

Research about children under three: Invisibility and increased numbers

A literature review of research about children under the age of three in Norwegian kindergartens

Anne Greve, Oslo University College

Morten Solheim, Oslo University College

Summary

The aim of this article is to provide an overview of the current state of research on the youngest children in Norwegian kindergartens. The literature review deals with research from the last two decades about young children in kindergartens. The article also discusses critical initiatives related to implications of the research findings, and points in conclusion to some challenges of the role of research in politics.

Résumé

Le but de cet article est de donner un aperçu de la situation, et la recherche sur les enfants les plus jeunes dans les écoles maternelles de la Norvège. La revue de la littérature donne une brève description de la recherche actuelle et en cours concernant les jeunes enfants dans les écoles maternelles, pour les deux dernières décennies. L'article permet également à des initiatives cruciales

liées aux conséquences de recherche, et des points en conclusion sur certains défis dans la manière dont les travaux de recherche sur la politique.

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es ofrecer una visión general de la situación, y la investigación de los niños más pequeños en las guarderías de Noruega. La revisión de la literatura ofrece una breve descripción de la investigación actual y en curso sobre los niños pequeños en las guarderías, en los últimos dos decenios. El artículo también le ayuda con las iniciativas críticas relacionadas con las implicaciones de investigación, y señala en la conclusión de algunos de los retos en la manera en los trabajos de investigación en la política.

Introduction

The last decade we have witnessed important changes in the Early Childhood Education and Care in Norway. One of the main changes is the considerable increase of children from 0 to 3 in the institutions. From 2004 to 2008 the percentage of children under the age of three in kindergartens, increased from 47,8 to 74,7 (Utdanningsforbundet, 2009). However, the professional and organizational challenges related to the work of the youngest, is still devoted little attention (Østrem, 2009, p. 201). The trained

personnel in the Norwegian kindergarten are graduated as Bachelors with 3 years training. There is no requirement for special training concerning the youngest children. The educated personnel constitute only one third of the staff. The other two thirds are uneducated. Both Unicef (2009) and OECD (2006) point out that this may be a negative aspect of the structure in the Norwegian kindergartens. At the same time, the question has been raised about how much knowledge there is available about the youngest children in ECEC. This literature review of published research on the youngest children in Norwegian kindergartens takes into account 4 doctoral theses, some research reports from ongoing research projects and 30-40 scientific papers. The article attempts to shed light upon the various current issues related to this research, by giving a brief description of the doctoral theses and research projects as well as various ongoing studies. The article will further provide some political analysis on how this research is made invisible in official documents and political action plans.

In 2009 the Norwegian Ministry of Education published a White paper outlining its intentions regarding future kindergarten policy. The White paper entitled *Quality in kindergartens*¹ provides a thorough overview of the challenges related to the kindergarten's content and place in society. One of the challenges that are highlighted is the low interest and knowledge about the

¹ In the article, this document is used consistently as an example of the relationship between research (about the youngest children in kindergarten) and politics in Norway.

youngest children, despite the increasing proportion of one- and two-year olds in kindergartens.

Although there is little research on the youngest children, it must be said that the research on this matter is increasing. In recent years, research on the youngest children also has become a relevant issue in a number of master student theses. This may give indications of an emerging field of research. However, adequate funding for this research remains a problem. There was almost no research in this field financed by the national authorities until 2004.

During our search for research publications about the youngest children in Norwegian day care, we experienced that it is difficult to get a complete overview. The research is difficult to retrieve, because the report system varies from one research institution to the other. The searches are done in the national library database BIBSYS and FORSKDOK, in universities and university colleges own databases for research publications, and through personal contact with a range of researchers.

One major problem is that the research on the youngest children in Norwegian kindergartens is fragmented and difficult to categorize. An interesting common feature of studies of the youngest children in kindergarten is that they all are qualitative and retrieves its data output from

the field being researched (kindergarten). All of the studies that are done on this field contain various themes.

