

Article

In-between discourses: Early intervention and diversity in the Norwegian kindergarten sector

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Keywords:

early intervention, kindergarten, diversity, institutional ethnography, ruling relations, institutional discourse, accountability



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Abstract

During the last decades, early intervention has become a major concern across political parties in Norway. In line with the discourse of early intervention, kindergartens are perceived as important arenas for identifying children at risk and initiating intervention. Equally important in the kindergarten sector is the discourse of diversity, in which a tolerance for behaviours that deviate from the majority norm is assumed. Drawing on an institutional ethnography in Norwegian kindergartens, and in particular the concept of ruling relations, I compare these two discourses in this article and discuss how kindergarten staff have to negotiate between different, and sometimes conflicting, institutional discourses that can justify different interventions. As a consequence, and despite good intentions, kindergarten staff can end up treating children with different backgrounds unequally.

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Introduction

Early intervention, understood as the obligation of professionals to intervene as early as possible when a child's development or circumstances cause worry, has over the last few decades become a major concern across political parties in Norway and internationally. Early intervention is mainly justified from a child development perspective, focusing on how early childhood experiences help shape how the brain structure develops (e.g. Fox, Levitt & Nelson III, 2010; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), and from a socio-economic perspective, focusing on the societal cost-effectiveness of early learning and development (e.g. Heckman, 2006; Havnes & Mogstad, 2011). An important goal of early intervention is to reduce the effects of social differences and to give children equal opportunities regardless of their socioeconomic, cultural or ethnic background. It is primarily the responsibility of kindergarten staff, teachers, public health and social workers - professionals or semi-professionals in the frontline who Lipsky (1980) refers to as street-level bureaucrats - to implement early intervention. To a large extent, whether a child receives appropriate assistance or treatment depends on their ability to identify children who cause concern and to initiate intervention.

In this article, the focus is on early intervention in the kindergarten sector in Norway. Drawing on examples from an institutional ethnography in Norwegian kindergartens, I address which ruling relations come into play when people discuss their worries for children with different backgrounds. The institutional ethnographic approach is suitable to discover how different texts and institutional discourses are locally activated, thereby discovering how people in the institutional complex of early intervention take part in ruling relations. Two institutional discourses are dominant in the ruling relations, and I will refer to them as the discourse of intervention and the discourse of diversity. By comparing how these two discourses enter into local activities, we can see how different interventions can be justified and accounted for. The insight gained from this analysis is relevant for policymakers, social workers, health workers and educators who work with young children, in order to raise awareness about how people working with children in frontline positions, despite good intentions and without their awareness, can end up treating children with different backgrounds unequally. The analysis sheds light on how discursive

practices, although they might appear neutral or even benign, are actually established in ruling relations in ways that may contribute to maintaining positions of disadvantage.

The article begins with an introduction to the concept of ruling relations as it is used in institutional ethnography, then moving on to a short description of the methodology, before turning to an outline and comparison of the two institutional discourses under investigation in this study.

The role of texts and institutional discourses in ruling relations

Institutional ethnography is a method of inquiry developed by Dorothy E. Smith in response to the theoretically driven and dominant mainstream sociology that Smith claims is still strongly influenced by positivist ideals and principles (Smith, 2005; 1999, pp. 96-130). In contrast, institutional ethnography starts in a local standpoint, aiming at exploring how individuals' actions and activities are hooked into local, trans-local and ruling relations within an institutional complex. The individual is regarded as a 'knower', and it is his or her knowledge about her work that is subject to exploration. According to Widerberg (2015), institutional ethnography invites us to set our pre-defined theories, concepts and understandings aside to avoid reproducing what we already know about the world. The quest is to discover, and thereby contribute with new and potentially transformative knowledge and insights.

