because the other [boy] has the toy. It makes him a bit distressed.

Sanne: Wow, that was a lot, we came close there. Why is he a bit distressed?

Troels: Because he [the other boy] has told him that he can't join in.

Sanne: Can you show me what a distressed face looks like? (Some of the children turn their mouths downwards, pout, frown and pull their chin down).

At first glance, what was promoted in the various set ups of social training was being polite and friendly towards other people. Looking closer, however, it was always the controlled, emotionally balanced, benign, non-aggressive, empathetic, inclusive and cooperative reactions to other people, which were in focus. The children were directly and indirectly told that they ought to avoid excluding others, conflict, agitation, aggression, conflictual competition and selfish behavior, and they were taught what kind of speech and bodily movements communicated this unacceptable behavior.

Thus while the norms of formality, discipline and authority seen in the Danish schools of previous times were almost gone, what could be seen was the informal civilised code. As described above, this does not imply a lack of norms of civilised behaviour. Children called their teachers by their first name; they were allowed to move freely around the classroom; the language was informal and in many class situations teachers and children discussed quite intimate subjects, which would previously have been avoided. Yet this informal interactional form required a substantial, though subtle, knowledge of behaviour and interactions. Looking closely at the daily practices in the institutions studied, it was obvious that being an acceptable child demanded a fine-tuned sensitivity to others, and a quite specific ideal of social behaviour used to assess and evaluate individual children (Gilliam 2012).

Knowing the boundaries

A central word in the social training to this ideal was 'boundaries'. As their teachers explained, the children had to learn to 'respect other people's boundaries', avoid 'transgressing these boundaries' or letting other people 'transgress their own boundaries'. They should 'keep within their own space'; 'not take up more space than their share' within the group. Judging from observations in class, when children transgressed these boundaries it was by bullying, being too loud, too dominating, too aggressive or insensitive about other people's feelings. The teachers strived to help children develop a nuanced sensitivity towards other people's feelings and awareness of acceptable behaviour in order not to transgress their personal boundaries.

Across our observations in kindergartens, schools and families we have found this concern with boundaries when adults talk about children and child-rearing (Bach 2012; Gilliam & Gulløv 2012). This points to an image central to notions of civilised behaviour. It seems as if society or a given social group is understood as a space of individuals each assigned a certain space with firm boundaries around them, which must be respected to uphold civilised interaction. We will argue that the idea of boundaries is central to all understanding of civilised behaviour, and that the cultural differences in civilising ideals lie in the way we perceive these boundaries and what behaviour we find transgresses them. In teachers' discourse and moral conversations with children, they convey an understanding of a sensitive and fragile self, which can be hurt and traumatised by other people transgressing the boundaries around the self. Thus, being civilised in Danish child institutions requires a considerably high level of sensitivity, to use Elias's term (Elias 1998). It is not just avoiding being beastly or rough, but avoiding hurting other people's feelings and being careful not to transgress their personal space.

In the kindergartens and schools of our fieldwork, we also observed a norm of adult interaction with children, which seemed influenced by the same understanding. As Elias pointed out, there has been a change of norms for adult behaviour towards children which entails a more affectionate and careful approach (Elias 1998). In kindergartens and schools, the portrayal of children as vulnerable and in possession of a unique and fragile self, requires a sensitivity on the part of the adults, who must take care not to hurt or traumatise their pupils and to give them space to develop their potential. Thus, while the teachers in the field-material saw it as their task to teach children social norms, they also often expressed an understanding, that too much controlling and social training could suppress the nature of the child. As one teacher said: 'One should not violate the child; they should be allowed to be themselves.' This reference to violence, stresses that it is not only physical, but also psychological violence which is seen as uncivilised in today's Danish child institutions – hurting feelings, traumatising selves or merely restraining people's potentials or right to express their true nature. Thus, the teachers have to civilise children into good human beings who respect other people's boundaries, but must avoid transgressing the child's own boundaries in the process. Meanwhile the children must 'be themselves' and adapt to the group, they must identify and take care of their own boundaries as well as respect those of others, yet do so without too much effort. If they act too disciplined they will raise cause for concern. To be recognised as an acceptable child, they must adapt to the group in a natural undisciplined way by themselves – as a way of being *themselves*.