Although difficult to categorize, we have tried to collect the research publications by research themes. We have identified three main themes:

Relationships and peer culture; learning, language and creation of meaning; and, finally, care and participation. In addition to these themes, the research is concerned about ethical issues and dilemmas.

Relationships and peer culture

One could claim that all the studies about the youngest children throw light on relationships to some extent. However, there are only four studies, accomplished by respectively Gunvor Løkken and Anne Greve, concerning the relationships between the children.

Løkken (1999, 2000) illuminates the social styles within toddler's peer culture. She reveals that the children understand each other's purpose and meaning in the common game, mostly through their bodily actions. One- and two-year olds' distinctive social style is for example shown through the phenomena that Løkken names "corridor tours" (running in time), "mattress associations" (repeated jumping on the mattress) and the frequent "happy lives" (sound of laughter at the table).

Anne Greve (2007, 2009), emphasizing early friendships, has studied how children interact with each other. According to Greve, friendships between two-year olds are built up over time through many meetings and several experiences of a common we. Her studies show that experiences of a common we may constitute a basis for friendships. The expression of the common we emerge in the way children create meaning together, how they relate to each other's way of life through humor, bodily actions and a desire to protect the friendship. Meetings between children can be random, but most of the meetings occur because children deliberately seek each other out (Greve, 2007 , 2009).

Both Løkken and Greve have an approach based on life-world phenomenology. They go directly into the nurseries and make observations using video. Although the approach may be different, the use of video is also significant in other studies, such as studies concerning learning, language and the creation of meaning.

Learning, language and the creation of meaning

Although all the studies about the youngest children are concerned about learning, language and creation of meaning, there are two studies that focus specifically on these topics. Vibeke Grøver Aukrust (1995) focuses on how two-year olds use language within the framework of daily care routines in the

nursing room and nappy changing situation. Aukrust highlights the role of informal learning situations in the development of native language by showing that children may have valuable experiences with the use of their early language during care routines. The children seem often to take initiatives to talk about aspects of life not present in the kindergarten. But the quality of the children's language and relational experiences partly depends on the staff's ability and opportunities to follow up the children's invitations to conversations.

Elin Eriksen Ødegaard (2007) studies kindergartens for the youngest children as a cultural and culture-generating forum. The aim of her work is to study the creation of meaning in co-narratives, in order to explore their pedagogical potential. Her thesis describes and illustrates how children and adults are creating meanings, through telling each other stories about things that have happened or will happen to them.

Ødegaard points to the relationship between popular culture and traditional culture, as an importance of conversations between children and adults. Recognition of the child's cultural approach in a conversation is significant for the joint meaning between children and adults. Through various examples Ødegaard describes how children's different cultural expressions both is being ignored and benefited by adults. Through the study, it is also pointed out how

the conversation narratives can be a way to understand what has relevance for the youngest children in their everyday lives.

Grøver Aukrust's and Ødegaard's contribution to knowledge production is particularly associated with children's narratives and its impact on children's language development and the development of meaning-making, within a socio-cultural perspective.

Care and participation – some ongoing projects

The ongoing research project *The kindergarten seen as a link in the chain of care for children under three years of age* is a collaboration between the Norwegian Center for Research on Welfare and Aging (NOVA) and Oslo University College (OUC). The project is one of a few, which is supported by the Norwegian Research Council. The project contains several sub-projects aiming at investigating care careers and daily life for a strategically sample of families and children (Stefansen, 2008; Stefansen & Farstad, 2010). Further, the project aims at gaining knowledge about the characteristics of daily life in a broad specter of day care institutions for small children (Eide & Winger (eds), 2008; Eide, 2008; Greve, 2008a; 2009).

