Mosaic Piece 3

Danger and Learning: An Observational

Account of Practices in a Danish Afterschool Center

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*Goal of Observation:*

 During my time at the Hellerup Fritidscenter I have had the opportunity to work in many different settings with children whose interests range from running around all day to playing music in a studio. In this time I have found a comfortable niche inside the center’s woodshop and tend to have the most interesting interactions with both the pedagogues and the children in this space. As a result of extra time spent in the woodshop I began to notice certain practices and events that occurred there on a regular basis that stood out to me and seemed to be contrary to many of the American ideas of childcare practice. An example of this is how children are allowed to use power tools and saws in ways that any American counselor would cringe at, yet they do so ably. Upon recognizing this, I am extremely interested in exploring why this difference in perceptions of safe practices for children exists in the Danish system as well the thought process behind such practices. Therefore, I chose to focus my observations on situations in which children in the Hellerup Center were using tools that the average person would perceive as dangerous and try to understand the Danish approach to such situations in order to contrast it with American views.

*Method of Observation:*

 In order to explore the nuances of Danish safety practices and perceptions I used objective observations as a means to catalogue data. Once a week when I went in to the center I would place myself in a corner of a room and take detailed notes on everything that occurred in the room for a period of time. Usually this took place in the woodshop, since that was the source of my inspiration, but also because it was the space in which the children were allowed to use the most dangerous of equipment in the Fritidscenter. In order to provide the best possible data I focused on keeping a clear mind and recording only things that occurred in the room, rather than incorporate personal opinions and potential confounding information.

As is discussed by ­­­Merriam in “Being A Careful Observer,” it is extremely important for a participant observer to take detailed notes that are purely “raw data” because it allows for more data to be analyzed as well as higher quality data (1998). Although my role in the Fritidscenter was one of a participant observer, when I was actually making my observations I took extreme care to remain as separated from the scene as possible in order to minimize my impact on the events that occurred. Therefore, my observations could more accurately be described as being done from an “observer as participant” perspective, making them more objective than if I were involved in the activities of the children. It is important to keep in mind that when acting as an observer as participant the amount of information that is revealed is limited by the subjects being observed and the impact my presence has on their behaviors (Merriam, 1998). Despite this, objective observation allows a huge amount of data to be recorded and analyzed later on, assuming the researcher keeps notes only on setting, the people and the activities they are doing.

*Observations:*

 Although I have spent numerous hours in the Hellerup center’s woodshop, there is one set of observations from my time there that provides an informative sense of how the children interact with dangerous tools as well how their pedagogues interact with the children. On 4 November 2010 at 13:00 I sat down in a corner of the woodshop located farthest away from where the children work and semi-hidden behind a large supply cabinet. The room is relatively small, with stations set up with industrial grade power tools as well as walls lined with handsaws, planers, whittling knives and other tools. There are two boys in the room, one working with a band saw (a high speed electric saw used for cutting smaller pieces of wood) and one with a wood burner (a ”pen” that has an extremely hot tip that is used to burn away layers of wood to create designs), as well as one pedagogue who is a few feet away from the boy using the band saw.

“The pedagogue and the first boy are both working intently on the band saws and are hunched over their work, not looking at each other or saying anything. The boy moves quickly with the wood and at one point removes the blade and inserts it inside of a pre-existing hole in the wood, reattaching it and testing the tension very rapidly… At one point the boy gets up and begins sanding his work on a belt sander (a high-speed radial device with sand paper on it, used for heavy sanding), removing and left over wood dust from the belt with a rubber block. Both boys wear the proper safety gear for the devices they are using.”

The same activities continue for a few minutes, with the only interaction between the children and the pedagogue being a brief discussion about a recent FCK match. Eventually two more boys walk into the room with the additional woodshop pedagogue, Jeppe, and resume projects that they had begun on a different day. One of these boys begins work immediately on painting a wooden car he is constructing, while the other new boy saws a new piece of wood. He asks for help from Jeppe in clamping down the board as well as getting the cut in the wood started. Jeppe does this and then walks away to briefly check on the activities of the other children. While he is away, the boy Jeppe helped begins to saw the wood extremely quickly, placing his hand only a few centimeters away from where the blades are rapidly moving back and forth. “The saw sways left and right as he cuts rather than staying straight and at three instances comes extremely close to the boy’s left hand, which is holding the wood.” At this point, Jeppe turns around and sees the boy sawing and comes over to show him how to move the saw properly back in forth in a straight line and with slower motions. At this point I stop my observations and help a few children with their projects, but later on I ask Jeppe about his interaction with the boy, asking him about Danish customs in situations with dangerous tools and children. After telling him that in America, a child would never be allowed to use a hand saw like that, especially with his hand so close to it, he replies, “Yes, but if he does cut himself, he will know to never put his hand so close again.”

*Analysis:*

These observations taken in the woodshop provide a surprising difference to a setting one might see in an American childcare setting. There is no doubt that many of the tools available to the children in the woodshop are dangerous, since many of them operate at high speeds and have extremely sharp surfaces. Despite this, the majority of the children in the shop operate the tools with great ability. Although ability with tools is a subjective measure, the fluency and lack of hesitation seen by the boy operating the band saw, as well as his ability to remove the blade and reattach it with the appropriate tension clearly show that he is knowledgeable about the device. Add to this the fact that he moves quickly with the machine and doesn’t pause or ask for help, the child demonstrates that he has had experience with the device. This example suggests that in the Hellerup center the children are given a high level of trust since they are allowed to operate machinery that is undeniably dangerous. Furthermore, the level of experience the child demonstrates suggests that this activity is something that the pedagogues encourage the students to do, despite its dangerous nature.