Ruling relations is a core concept in institutional ethnography and can be described as objectified systems of knowledge produced by people's concerted activities, yet they are independent of particular individuals (Smith, 1999, pp.73-94; 2005). As social citizens, we often feel that our actions are structured by the institutional arrangements and practices that surround us, e.g. in legislation, norms, documents and forms. However, these arrangements do not exist on their own, but are brought about through the concerted activities of people located at different places and at different times in the institutional complex. Yet, they influence and regulate what is being done here and now. This complex coordination of activities entails an abstraction of peoples' consciousness and agency. It is this abstraction that appears as ruling. Nevertheless, ruling is an integral part of social relations, and can only be

regarded as a part of social activity. How ruling occurs can therefore best be understood by studying how institutional arrangements are incorporated into the daily activities of the people that are a part of the institutional complex.

In modern welfare states, most institutional arrangements are textual or textually-mediated, so texts are therefore important parts of the concerting of activities. Smith (2006) points out that texts bridge the local and the trans-local, the observable and the discursive. The text concept is used in a generous sense, comprising words, images, figures, sounds, etc., with the common feature being that it has a replicable material form. In institutional ethnography, the focus is on how texts contribute to the coordination and concerting of subjectivities, consciousness and activities across both time and space, and not on the texts as such (Smith & Turner, 2014). Central in this respect is the 'text-reader conversation' (Smith, 2005), which concerns how the individual activates and recognizes texts, devotes meaning to them and reflects about them. Texts are regarded as occurrences that are part of a chain of actions. By focusing on the text-reader conversation, it is possible to obtain insight into how the individual's consciousness is hooked into trans-local and ruling relations. Here, it is what the text 'does' or makes happen that is the focus of interest.

However, the text is not only always present in a material form in the text-reader conversation, but also as a mediator to a certain institutional discourse or as an ideological code. One example is the mothering discourse, mediated through women's magazines, newspaper articles, television shows, commercials, etc., as well as through letters and guidelines from the school (Griffith & Smith, 2005). Smith argues that the mothering discourse is informed by the notion of a standard North American family, consisting of children and two parents of opposite gender, and where the father is the main breadwinner. This notion, she argues, represents an ideological code, i.e. a replicable schematic understanding that structures the language of texts (Smith, 1999, pp. 157-171). Like material texts, textually-mediated institutional discourses and ideological codes are a part of ruling relations.¹

Institutional discourses do not predict actions, but they contribute to rendering some actions more institutionally accountable than others (Smith, 2005). In order for the street-level bureaucrats to justify their actions, for instance an intervention aimed at

enhancing better motor skills in a child, it is crucial that their actions are documented and rendered accountable. The increase in the use of testing and assessment tools in kindergartens and other institutions, what Turmel (2008) refers to as the textual inscription of children, has to be seen in light of this regime of accountability. Commonly, such tools are based upon specific programmes or methods that claim to be scientific, yet also serve certain commercial interests.² The objective of most of the tools is to enhance learning and development in the children, and to identify areas of improvement. Typically they are based on a specific understanding of normalcy, which has its roots in developmental psychology and pediatrics, and in particular the work of Arnold Gesell and Jean Piaget. Similarly, a specific notion of normalcy also exists when it comes to the children's home environment. Certain parental practices and family structures are regarded as more acceptable than others.³ It is the responsibility of people who work with children in the front-line institutions to intervene if a child's home environment is considered to be detrimental to his or her development or safety, and indeed so if the child is suspected to be subjected to violence, whether physical, psychological or sexual. In such cases, the kindergarten staff has a judicial responsibility to report concerns to the child welfare service (CWS). Nevertheless, compared to the assessment of, e.g. a child's language or motor skills, in which standardized tools are easily available, the assessment of the home environment is far more difficult and the grey shades between right and wrong, and good and bad, are wide. Indeed, some studies indicate that professionals in Norwegian schools and kindergartens are more reluctant to report worries regarding 'family issues' than delayed development, and that a language to identify and express such worries is missing (e.g. Olsen & Jentoft, 2013; Backe-Hansen, 2009; Bø & Løge, 2009). In the examples below, we will see how worries regarding children's family situations are subject to negotiation. The analytical quest has been to see how worries are structured by certain relations of ruling that come into play as people working with children activate different institutional discourses.