Another major ongoing research project funded by the Norwegian Research Council is *Children's participation in a relational perspective – Focus on the youngest children in kindergarten*. This project focuses upon

children's participation through playful interaction; the range between adult authority and the children's participation; documentation (Fennefoss & Jansen 2008; Sverdrup & Myrstad 2009); meals in the nursery department; children's expressions and adult's understanding (Sandvik & Johannesen 2008) and the youngest children's opportunities to create 'flight lines' in space and time (Sandvik 2009).

Some ethical issues in research with the youngest children

Research related to the youngest children in kindergartens offers different ethical challenges. Children's age and maturity, as well as the fact that several of them do not yet have a verbal language, can lead to critical challenges related to the validation and publication of the research results. Several researchers point to these ethical dilemmas, by adding a meta-reflective perspective to their research (Aukrust, 1995; Greve, 2008b; Winger (ed.), 2007).

In the research report "Research in young children's everyday life" (Winger 2007) ten scientists share their reflections related to the methodological challenges in their various research work. One of the topics that are affected in this report includes the power position that scientists hold above the children and staff in the nursery where the study takes place.

To summarize, the Norwegian research on the youngest children in ECEC is first and foremost characterized by small-scale projects. Although there have been a few projects across institutions, there is a considerable lack of longitudinal studies and comprehensive studies.

Accessibility – and political use of research

In Norway there is a common assertion with regards to research on the youngest children in the nursery: there is not enough of it. And most will also agree with the following claim made in the white paper by the Norwegian Ministry of Education:

In recent years there has also been an increase in the number of studies focusing on the youngest children in kindergarten and the kinder-garten physical environment. Despite this increase, there is still a low interest for research in which children, and especially the youngest, are objects of study (Norwegian Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 42).

The paradox in this context is apparent: when the children under the age of three are finally discussed, the white paper excludes large sections of the research that is actually ongoing. In this way, the Ministry reproduces the claim that there is little research on this field. How does this situation arise?

Through the research for this article, it was discovered that research, explicitly linked to the youngest children in kindergartens, is extremely

difficult to access through various university, college and library search engines. A general problem when it comes to identifying research publications is that the various scientific institutions use different registration databases for their research. Furthermore, the categories used also seem to be different. In some of the databases it can be difficult to recognize what kind of publication the different hits in the search results actually are. Maybe it is the researchers own responsibility to publish their studies in a way that will make them visible for more people – also politicians. But can it also be that this specific research about the youngest children in kindergartens is being marginalized?

What is research?

What is research? Or to put it in a more specific way: what is considered valid research in a political context? The white paper previously referred to in this article, is the most comprehensive policy document that is prepared in terms of how the future of day care in Norway will look like. In relation to the research overview in this article, it appears that this research is not considered valid in a political context. The white paper refers only to one publication that is directly related to research on the youngest children in kindergarten. In the search for research publications preparing this article, we found more than 40 results.

Welfare research and research related to socio-economic interests are the two types of research referred to most in the white paper. This research contributes to marginalize the educational research related to the youngest children. Both research related to welfare and socio-economics is research, which extensively puts the childhood in a preparation perspective: A period in life that will prepare the child for the rest of her life, and to achieve a successful education.

The tradition in the Norwegian kindergartens has for several decades emphasized the relation between learning, play and care. It has built on a social pedagogical style more than a focus on preparing to school. This tradition is maybe at a changing point. To illustrate this, we will point at a contrast between the research referred to and the white paper. All of the research related to the youngest children gain in some way knowledge about how the children express themselves without a verbal language. This knowledge is virtually absent in the white paper. Forms of expression such as body language, facial expression, glances, humor, joy and friendship are not referred to as important knowledge about the youngest. Instead, the white paper points out extensively on the importance of knowledge of language development (verbal language) in working with children. This is done with the preparation for school, social equality and opportunity for success in education as argument. In this way, it is set a political agenda that can

contribute to a pedagogical practice that marginalize the youngest children's forms of expression, and thus deprives us the opportunity to see what the youngest children are concerned.