One can argue that the understanding of isolated individuals surrounded by fragile borders that we see in the ethnographic material, and which we find central to the norm of civilised conduct in Danish child institutions, is strongly influenced by the dominant psychological paradigm about the individual and self in Western thought, which was initially introduced to Danish kindergartens, school and teacher education by the pedagogical reform movement. Yet this understanding and the necessity to teach children to be aware of boundaries seems to have gained new urgency and meanings within the institutions, due to the task of managing large groups of children in confined spaces. This is supported by another focus in the teachers' civilising work.

The good class and the civilised community

A further aspect of the teachers work with 'the social' was their focus on children's relationships. This was particular evident in the school material. The teachers did their best to help the children become friends with each other, for example, by encouraging the children to invite each other home and dividing class-members into 'play groups' (and for the elder children 'dinner groups') of four to five children who should take turns inviting each other home. These efforts had a clear civilising aim – to make the children empathetic and tolerant towards all children in the class, to avoid harm and aggression, as well as malign competition, domination or exclusion of others, and not least to make the class a tight knit and harmonious community of children.

The teachers often explained this focus on harmonious interaction and relationships with a concern for the children's wellbeing and for the learning environment. Yet when listening to teachers, it became evident, that it also reflected how children and childhood were vessels loaded with the dreams and fears of society and the future. When describing 'a good class' in interviews, teachers stressed that it was a class with room for everybody; where children made friends across social divisions and personal differences and idiosyncrasies (Anderson 2000). This refers to a central aim of the school, described in the historical outline and reflected in its name – 'the people's school'; to cater for and integrate children of all social backgrounds. Thus twenty to thirty children of different background and abilities are grouped together ideally for a ten year period, from six to sixteen. Here they are meant to take common decisions, tolerate each other's views and needs; cooperate towards common goals, and settle disputes through joint effort, common rules and empathy with one another. And, in particular, in a good class children should feel safe and well and happy to express themselves. Though many classes do not live up to this ideal, it still exhibits the cultural values of civilised behaviour and interaction and shows us that the class as a social entity has a central role in the civilising project of the school. The good class is a model of the ideal, harmonious and civilised society, and it is to this ideal that teachers mould individual children as well as the group as a collective (Gilliam 2012).

This emphasis on harmonious social interactions is, however, not merely an expression of cultural ideals transferred into the curriculum and school organisation. It also reflects more mundane institutional practicalities. To get the everyday work done and ensure a constructive teaching environment, it is necessary to have rules, routines and standards of conduct. In support of this, teachers will often explain the behavioural norms they try to teach children, by the need to adapt the children to the school institution and its practical arrangements. As one of the teachers stated:

You can't have 23 kids running around at the same time. You can't make a lot of noise when you have to be so many together. You must be able to put yourself somewhat in the background [...] You have to wait for the others [...] You have to have a good time together, when you have to be together so much and for so long.

In other words, children also have to learn to be *social*, to fit into the class and get along with the others, in order for school life and the teaching to run smoothly. Thus, ideas of what count as proper behaviour are strongly conditioned by everyday practical concerns and routines. The norms have become institutionalised – in the sense that they have become shaped by the institution itself.