Methodology

The project on which the analysis is based is an institutional ethnography of how the kindergarten staff, in collaboration with other professionals, interprets and

implements the principle of early intervention. My empirical starting point is the kindergarten staff's worries for children. In this context, the concept of 'worry' is an institutional term frequently used in welfare institutions for children (e.g. kindergartens, schools, health stations) to describe a feeling of anxiety or concern for a child, or a 'bad gut feeling', as many people I interviewed put it. The data collection followed a discovery design, in which one clue led to another, resembling, as Campbell and Gregor (2004) suggest, the work of a detective. Starting within the standpoint of the kindergarten staff, I set out to trace how their experiences of worry were hooked into trans-local and ruling relations, and how these relations influenced on the experiences of the kindergarten staff, aiming at obtaining knowledge about the links between local actions and the institutional processes these actions are part of. I collected data at two levels, starting with the kindergarten staff, and moving on to other sites in the institutional complex that constitute early intervention. Based on the view that the methodological design in institutional ethnography should allow for a great deal of flexibility (see McCoy, 2006), I did not collect data in a strict and procedural manner, but freely moved between the two levels and between different sites in the institutional complex.

The recruitment of informants started in four kindergartens located in two municipalities in southern Norway. The enrolment rate in Norwegian kindergartens is high; in 2014, more than 80% of children aged 1-2 and almost 97% of children aged 3-5 attended kindergarten (ssb.no).⁴ The enrolment rate in the two municipalities studied is in line with the national norm. The data include in-depth interviews with 14 core informants employed in the kindergartens, including two who were interviewed twice individually; two focus groups interviews with the kindergarten staff (including the core informants), as well as a number of informal chats; four individual interviews and two focus group interviews with representatives from the child welfare service (CWS), the pedagogical-psychological service (PPS) and the public health service; ad-hoc individual and focus group interviews with experts and representatives from the municipality authorities; observation at staff meetings and inter-professional meetings; in addition to different documents that were rendered relevant as the data collection progressed. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, I took field notes from the observations and all informants provided written consent.

For this article's purpose, I will focus on an inter-professional meeting and four interviews with core informants. These examples were chosen because they are suitable to elucidate a general finding in the data, namely that there seem to be two dominant institutional discourses related to early intervention which people working with children activate to justify different interventions. The point is to uncover how local actions are part of an institutional complex that transcends the local. Therefore, although the examples may to some extent be considered representative of the data as a whole, it is not my intention to generalize based on this analysis. Rather, my intention is to generate knowledge about how local actions are intertwined with- and make sense in relation to actions outside the local context in order 'to reorganize the social relations of knowledge of the social so that people can take that knowledge up as an extension of our ordinary knowledge of the local actualities of our lives' (Smith, 2005, p. 29). Hence, I have sought to grasp the accounts of the work that is being done, and how it is integrated in local and trans-local relations (cf. McCoy, 2006). The comparison of the examples revolves around how people who work with children are involved in different ruling relations, and incorporates an analysis of the role of texts and institutional discourses.

The discourse of intervention

For the purpose of strengthening the professionals' ability to identify children of concern, which is a main objective of early intervention, the policy-makers in one of the municipalities took the initiative to implement a specific method (the Kvello method) to be used among people employed in different welfare institutions for children. The description below is from my observation at an interdisciplinary meeting that took place in one of the kindergartens in which this method was used:

There is a meeting in the kindergarten this morning among some of the kindergarten staff, the public health nurse, a physiotherapist, a representative from the pedagogical-psychological service (PPS) and one from the child welfare service (CWS). The intention is to discuss their observations of the children in the kindergarten after a three-hour observation session that took place a few weeks ago. The observation and subsequent meeting follow a specific design, named 'Kvello' after the expert who invented the programme it is a part of. The intention of the programme is to strengthen the kindergarten staff's ability to identify children with special needs and to enhance a better professional collaboration between the kindergartens and other welfare institutions in order to implement appropriate interventions when needed. Most of the representatives at the meeting have attended lectures by the same expert, as well as reading his book.