Policy making: A research issue

The numbers of both children in kindergartens and research about them are increasing. The children are visible, but unfortunately the research isn't. The status on research about the youngest children in Norwegian kindergartens is that it's increasing but not as visible as it should be.

In Norway it is a national curriculum related to the pedagogic work in the kindergartens. This curriculum can only be changed through the political system. In order to have an impact on which pedagogies that will be practiced in the future kindergartens, it seems like the researchers is standing in front of a challenge. Educational research about children between 0-3 does not seem to be valued as much as other research. It produces more and more knowledge of the youngest children in Norwegian kindergartens, despite the fact that the allocated scarce funds. Research that is available gives us, among other things, knowledge of the relationships between the youngest, the importance of friendship in kindergarten, young children's forms of expression, young children's opportunities to participate, how young children learn and how they receive and provide care. The challenge ahead is to make this knowledge so visible that it has an impact on policy making.

Summary

As a temporary conclusion it can be said that there are some challenges related to make the youngest children in Norwegian kindergartens more visible, both as a political concern and as a field for researchers. The high increased numbers of children under the age of three in kindergartens has not yet produced the same increase of knowledge about the same group.

Anyway, there is a slight increase of interest from the researchers view on this field. In the next two years the number of doctoral theses about these children, probably will be doubled. The challenge ahead seems to be a question of political will to allocate money for research in this area, as well as to let the study that is being produced affect the policy. The possibility and the hope associated with this challenge, lies in the ever-increasing interest in the youngest children in various research fields.

References

- Aukrust, V. G. (1995). *Fortellinger fra stellerrommet: To-åringer i barnehage: En studie av språkbruk, innhold og struktur.* (Stories from the nursing room: Two-year-olds in kindergarten: A study of language, content and structure). Doctoral Dissertation. Universitetet i Oslo, Oslo.
- Bourdieu, P. (2007). *Viten om viten og refleksivitet.* (Knowledge of knowledge and reflexivity). Oslo: Pax.

- Eide, B. J. (2008). Barns medvirkning - eksempler fra lekesituasjoner i barnehagen. (Children's participation - examples from children`s play situations in the kindergarten). *Barn* 2008 (1), 43-62.
- Eide, B., & Winger, N. (2008). *Glimt fra små barns hverdagsliv i barnehagen. 2. delrapport fra prosjektet "Barns omsorgskarriere. Barnehagen som ledd i en omsorgskjede for barn opp til 3 års-alder"*. (Glimpses of the youngest children`s everyday life in kindergarten. 2. interim report from the project "Children's care career. Kindergarten as part of a chain of care for children under 3 years of-age). (HiO-rapport nr. 18). Oslo: Høgskolen i Oslo
- Engeseæter, Mari (2008). *Det kommer noen krypende: Rom for små barn.* (Room for young children). Master Dissertation. Oslo: Høgskolen i Oslo.
- Fennefoss, A.T., & Jansen, K. E. (2008). *Småbarnspedagogikk og praksisfortellinger: Pedagogisk dokumentasjon gjennom tolkning og analyse.* (Infants Pedagogy and practice stories: Pedagogical documentation through interpretation and analysis). Bergen: Fagbokforlaget.
- Farstad, G. R. & Stefansen, K. (2007). Ett år og klar for barnehagen? Foreldres forståelser av små barns omsorgsbehov. (One year old and ready for kindergarten? Parents' understandings of young children's care needs). *Barn* 25(2), 29-47.
- Gillund, M. (2006). *De yngste barnas medvirkning i barnehagens hverdagsliv.* (The youngest child's participation in the kindergarten everyday life). Master Dissertation. Oslo: Høgskolen i Oslo