Yet the practical reasons seem to have gained another layer over the years, as other dimensions have been added to the interaction of the class, which are not merely required for an institution to function well; eg., it was not regarded of prime importance to get along and socialise extensively with classmates half a century ago, nor does it seem to be necessary in schools in different parts of the world. In today's Danish school,

children are required to relate to each other in much more extensive ways than previously. In the two fieldwork classes, as well as in other classes Gilliam has previously researched (Gilliam 2009, 2012), children had to collaborate on projects; they were trained to show and develop proper empathy towards each other and not to express superiority over their classmates or hierarchy between them. Their competences to cooperate were assessed; as we have described, they were arranged into playgroups and encouraged to make friends; they had to decide common rules of conduct in class and to take decisions through discussions and votes. And as an indication of the weight put on this way of interacting, the children giving cause for concern were the ones not committing to the group, who did not make friends in the class, or did not engage in social life. Thus, in today's school, the class is loaded with all kind of social norms about proper ways to be and act in groups, which the children have to learn; but which are also interactional norms deemed to be vital for participation in the democracy and welfare system of Danish society.

In this way the class, but also child institutions in general, functions as a *model of society*, but also as a *model for society* (Geertz 1993 [1973]: 93–94). Analysed from an Eliasian perspective, this suggests an interesting point. One could say that the institutional conditions of the school or the kindergarten which necessitates the lumping together of children in small rooms, asking them to get along and cooperate for many hours a day for years in a row, in itself constitutes a process of integration; that is, a process central in larger civilising processes (Elias 1994[1939]: 429). In the tightly integrated group of the class or the children's group in kindergarten, the pedagogical idea is – in line with Elias' theory – that close proximity and interdependence will enhance the development of self-restraint, and a whole range of other norms of interaction, including expressions of equality, tolerance and the avoidance of explicit exclusion. In this sense, the class and child institutions as a whole can be seen as a kind of 'integration laboratory' in which children through forced integration and interdependence, observed and supervised by adults, are expected to develop civilised behaviour, that is, to learn to behave towards other people in culturally acceptable ways. While the class and institutions were possibly not intended to be like this from the outset, it seems as if the combination of the integration of different social groups in schools and kindergartens; the practical conditions of these institutions, and the ideals of civilised society and conduct over the years have created a specific – institutional – form, which is now employed and endorsed for its civilising effect. In everyday practice in school classes, children may, of course, learn quite different social lessons from those intended. Rather than equality, cohesion and loyalty children might experience exclusion, bullying and social distinctions between children. [6].[#N6]. Nevertheless, the integrated class stands as a means, as well as a symbol, of the civilised community. This becomes apparent when teachers in interviews stress the alignment between the behavioural forms required in the school and cultural values in Danish society. They don't see any difference in bringing up good school pupils, good human beings and good citizens. Thus, the social groups children are placed in are accomplishing their civilising tasks by being models of and models for the civilised society, and through this generating the dual institutionalisation of norms of civilised behaviour.

In conclusion: Civilising institutions in the welfare state

The historical outline as well as the ethnographic material from our fieldwork in Danish child institutions illustrate the role child institutions have played and still play in forming and disseminating ideas of what it means to be a civilised person in a welfare state. What we have seen is a correlation between the establishment and expansion of state-regulated childcare institutions – schools and kindergartens – and the coordination and standardisation of specific interactional codes, social norms and schemes of understandings conceived of as the civilised form of behaviour. As we have shown, this correlation has evolved over a longer period, but was particularly related to the establishment of the welfare state after World War II. Although

clearly related to the centralised state formation before the war, a completely different view of the responsibility and regulative role of the state in relation to citizens was established in the post-war period. Welfare institutions influenced the development of new understandings of individual rights and responsibility, of gender roles, generational relations and general social interactions, emphasising informal modes of communication.

As we have argued, kindergartens and schools have come to play a particularly central role in this development, as they have contributed to the standardisation of specific codes of conduct through the incorporation of norms, which children then carried into wider society. We believe this is a highly important aspect of welfare societies. When virtually all children spend their days in nurseries, kindergartens and schools, norms and expectations about typical and appropriate interactional behaviour become well-established, and indisputable as the way in which things should be done not only within the institutional settings, but also in wider society.