After a long round of clarifications involving which children whose parents have consented to the observation and who can consequently be discussed, the representatives go through a list of children while advocating the concerns they might have for each individual child. For most of the children, they agree that there are no major concerns. But for some of the children, there are worries to attend to. It is the representatives outside the kindergarten who have conducted the observations and who are eligible to voice their concerns, with a particular attention towards children that the kindergarten staff has already expressed worry for. The kindergarten staff is there to clarify, elaborate, seek advice, discuss interventions and reflect upon their behaviour in relation to the child.

During the discussion, the representatives recurrently turn to a list of risk factors copied from the expert's book. For most of the children they discuss, several of the risk factors seem to apply, e.g. the child has divorced and/or unemployed parents, the main caregiver has a history of drug abuse and/or psychological distress, the child is unable to take part in certain activities or has difficulties being included in the peer group. In addition, the representatives at the meeting pay attention to signs of neglect, for instance clothes that are lacking, messy or dirty hair, unhealthy teeth, etc. The list of risk factors is used to substantiate and support their worries. Thus, departing from their observations they turn to the list to confirm that the things they have noticed about the child in question are listed as risk factors. But they also pay attention to a list of protective factors from the same book, e.g. that a child is popular among peers and has good social skills, or that a father, despite divorce and family conflict, is caring and patient with his child. The lists seem to guide their attention and to aid them in assessing their observations. For the most part there is consensus about which children should be attended to, and where interventions are needed. The discussions tend to revolve around which interventions are currently in place, which ones that are most appropriate, the timing of interventions and whose responsibility it is to make sure that the child gets the assistance needed.

The problem, from which the political focus on early intervention derives, revolves around actions that are *not* taken. Why has no one intervened when a child is suffering from poor care? Why has no one taken action to improve a child's delayed language development? Initiatives to improve the identification of children 'at risk', like the above meeting is an example of, are considered important measures to enhance early intervention and to prevent inadequate development or detrimental life conditions for children. The responsibility of people working with children in that respect is clearly stated in government documents, including several white papers (e.g. Ministry of Education white papers no. 18 (2010-2011) and no.16 (2006-2007)). In order to identify children of concern, kindergarten staff, teachers, public health nurses, etc. have to look for risk factors in relation to individual children, and they have to know what to look for. The title of a book by a former minister for children and

families, Inga Marte Thorkildsen, puts it on the edge when she twists the saying 'You will not believe in until you see it' into 'You will not see it until you believe it' (Thorkildsen, 2015). In other words, in order to identify detrimental life conditions, such as violence and neglect, the kindergarten staff, teachers, public health nurses, social workers, etc. have to recognize that it exists and be willing to face it. The institutional discourse, which is mediated through the government documents mentioned above, and processed in educational programmes like 'Kvello', is one that calls for a responsibility to judge and act in the best interest of the child. Failing to do so reduces the accountability of kindergartens as welfare institutions in the frontline with the specific assignment to ensure a positive development for children below school age.

The lists of risk factors and protective factors exemplify how texts enter into a chain of actions, linking what is going on locally to trans-local and ruling relations. The lists can be regarded as lower order texts that are connected to texts or textually-mediated discourses of higher order, i.e. governmental and scientific documents that depart from a certain scientific knowledge about the conditions under which children develop and can reach their potential. In Western societies, this knowledge is particularly rooted in developmental psychology and pediatrics (Turmel, 2008; Rose, 2005; Burman 1994). In line with this knowledge system, certain understandings of what is good, normal and acceptable have emerged, and serve as guiding principles when a child's development or home environment is assessed. The obligation to intervene occurs when something is deviating from this norm, when children are perceived to be 'at risk' because they do not fit into the prescribed categories of normalcy. A specific category of children is implicitly constructed, mediated through programmes and methods such as 'Kvello', with the institutional term most commonly used to describe it being 'children at risk'. It is when the textually mediated risk factors are applied on a child that he or she becomes a 'child at risk' (Hacking, 2000; 2002). The categories and institutional terms that are used cannot be separated from the institutional context in which they appear and the systems of knowledge that dominate in that context. The gaze of people working in these institutions - how they understand and evaluate what they see and how they act - will be informed by the ruling relations of which the institution is a part. Indeed, the kindergarten staff,

nurses, social workers, etc. are themselves a part of the ruling relations when they relate to- and use the textually-mediated categories and institutional terms.

