



# Unnoticed Professional Competence in Day Care Work

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## ABSTRACT

*This article presents a double perspective on social educators' professional competence: It discusses how everyday life in day care centres (preschools) is dependent on professional competences that can be conceived as "unnoticed." These aspects of professional competence are embedded in routines, experiences and embodied forms of knowledge. However, it may be discussed whether these competences are under pressure from increased demands for documentation, standardization and evaluation of children's learning outcomes. The article will briefly outline this development in the day care sector, followed by a discussion of unnoticed professional competence and the related notion of gestural knowledge. The double perspective on social educators' professional competences will be illuminated by empirical examples from a research project involving social educators from two day care centres in Denmark.*

## KEY WORDS

*Unnoticed professional competence / day care centres / welfare work / New Public Management / professionalization*

*"It had nothing to do with pedagogy - I just had to take care of children."* This was how a student described her experiences from her workplace training in a day care centre. The quote reflects a widespread understanding that the work of social educators can be divided into a number of practical or caring responsibilities on the one hand and the real professional tasks on the other. Thus, the important professional competencies are seen

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as primarily the planned educational activities, as opposed to the practical and caring tasks, such as receiving children in the morning, changing nappies or helping children to be self-reliant, ensuring that all children get something to eat, watching children in the playground, etc.

This separation and hierarchization of different aspects of social educators' professional competence has increased following the implementation of national learning curricula and further demands for documentation and evaluation of children's learning outcome in day care centres. The article explores whether it can be argued that professional competence must be seen as competence that involves all aspects of the work of social educators. It examines whether the unnoticed aspects of professional competence are not only embedded in the practical and caring activities but also play an important role in the planned educational activities.

The article contributes to the growing interest in researching professional competences of "welfare workers" (in the educational, health, and care sectors). Our focus on unnoticed professional competence (Ahrenkiel et al 2012) is an example of attempts to understand the nature of work of professionals, beyond the formal descriptions of qualifications and competences. The political and institutional framework becomes important to analyze in order to understand whether and how it affects the unnoticed aspects of professional competence. For the work of social educators, this means exploring the changes day care centres have been undergoing in recent years.

## The regulation of day care centres

Day care centres have a central function in modern society, not least because of the need for institutions to take care of children while both parents are working. Especially in Northern Europe this development has led to most children attending day care centres from the age of one until they start school. Just like other parts of the public sector in health, care and education, day care is regulated politically and is a contested terrain (Miller & Rose 2008) with a variety of actors trying to influence the development of day care centres (Dahlberg & Moss 2005). An "investment paradigm" (Karila 2012) seems to have developed in the day care sector in many European countries, including Scandinavia, focusing on the development of children's competencies to prepare them for competition in a globalized knowledge economy.

The development of an "investment paradigm" can be seen in connection with how neoliberal governance and New Public Management in the Danish (and other European) welfare states have developed over the past 20 years (Campbell & Pedersen 2001). Several key reforms have had both structural consequences and implications for everyday working life in the public sector. The Danish Quality Reform of 2007 was launched in the desire to allow employees and management freedom to choose how they would live up to key government targets. The Quality Reform further developed contract management as a tool to create quality, implying also that quality is identified as a target that can be quantified (Andersen & Sand 2012). The reform has been met with criticism because bureaucratic governance simply assumed new forms involving standards, benchmarking, accreditation, etc. It has been considered a paradox that the rhetorical liberation has been wrapped up in powerful governance and control (Andersen et al 2008).

The neoliberal element of privatization has not been strong in the day care sector in Denmark compared to the experience of some other countries such as Norway. Some of the privatization in Denmark is the result of parents' dissatisfaction with developments in local day care centres. They have established private institutions, where it is easier to avoid control by the local council to some extent, but in fact central legislation for day care centres also applies to private institutions. In Denmark large service corporations have tried to run day care centres, but stopped these initiatives supposedly because they found there was too much resistance from the unions and generally a critical political attitude. Some found that the companies had not taken the well-established Danish day care traditions into account and were therefore unable to run the day care centres in a pedagogically responsible manner (Ugebrevet A4 2003).

In the day care sector, various statutory requirements have been introduced and the redefinition by the Government's Day Care Services Act of day care centres from day care *institutions* to day care *service suppliers* is symptomatic of the growing market-, service-, and customer-oriented thinking that characterizes welfare services (Pedersen 2006). This might seem to be an innocent change; however, it can be seen as a symptom of the transformation of societal institutions to service contractors and the marketization of public services with customer and supplier relationships. A concrete example of this development can be seen in the removal of the day care centres' own web sites, often adorned with children's drawings, photos and stories. These have been replaced by anonymous council web sites with a focus on comparative data and descriptions of curricula, etc. The steering logic behind this is to enable consumers to compare the "products."

