



Action Competencies in Social Pedagogical Work with Socially Endangered Children and Youths – Interventions and Effects (The ASP Project) - an introduction to the day-care study

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Introduction

This folder presents the purpose, background, methods and perspectives of the research project Action Competences in Social Pedagogical Work with Socially Endangered Children and Youth – Interventions and Effects (the ASP project). The overall objective of this project is to identify professional intervention forms that contribute to the achievement of the objectives set for pedagogical work with socially endangered children and youth seen in an action competence perspective. The project thus seeks to examine how socially endangered children's life opportunities can be enhanced most effectively.

The ASP project is comprised of two core projects: one that focuses on day-care centres and one that focuses on residential institutions. It covers the development of tools for effect measurement, the implementation of intervention, effect measurement as well as exchanging experiences with the practice field. This folder focuses on the activities taking place in day-care centres, examining both children and their teachers' development of action competences. Throughout the project, baseline, midway and final effect assessments will be conducted in 60 day-care centres.

The ASP project is housed at the Danish University of Education (DUE), and is funded by the national Strategic Program for Welfare Research (SPW). The project runs from October 2005 to May 2009. The project is carried out in collaboration with the Copenhagen College of Social Work (Den Sociale Højskole – København), the National Institute for Social Education (Jysk Pædagog Seminarium), the National Institute of Early Childhood and Social Education (Frøbel Seminarium), Aalborg National Institute for Social Educators (Ålborgs Socialpædagogiske Seminarium) and consultants from Århus and Hvidovre municipalities.

Background

The ASP project draws on theories of social heritage. Negative social heritage is linked both to socioeconomic unequal conditions *and* to problems of marginalisation and the difficulties that socially endangered children often are exposed to. These two kinds of negative social heritage sometimes reinforce each other. It is difficult to break a marginalisation process once it has been set in motion – it gets reproduced generation upon generation, partially because of inadequate social networks as well as personal resources and competences. Such processes are often described as “vicious circles”.

Day-care centres have exceptional possibilities for strengthening children's development from an early age, however, there is also a risk that children marked by a negative social heritage are kept in and perhaps even get the negative patterns reinforced. The ASP project assumes that early interventions aimed at socially endangered children and youth can improve their life opportunities, socially and in relation to school achievement and learning motivation, both in a current perspective and later in life.

Improving life opportunities

Research has demonstrated that efforts aimed at developing children's competences and learning potentials (Jensen & Christoffersen, 2005) combined with a simultaneous focus on combating risk processes (exclusion) is a step in the right direction. The ASP project aims at a) identifying the pedagogical interventions that achieve the best results (“best practice”) in relation to combating the effects of the negative social heritage and b) developing methods that pre-school teacher's can use to change their pedagogical practice towards a action competence perspective, assumed to improve socially endangered children's life opportunities. The concept of “action competence” is central, both as an intervention objective (the children) and as a means (the teachers). Action competences are defined on the basis of five dimensions

that together are assumed to make the individual capable of navigating as an active participant in the surrounding world in an adequate way. The five dimensions are 1) Knowledge 2) Skills 3) The ability to take control 4) Identity 5) Action abilities - the ASP project focuses on social competences, learning and physical competences.

Methods and materials

The ASP study is carried out in day-care centres (kindergartens), where one of the central points of attention is a pedagogical learning plans (a curriculum). A so-called “qualification package” - comprising the core of the intervention – will be developed and implemented in the pedagogical practice. This package contains input and knowledge about social heritage, learning and competence development and knowledge about effectiveness in relation to socially endangered children’s special needs. The qualification package also includes suggestions as to how the curriculum can be used in an action competence perspective.

The project runs through five phases:

- **Phase 1:** Identification and clarification of the existing knowledge about the target group, based on previous research, social and educational political documents and on the participating municipalities’ strategies for developing and improving preschool teacher’s work in relation to socially endangered children (starting in October 2005)
- **Phase 2:** Development of an intervention strategy, i.e. the qualification package. This phase consists of three elements 1) process descriptions 2) tools based on input and knowledge 3) implementation strategy. Input is gathered from background papers from research groups, theoretical implementations and ideas about organisation development – seen in an action competence perspective. Planning and specification of the collaboration between researchers, centres for higher education and consultants and specialists from the municipalities (starting in April 2006)
- **Phase 3:** Strategic selection of the day-care centres. 30 centres are selected as intervention institutions and 30 as reference institutions. In total this comprises app. 3000 children, 3-5 years of age (starting in May 2006)
- **Phase 4:** Implementation of the intervention. Observations in the selected day-care centres (starting in September 2006)
- **Phase 5:** First baseline assessments. A data base is established and the first competence assessments are conducted in the 60 day-care-centres, making the first comparisons between intervention centres and reference centres possible. Along continuous observations in the day-care centres, midway and final assessments will be conducted. Furthermore, data about pedagogical processes will be collected (starting in September 2006 and running through May 2008)

There will be continuous reporting of the research and implementation processes and results that will be published on the home page and through a series of books.

Effect and intervention

The ASP-project is inspired by international research, however, it differs from previous Danish research by employing an effect and intervention design. It intends to develop tools for evaluating “best practice” and through the screening of children’s competences to develop knowledge about effects – hence examining the question about “what works?” Furthermore, a number of background variables concerning 1) children’s social background 2) the day-care centres educational conditions 3) municipal interventions and structural conditions are included in the analyses. The study is designed in such a way that it is possible to make follow-up studies of the participating children aimed at identifying possible long-term effects.

For detailed project description please consult the following link: www.dpu.dk/hpa

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