As street-level bureaucrats, the kindergarten staff is encouraged to be alert to such 'risk factors'. A dominant institutional discourse in that respect is that of identifying and taking action against deviations from the good, normal and acceptable. I will refer to this institutional discourse as 'the discourse of intervention'. A quote from the interview with the kindergarten teacher, Anna, may further illustrate how this discourse enters into the local. Here, Anna activates the standard Norwegian family as an ideological code (Smith, 1999, pp. 157-171):

I sometimes think that the norm seems to be two working parents, like typically middle-class. So you automatically think that these children will do it well, right. But when you meet a single mother with a different cultural background you think that, 'Shoot, here we have to help out', or that you have to be alert.

Departing from a similar notion of 'good families' and 'troubled families', Kari draws attention to how such constructions may fool us:

Well, you can say that those who struggle, you have for instance those who have an explicit need for help from the child welfare services or similar...But the families that are better off chose different activities for their children. They attend ballet and things like that, whereas the others hardly do anything. (...) I have been thinking different things about that. Even in the best families there can be things that make it difficult for the children. Meanwhile, those who appear to struggle may have children who are surrounded by love. So it can go both ways. We have examples of that.

The quotes from the interviews with Anna and Kari illustrate how certain dominant understandings of good and bad, or nourishing and detrimental, influence on their alertness towards different children. While some easily fall into the 'at risk' category based on certain clearly defined family attributes, other children, from families that are perceived as 'good', are expected to succeed. In other words, the constructions that the discourse of intervention relies on may not only draw attention *towards* certain risk factors, but also *away from* signs that may also indicate risk, but which have not been constructed as risk factors within the institutional context they are a part of.

The next example illustrates how the discourse of intervention can come into conflict with another dominant institutional discourse in the kindergarten sector, which I shall refer to as 'the discourse of diversity'.

The discourse of diversity

Stine is a kindergarten teacher. The following account is taken from an interview in which she tells about an incident that happened in the kindergarten:

Stine: Since I am married to a foreign man and have lived abroad, I am not afraid to speak my mind. Like when a child came with a bruise on the upper part of her butt - her skin was blue - I asked her, when I was helping her at the toilet, what happened. 'Daddy slapped me', she said. This was a foreign girl. 'Oh?' I said, trying not to put the words in her mouth. 'So what happened?' 'Daddy got mad and he slapped me'. And fortunately then, I am not afraid to tell her father when he comes to pick her up. 'Your girl says this and this, just so that you are aware. Is that right?' 'No, it's not, she is just blue. But yes, I struggle, and I did slap her once.' I could ask because I know him, I felt that I could trust him. If he had been a total stranger, someone I didn't know, then I would have had to leave it for a while. (...)

Ann: So what happens normally after? Do you think that one slap is one too many, and that you have to contact the child welfare service, or....

Stine: Well, if it is the first time we hear about it I think it is important to discuss it with the parents. Because everyone can lose their temper, I think, and you don't have to make a whole programme running after the first incident. You have to listen to your gut feeling, the personal aspect. Do you know them well, or not? Do you know their history, or not? I think it is important to talk with the parents, but putting it gently so that you can get some more information from them. I could tell this father because I knew him well. And I know their culture. And I know the girl well. (...) But I trusted what she said. So I wanted the father to know that I was paying attention. That even a slap is unacceptable in Norway. That we have rules against that. I wanted the father to know. And it has not been a problem after that.

The incident that Stine describes concerns a father slapping his daughter. Understood as an incident of physical violation, this is clearly a risk factor according to the list mentioned above. When kindergarten staff discovers that children are subject to violence they have a judicial obligation to notify the child welfare service. However, as Stine explains, it is sometimes wiser to discuss the incident with the parents first. Stine refers to her gut feeling and her knowledge of the family and their background, and we can suspect that she implicitly considers the protective factors surrounding the girl. Acknowledging that this family has a different cultural background, Stine explains to the father of the child that slapping children is illegal and considered inappropriate in Norway and leaves it, at least so far, at that. However, the incident has obviously made Stine alert. The fact that the father has an immigrant background, and has admitted to having slapped his daughter, makes Stine pay attention. The daughter arguably belongs to the textually-mediated 'at risk' category.