In this regard, Denmark and the other Scandinavian societies can be seen as a special case. The extent and distribution of welfare institutions, as well as their involvement in civil conduct, are particularly illustrative of post-war integrating processes taking in more and more social groups. Supported by a corpus of public health and counselling experts, kindergartens and schools have worked to integrate, educate and form various groups for peaceful co-existence, levelling out markers of social distinction in manners and lifestyle. In this way, we believe that child institutions have been central to the stability, integration and the experience of cohesion in Danish society. To a large extent, this civilising process has been a state project, as the means and aims of childcare and educational institutions were part of the expanding welfare state. Yet, as argued here, the institutional form itself is also of significance for the norms and standards established. Through the daily formative work with cohorts of children, norms and manners have been routinised and incorporated, not only referring to wider understanding or ideologies, but also to the social integration of groups of children and the practical matters of everyday life. As we have argued, the norms of civilised behaviour in Danish society are thus institutionalised in a dual way: through the dissemination of values and behavioural forms by child institutions; and given an institutional character as they are moulded by institutional life. As demonstrated by our ethnographic material, this dual institutionalisation makes it difficult to decide whether the formative work reflects cultural norms of the welfare society, or it is welfare society which over the years has become shaped by institutional norms. For us, the point is that child institutions and contemporary Danish society cannot be separated, as the ideals of civilised behaviour and civilised communities which are encountered inside and outside institutions have developed in a dialectical relationship.

As we have shown, this institutionalisation of civilised norms is partly a consequence of larger societal processes, including the massive institutionalisation of Danish childhood; partly a consequence of intended state regulation and pedagogical work. We hope to have demonstrated this relation between civilising processes, as an effect of long-term shifts in social figurations; civilising projects, such as those intended by influential groups; and the civilising institutions in which the civilising projects are carried out. In this interaction between intended state projects and daily educational work, certain understandings of social conduct are established and recognised as meaningful expressions of civilised behaviour – with influence far beyond the institutions themselves. From this perspective, child institutions have become part of the civilising processes, not only as reflections of changeable state-visions, but as dominant definers themselves.

Biographies

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Notes

1. The project involved ethnographic fieldwork in affluent families, four kindergartens and six school classes, as well as ethnographic interviews with mothers and fathers, pedagogues, teachers, school leaders, children of five to sixteen years of age, and young people remembering their institutional lives. Inspired by the theory and concepts of Norbert Elias, we aimed to explore the civilising projects of these

institutions, the civilising practices of the adults and the kind of civilised behaviour it aims at *in situ*, in the everyday life of the institutions. In addition to this, we were also interested in what children of different ages, as well as different social and ethnic backgrounds, learn from the civilising projects they are enrolled in – both about themselves and about social and cultural distinctions in society. The project also involved Professor Karen Fog Olwig, Department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen, Assistant Professor Dil Bach, Department of Education, Aarhus University and Associate Professor Sally Anderson, Department of Education, Aarhus University. The full analysis of the material has been published in Danish in Gilliam & Gulløv (2012). [#N1-ptri](#)

2. It was, however, heavily debated whether it was solely the state responsibility to be in charge of children's education. After long debate, it was decided by law in 1855 that parents were allowed to teach their own children either privately or create alternative independent schools under the supervision of public authorities. [#N2-ptri](#)
3. The school law of 1903 changed the Danish school into a so called 'unity school', and, although this school form developed and gained new meanings through the twentieth century, in 1903, this first of all implied more equal access for girls and children of different social background to secondary education (Olsen 1986: 68–69) [#N3-ptri](#)
4. This is clearly expressed in the influential political vision for education, U90. This report was later heavily criticised by right-wing liberal politicians for the understanding of the formative mission of school as a social equaliser directed towards the community and democracy. [#N4-ptri](#)
5. The first school class (the 'o' class) is regarded an introduction to school life, teaching children what it means to attend school by inculcating social expectations and codes of conduct. [#N5-ptri](#)
6. Research in bullying in Danish schools stresses that the close knit group of the school class can also create processes of social exclusion as children participate in the active exclusion of other children due to the fear of their own social exclusion (Kofoed & Søndergaard 2009). [#N6-ptri](#)

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