- Greve, A. (2007). *Vennskap mellom små barn i barnehagen*. (Friendship among young children in kindergarten). Doctoral Dissertation. Oslo: Universitetet i Oslo
- Greve, A. (2008a). Friendships and participation among young children in a Norwegian kindergarten. In: *Participatory learning in the early years. Research and pedagogy*, 78-92. London: Routledge.
- Greve, A (2008b). Ulike strategier for resultatpresentasjon av fenomenologiske barnehagepedagogiske observasjonsstudier. (Different strategies for result presentations of phenomenological observational studies). *Barn* 26(4), 63-76.
- Greve, A. (2009). Vennskap mellom de yngste barna i barnehagen. (Friendship between the youngest children in kindergarten). Oslo: *Nordisk Barnehageforskning* 2(2), 91-98
- Hernes, L. & Os, E. (2004). "Under tre? – mener dere under tre?": *Kunstformidling til barn under tre år – erfaringer fra prosjektet "Klangfugl"*. (Kunst formidling til barn under tre år – erfaringer fra prosjektet "Glitterbird"). Stockholm: Centrum för barnkulturforskning.
- Hognestad, K. (2007). *Ettåringens medvirkning i barnehagen: Et kritisk blikk på møter mellom mennesker*. (The one year olds participation in kindergarten: A critical eye on meetings between people). Master Dissertation. Oslo: Høgskolen i Oslo.
- Johannesen, N. (2002). *Det glemte språket: hvordan de minste barna i barnehagen bruker imitasjon i kommunikasjonen seg imellom*. (The forgotten language: how the youngest children in kindergarten are using

imitation in the communication between them). Master Dissertation. Oslo: Høgskolen i Oslo.

Johannesen, N., & Sandvik, N. (2008). *Små barn og medvirkning: Noen perspektiver*. (Young children and participation: Some Perspectives). Oslo: Cappelen.

Løkken, G. (1999). *Challenges in toddler peer research*. *Nordisk Pedagogikk* (3), 145-155.

Løkken, G. (2000): *Toddler peer culture: The social style of one and two year old body subjects in everyday interaction*. Doctoral Dissertation. NTNU, Trondheim.

Myrstad, A. & Sverdrup, T. (2009) *Improvisasjon: Et verktøy for å forstå de yngste barnas medvirkning i barnehagen?* (Improvisation: A tool for understanding the youngest child's participation in kindergarten). *Barn*, 27(2), 52-68.

Mæhlum, Simen (2006). *Rytme, dynamikk, rom og relasjoner i barns egeninitierte estetiske uttrykk: En mikroetnografisk studie av barn i alderen 1-3 år i barnehage*. (Rhythm, dynamics, space and relationships in the child's own initiative aesthetic expression: A microethnographical study of children aged 1-3 years in kindergarten). Master Dissertation. Oslo: Høgskolen i Oslo.

Nyberg, M. & Grindland, B. (2008). The influence of the room context in the meal experience: examples from a hospital and a nursery. *Journal of Foodservice*, 19 (1), 35-43.

Norwegian Ministry of Education (2009). *Ministry Report to the Storting nr. 41: Quality in Kindergartens*. Oslo: Ministry of Education.

- Odegaard, N., & Rossholt, N. (2008). Nærmiljø og Samfunn: Barna i byen former i Brevik. In T. Moser & M. Pettersvold (Eds.) *En verden av muligheter: Fagområdene i barnehagen*, 137-154. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.
- OECD (2006). *Starting Strong 2. Early childhood education and care*. OECD: Paris
- Os, E. (2004). *Under tre år? Mener dere under tre? Under tre? Klangfugl kunst for de minste: Rapport fra et prosjekt som beveger seg under den kulturelle lavalder*. (Report from a project that is moving under the cultural consent). Oslo: Høgskolen i Oslo
- Pedersen, Kristin Elisabeth (2006). *Barns subjektiveringer i tid og rom: En etnografisk reise med en poststrukturell tilnærming til en barnehageavdeling for barn under tre år*. (Children's subjective call in time and space: An ethnographic journey with a post-structural approach to a nursery department for children under three years). Master Dissertation. Oslo: Høgskolen i Oslo.
- Rossholt, N. (2009). The complexity of bodily events through an ethnographer's gaze: focusing on the youngest children in pre-school. *Contemporary Issue in Early Childhood* 10(1), 55-65.
- Sandvik, N. (2000). *Når munterhet rommer livets alvor: fenomenet munterhet blant 1-3-åringene i barnehage*. (the phenomenon of cheerfulness among 1-3-year-olds in kindergarten). Master Dissertation. Oslo: Høgskolen i Oslo.
- Sandvik, N. (2001). Småbarnas bidrag til barnehagens sosiale miljø. (Infants contribution to the kindergarten social environment). *Barn* 19(2), 21-42.