The interview with Stine is interesting, not only because of the incident described and her reflections about it, but also because she speaks frankly about her confidence, that she dares to discuss her concern with the parents. Implicitly, she says that this cannot be taken for granted. The other interviews I have conducted indicate that Stine is right. The kindergarten staff is open-minded towards children and families of other cultures, they cherish the diversity and are reluctant to judge different parental practices as detrimental. As a consequence, voicing concern seems to be less of an option. An account from the interview with the kindergarten assistant, Lise, in which she talks about a group of refugees who has settled in their municipality, illustrates this:

Lise: It is so nice that we are different, the diversity. And it is nice that there are children of different colours in the kindergarten. (...) We tell [the children] that differences are good, that it is good to be different. And when children who look different come, they see that the adults accept it and that they are just like us. It is just the looks that differ. (...)

Ann: They might have a different parenting style...

Lise: Yes, they have a completely different style. They are shocked to see how independent our children are. Because they carry them until they are very big, or what we call big. And to them the time speaks for itself, so if the child is tired she can sleep whether it is five or four in the afternoon. (...)

Ann: Can it be challenging? Children who don't fit in?

Lise: It has gone relatively smoothly. But they do fall on the outside many times, I feel. That they are not... But it depends on the group. I don't know how to explain. It is good and bad. But it is very exciting!

Whereas predictability, routines and encouraging independence are ideals that are high on the agenda in Norwegian kindergartens, as well as in parent counselling, Lise does not seem to worry when she describes how the refugee children are raised differently. Instead, she finds the differences exciting and educational.

Neither Stine nor Lise refer to any specific texts in their accounts. Nevertheless, their actions are clearly hooked into the textually-mediated institutional discourse of diversity. Diversity and inclusion are important concepts in different higher level texts in the institutional complex of day care. For instance, the Framework Plan, which is the common kindergarten curriculum in Norway, states that: *'Staff are responsible for ensuring that all children, regardless of their level of functioning, age, gender and family background, feel that they and everyone else in the group are important to the*

community. Kindergartens shall provide an environment in which different individuals and different cultural expressions meet with respect for their differences. Looking at differences and similarities can help to foster understandings and insights. Encountering something that is different from yourself allows you to develop a positive curiosity about the similarities and differences between people and cultures' (Ministry of Education and Research, 2011, p. 20). Furthermore the Ministry of Education and Research has developed a pamphlet about linguistic and cultural diversity, in which the importance of having a resource perspective is strongly emphasized (Gjervan, 2006). The core message in the institutional discourse of diversity is that differences should be valued and encouraged. When Stine and Lise talk about their actions, they replicate the rhetoric of this discourse, prioritizing tolerance for differences over a rigid adherence to rules and standardized perceptions. Lise's response to the different parenting practices of the refugee families in the kindergarten exemplify how her subject position is structured by the discourse of diversity. According to this discourse, diversity is supposed to be exciting and educational, not worrisome and challenging. The institutional discourse of diversity is one that calls for a responsibility to tolerate differences and celebrate diversity, giving each individual child and family an opportunity to make choices that differ from the norm.

Detrimental or different?

The institutional discourse of intervention, mediated through texts as diverse as white papers and heart-breaking media reports, calls for alertness to factors that can be detrimental to the child. The accountability of people in welfare institutions working with children lies in their ability to identify, judge and take action if a child is suspected of suffering or not developing adequately, based on a standardized notion of what is normal, good and acceptable. On the other hand, the institutional discourse of diversity, which is also mediated through diverse texts, and in particular higher order texts in the kindergarten sector such as the Framework Plan, calls for a tolerance for behaviours that deviate from standard Euro-centric and stage-based developmental frames.