As Judith Wagner’s (2006) discusses, part of the Danish ideal of what a *good childhood* is finds root in the emancipation of the children from adult regulations and interference. A direct comparison can be drawn between her description of children-only “pillow rooms” which “require adults to believe that children benefit from rough play” and the woodshop environment. As the pedagogue Jeppe pointed out, unless the children experience a dangerous situation and potentially hurt themselves, they will not truly learn the danger of using the tools. Rather, they will just have a warning from adults that it is possible to get hurt and that they should be careful, which doesn’t allow them to benefit from a concrete learning experience. By permitting the children to be in a situation where they can potentially hurt themselves the pedagogues are reflecting a strong belief in the idea that the children need to learn from experience, “follow their own aspirations and take risks” (Wagner, 2004). Additionally, by allowing the children to accumulate extensive experience with the risky learning situation, the pedagogues reflect what is possibly a desire to increase a child’s confidence in his or her own abilities, which in turn helps them develop into successful individuals.

Separate from the inherent trust that the pedagogues place in the children by allowing them to use such dangerous equipment, an interesting dynamic can be observed in how the pedagogues respond to the children while they are working and asking questions in the shop. As seen earlier, during the beginning of the observation period the pedagogue is working on his own project and not paying any attention to the boys working in the room. This apparent lack of concern suggests that although he is responsible for what happens in the shop, he is either confident in the abilities of the children who are working or actively chooses to allow whatever might happen to happen. Rather than present an image of Danes as uncaring and rash in regards to the safety of their children, I would propose that this practice reflects a high level of respect for the children. Rooted in what Wagner terms egalitarianism, this tendency to allow the children to actively construct things on their own, free from overbearing adult influence, ensures that children have influence in their own life as well as feel that the adults in their lives respect them (2006). Respect fosters positive social development and also makes children feel cared for and valued (Seligman, 1996). Therefore, rather than demonstrating a lack of concern for the children, the behaviors of the pedagogue could in fact promote their feeling of safety in a dangerous environment. Furthermore, the observations indicate that if a child does feel unsafe or unable to do something, they will reach out for help without any hesitance.

As is illustrated by the child who did not know how to begin sawing his piece of wood, it is clear that the pedagogues are in fact more than willing to offer aid to the children. Similar to how they may try to foster the children’s confidence in their own ability through a hands off approach the majority of the time, the instructors assist the children with their problems by outlining the appropriate steps and then allowing the kids to complete the process on their own. This is seen in when instead of sawing the whole piece of wood for the boy, Jeppe starts him off with a cut and demonstrates the proper technique for sawing and then allows him to try for himself. In many cases in America this dangerous first step in the project would not be allowed and the instructor would prepare the wood and then let the child work on it with less risky tools. By allowing the boy to experiment from the foundation of the appropriate sawing method the instructor is not only reinforcing the boy’s safety with good practice, but also expanding his own ability with the tools. Moreover, it is impossible to say that the Danish pedagogues don’t care at all about the children’s safety because the observations provide a clear example of the pedagogue stepping in when the child with the saw is practicing an unsafe method.

When one is placed in an environment to observe it is inevitable that the subjects of the observation will be influenced by the researcher’s presence at least to a small degree (Merriam, 1998). Despite this tendency, because I am a regular figure in the woodshop, along with many of the kids who use it, it can perhaps be argued that my presence has a reduced bias upon the data since the children are used to seeing me there. Despite my hope in conducting my observations that I was able to remain an objective observer, it is likely that the children in the woodshop were aware of my presence and as a result behaved in a slightly altered manner. Perhaps what I observed as focused attention by individuals on their projects was in fact a reaction to being watched and recorded. Similarly, it is difficult to say that the pedagogues didn’t act in their “detached” manner because I was in fact in the room and am considered to fill more or less the same role as a pedagogue when I am at the Fritidscenter. Conceivably, they felt that I was able to monitor the room and the children in it, allowing them to work on their projects.

Similarly, it is important to recognize that my heightened awareness of the danger inherent in the woodshop stems from my experience and values from an American way of thinking. I come to the observation exercise from a discursively constructed perspective and it is inevitable that my perception of the events in the woodshop are affected by this “positioning” (Davies & Harré, 1990). When I see a child using a hack saw my natural instinct is to jump up and tell him to be careful and watch over his every move like a hawk. Similarly, the way in which I interpret a pedagogue’s interaction with a child is influenced both by what I expect the interaction to consist of as well as my lack of understanding of the Danish perception of an appropriate interaction. As a result of these things, it is easy to make assumptions about Danes being less careful with their children than Americans might be, but by objectively analyzing straightforward observations, it becomes clear this is not the case.

Although it is difficult to separate one’s positioning and experience from an observation, doing so can reveal subtle differences in the way different cultures view a situation. Through my observation and analysis of a Danish woodshop setting, I have been able to get a clearer understanding of the ways in which the pedagogues at my practicum site perceive the children as well as their views regarding dangerous situations the children face. Although the difference between American and Danish views can seem vast at times, it is really in the slight differences in perceptions of a situation that the two cultures differ. In order to gain a better understanding of how each culture can be concerned with the wellbeing of their children, but in such differing ways, it seems most pertinent to me to ask what cultural experiences the Danish and American views are rooted in. In doing so, not only will it become clear what the major influences behind each group’s views of childcare are, but it will also allow stronger comparisons to be drawn each culture.

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