- Sandvik, N. (2002). Å gjøre seg selv tydelig for seg selv og andre. (To make yourself visible). *Barn* 20(1), 49-67.
- Sandvik, N. (2007). De yngste barnas medvirkning i barnehagen. (The youngest children`s participation in kindergarten). *Barn* 25(1), 27–45.
- Sandvik, N. (2009). A pedagogy of listening: Following different and unknown pathways: The first years. *Ngā Tau Tuatahi* 11(1), 21- 25.
- Stefansen, K. (2008). Et uendelig ansvar. Om foreldreskap i middelklassen. (An endless responsibility. About parenthood in the middle class). In Bø, B.P. & Olsen, B.C.R. (eds.): *Utfordrende foreldreskap*, 27-50. Oslo: Gyldendal Akademisk.
- Stefansen, K. & Farstad, G. R. (2008). Småbarnsforeldres omsorgsprosjekter. Betydningen av klasse. (Parents care projects. The importance of social class). *Tidsskrift for samfunnsforskning* 49(3), 343 374.
- Stefansen, K. & Farstad, G.R. (2010).Classed parental practices in a modern welfare state: Caring for the under threes in Norway. *Critical Social Policy*, 30(1),120-141.
- Utdanningsforbundet (2009): http://www.utdanningsforbundet.no/upload/Pdf-filer/Publikasjoner/Faktaark/Faktaark_2009_06.pdf?epslanguage=no
- Ulla, B. (2008). *Omsorg, makt og barndommar: Rekonseptualiseringar av omsorg gjennom feministiske poststrukturalistiske tilnærmingar*. Master Dissertation. Oslo: Høgskolen i Oslo.
- UNICEF (2009). *The child care transition. A league table of early childhood education and care in economically advanced countries*. Florence: UNICEF.

- Winger, N. (2007). *Forskning i små barns hverdagsliv i barnehagen: Noen forskningsmetodologiske utfordringer og dilemmaer* (Research in young children's everyday lives in kindergarten: Some research methodological challenges and dilemmas) (HiO Rapport nr. 19). Oslo: Høgskolen i Oslo.
- Wos, E. (2006). *Hverdagsliv i en polsk institusjon: Om kjennetegn ved omsorgsrutiner for barn mellom 0 og 3 år*. (Everyday life in a Polish institution: The characteristics of care practices for children between 0 and 3 years). Master Dissertation. Oslo: Høgskolen i Oslo.
- Ødegaard, E. E. (2006). Kaptein Andreas og hans mannskap: Drøfting av forskningsdata om en gutts stemme og innflytelse på barnehagens innhold. (Captain Andreas and his crew: Discussion of research data about a boy's voice and influence on the kindergarten content). *Barn* 24 (1), 67-89.
- Ødegaard, E. E. (2007). *Meningsskapning i barnehagen. Innhold og bruk av barns og voksnes samtalefortellinger*. (Meaning Creation in kindergarten. Content and use of children's and adults' conversation narratives). Doctoral Dissertation. Göteborgs universitet, Göteborg.
- Østrem, S. (ed. 2009). *Alle teller mer. En evaluering av hvordan Rammeplan for barnehagens innhold og oppgaver blir innført, brukt og erfart*. (The evaluation of how the curriculum for kindergarten's content and tasks are introduced, used and experienced). Tønsberg: Høgskolen i Vestfold.