The difficulty of knowing how to act in the best interest of the child lies in the encounter between these two institutional discourses. The discourses inform the gaze of the people working with children in different ways. What they see and how they act depends on which discourse they activate. An implication of this is that children are understood and treated differently, particularly when comparing children in minority and majority cultures in Norway. This is not only a challenge in Norway, but also occurs in other Scandinavian countries where diversity and inclusion are high on the political agenda. For example, in their ethnographic study of kindergartens in Denmark, Bundgaard and Gulløv (2006) find that there exists a paradox in how minority children are met. On the one hand the kindergarten staff undermines differences between the children based on the understanding that all children are alike and should be treated the same way. On the other hand, the minority children's behaviour is interpreted differently from the behaviour of majority children. Whereas the behaviour of majority children is explained in light of their family background or family problems, such as divorce, unemployment, drug abuse, etc. – i.e. individualistic explanations - there is a tendency to turn to collective explanations for the minority children, thus rendering relevant stereotypical ideas about 'their culture'. In this instance, culture seems to act like an ideological code, rendering some behaviours more acceptable than others in diverse contexts. Like the interviews with Stine and Lise, this bears witness to a similar cultural stereotyping that can be found in Norwegian kindergartens. Addressing problems at an individual level is obviously more tangible than addressing problems at a collective level. Hence, Bundgaard and Gulløv find that kindergarten staff tends to adopt a compensating approach in relation to the minority children, departing from a normative notion of what is appropriate Danish (middle-class) behaviour for children at different ages. Lunneblad (2013) finds the same in the Swedish kindergarten sector. The danger of this approach, he warns, is that we risk veiling the experiences and competencies children might have (for better or worse) that deviate from the norm. Similarly, in her study of how minority children are treated in the Norwegian kindergarten, Lauritsen (2011) discovered two dominant narratives. The narrative of worry is concerned with children who do not fit in, and who are perceived as difficult, challenging or even terrifying. By contrast, the narrative of negation is about differences being undermined and neglected. What these studies have in common is that they uncover the complexity of celebrating diversity, while at the same time

behaving in accordance with the ideology of equality that is predominant in Scandinavia, and upon which the obligation to early intervention relies. Implicitly, there is a risk of ignoring detrimental life conditions that affect minority children in particular, under the pretext of a tolerance for diversity.

Subsequent to her account about her observation of the bruise on a girl's butt, when I asked Stine whether she thought she would have reacted differently if the child had a majority cultural background, she quickly responded that she would not. Equal treatment is a core ideal throughout the educational sector in Norway, which Stine seems to endorse. Whether or not she would actually react the same way is a topic for mere speculation. However, the two institutional discourses in question could justify both equal and different reactions. The institutional discourse of intervention could justify an intervention from the child welfare services (CWS) based on the single fact that the child has been subject to violence, and that the father admits that he struggles. These are individualistic explanations, and clearly in line with the textually-mediated risk factors referred to in the interdisciplinary meeting of the first example. Building on the study by Bundgaard and Gulløv mentioned above, it is more likely that this institutional discourse would be activated if the child in question belonged to the majority culture. However, the institutional discourse of diversity calls for a tolerance of parental practices that are different, and although deviating from the majority norm, may not be defined as detrimental. Such tolerance is arguably difficult to admit unless the family has a minority background. Stine's decision to tell the father about her worry and inform him about which rules he has to abide by in Norway may well be justified along this line, but would perhaps be more difficult to justify if the parent in question had a majority background and could be expected to be familiar with the majority norms of parenting.

By activating different texts and institutional discourses through the text-reader conversation, people working in kindergartens or other welfare institutions take part in ruling relations. Whether they are worried about a child, and how they chose to react, is a question of which discourses and texts they activate, and hence, how they negotiate and interact in the ruling relations. It is worth noting that people do not uncritically abide by these discourses. They may question them or be in opposition to them. Though disputed, the discourses are nevertheless present and influence what

people do. The quote from the interview with Kari, in which she is questioning the hegemony of the standard Norwegian family, may serve as an example.

In modern welfare states, or what Griffith and Smith (2014) refer to as the 'managerial state', ruling has to be seen in light of the concept of accountability, which is rooted in a neo-liberal ideology. Within this regime it is how the street-level bureaucrats' actions are documented and justified that is at stake. The point of this article has not been to deem some actions as more institutionally accountable than others, but rather to depict the landscape in which these decisions have to be made. In so doing, it is possible to see why street-level bureaucrats, perhaps unintentionally, can end up treating children with different backgrounds unequally.

Concluding remarks

There is political consensus in Norway about the importance of early intervention. The goal is to reduce the effects of social differences through interventions targeted at children early in life. The discourse of intervention is consequently geared on discovering children who might be eligible for such interventions, children who are 'at risk'. During the last decade, an abundance of programmes, methods and tools aimed at assisting people who work with children to discover children in the 'at risk' category have been developed. Intertwined, a certain institutional language has emerged, leading the gaze of the professionals in specific directions.

It might seem paradoxical that a discourse of diversity has developed alongside the discourse of intervention. In many respects, the two discourses are contrasting; one oriented towards the limits of normalcy, focusing on differences as potentially detrimental, and the other oriented towards embracing differences as something benign and educational, as a positive resource for the individual and society. In this article, my intention has been to uncover how these discourses enter into the decision-making processes in the local contexts of people in the frontline of our welfare institutions, and who are responsible for rendering their actions accountable for a public audience. What they see and how they act is a question of which institutional discourses they activate.

Being aware that these two discourses co-exist, and that they may justify different actions, is itself important. Moreover, being aware that the discourses can justify different actions for different people is perhaps even more important. The two discourses give people working with children several choices, and a reflective practitioner should question herself about what she sees when she is worried about a child, why she sees this (and not something else), and which different actions her observations might justify. The discourses are activated when children are being classified, e.g. to be 'at risk' or to be refugees. How they are classified has consequences for how they are treated. Questioning our categories and the institutional discourses that structure our ways of classifying people is therefore of the utmost importance if we are serious about giving children equal opportunities.

End notes

1. It can be difficult to distinguish the concept of discourse in institutional ethnography from that of discourse analysis, and in particular critical discourse analysis (e.g. Fairclough 1992). Indeed, Smith points out that she has borrowed the concept from discourse analysis (Smith 2005, 2012c). In institutional ethnography, the role of texts is crucial, and texts tend to be included in the analysis, also when the texts are hidden. Smith and Turner (2014) emphasize that the concept of text in institutional ethnography is restricted to material objects that can be reproduced and circulated. However, contradictory to critical discourse analysis, as well as discourse analysis in a broader sense, institutional ethnographers do not study the texts or textually mediated discourses in themselves, but instead are devoted to study how texts and textually-mediated discourses are integrated into the concerting and coordination of activities, and in particular how they take part in ruling relations. Hence, the starting point in an institutional ethnography is always the local setting, and not the discourse.
2. The explosive expansion of the kindergarten sector in Norway over the last decades has been accompanied by an abundance of profit-based educational programmes, testing tools, etc. Claiming to serve in the best interest of children and society, these intervention programmes and testing tools are widely used in kindergartens throughout the country, and is good business for the suppliers, see Pettersvold and Østrem (2012) for a critical discussion.
3. There exist a number of different programmes aimed at enhancing and promoting positive parenting styles, e.g. PMTO (Parent Management Training - Oregon) and ICDP (International Child Development Programme). Some of these programmes were mentioned as existing or possible interventions in the interviews I conducted, especially in relation to families who received assistance from an interdisciplinary team. At one meeting, a discussion about whether the kindergarten staff should be trained in one of these programmes took place.
4. Kindergarten in Norway is not free of charge, but strongly subsidized by the state, and with reduced costs for low-income families. As a result, children from all social categories attend kindergarten. In 2006, the responsibility for the kindergarten sector was moved from the Ministry of Families to the Ministry of Education, thus underscoring the educational dimension of kindergarten attendance. Still, the ideals of play, care, natural growth and development are highly valued in the kindergarten sector in Norway (Seland 2009). In this article, I use the term kindergarten for day care services aimed at children below school age, since it is the term that is most commonly used in public documents, e.g. the Framework Plan. It is important to note that kindergarten in Norway comprises children from 1 to 6 years old, which is the age for compulsory school entry.

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