Among the most recent requirements for day care centres are: language assessments of three-year-olds and language stimulation programs for children with insufficient language skills, and the child's benefit from such programs must be documented. The children's environment must be evaluated, with a review at least every three years. Educational curricula for young children in six specified areas must be developed. The six themes are The comprehensive personal development of the child, Social competencies, Language, Body and motion, Nature and natural phenomena, Cultural expressions and values (Ministry of Social Affairs 2013). The day care centres will set targets and define methods and activities for the curricula, and the outcome of working with the six themes has to be documented and be subject to biannual evaluation, including an indication of how to follow up the results. There have to be status and development talks with parents, and local councils and day care centres are required to document the overall effort, goal achievement, and resource use in day care.

One of the rationales behind the implementation of educational curricula and the focus on development of the children's competences is to prepare children for school through organized learning activities. In some European countries like France, day care centres/preschools have always been seen as an integral part of school education in both content and organization. In the Nordic countries, however, there has been a tradition of clear separation of day care and schooling, often described as a child-centred approach with emphasis on concepts like care, relations, activities, and development (Einarsdóttir & Wagner 2006). The introduction of national curricula in Norway in 1995, Sweden in 1998, Iceland and Finland in 2000, and Denmark in 2004 has challenged this tradition with an emphasis on formal learning activities and documentation of these (Broström 2006).



## Unnoticed professional competence

The increased focus on formal learning activities in day care centres has meant a change in how professional competence is being conceived (Moss 2010). Irrespective of whether or not one considers day care to have become curriculum oriented rather than child centred, it can clearly be argued that the increased demands for documentation and evaluation of learning outcome have an impact on how social educators' competences are viewed (Jensen et al 2010). Professional competence has to live up to the demands of new steering mechanisms, and although day care centre leaders have more of the formal responsibility, the social educators are the ones that in practice carry out the tasks according to the requirements.

In research on professional competence and learning, it is generally acknowledged that there are different types of knowledge involved in working life (Billett et al 2006, Eraut 1994). "Classical" theoretical approaches that have influenced discussions on professional competence have contributed with notions like tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1958), modus 1 and 2 knowledge (Gibbons et al 1994), intuitive expertise (Dreyfus et al 1986), reflective practice (Schön 1983), practical knowledge (Bourdieu 1990), and communities of practice (Wenger 1999). In line with the same basic ambition to find appropriate notions for analyzing professional competence, we have found inspiration in the Danish researcher Birte Bech-Jørgensen's (1994) notion of "the unnoticed." We suggest the notion "unnoticed" as especially useful to describe the dimensions of work that often escape the eye that looks for measurable and easily documented curriculum-oriented activities. The "unnoticed" professional competence is reflected in welcoming the children in the morning, activities around mealtime and bedtime, changing nappies, dressing and undressing, cleaning up, etc. These activities clearly express continuity in daily routines and have great significance for the day-to-day structure. Such activities are obviously not in themselves unnoticed. But with the increasing focus on educational curricula and documentation, there will be a tendency not to see them as *professional* activities important for professional competence. In the following empirical examples we will investigate whether and how it is relevant to suggest that the importance of the unnoticed professional competence is escaping the eye in professional practice. Our assumption is that it is not only the formal system (management, the steering technologies, etc.) that does not value unnoticed professional competence. Also the social educators themselves might have difficulty in seeing and recognizing the importance of the unnoticed aspects of professional competence.

In our exploration of unnoticed professional competence, we have also found the notion of *gestural knowledge* to be useful to describe a significant dimension of day care work. This concept, as we use it here, has been developed from the theory of "sensory awareness" of the German social philosopher Rudolf zur Lippe (2000). Sensory awareness is a concept that, as the word suggests, is intended to overcome the polarization or division of body and mind without letting the two sides flow into each other. Sensory awareness is the result of a creative process centered on a bodily aesthetic experience whose essential medium is gestural. Human gesture is a significant and communicative form of expression, and gestures are not simply bodily movements, but bodily movements that combine into *gestalts* or rhythms. Further, being communicative, they are never merely individual movements, but elements of social interaction. The more commonly used term "tacit knowledge" lacks the clear communicative and interactional

aspect, and gestural knowledge also more clearly signals a close relationship with discursive forms of knowledge.

On the basis of the results of our project, we have seen how unnoticed gestural knowledge in day care work is central in two ways. The interaction with children often has strong bodily dimensions, and also the interaction between the social educators has highly gestural and collective dimensions. Working with children often involves situations where children are shown how to do things, whether it is help with clothes, drawings, or playing; also guiding children's interaction with each other includes not only verbal but also physical communication. Between the social educators in day care centres, unnoticed gestural knowledge is important for the exchange of information, intentions, and coordination during the working day. Even though much of the day can be planned, numerous spontaneous situations arise that the social educators must act upon. Much of the exchange in such situations can be described as gestural, sometimes verbally facilitated, but often it "just happens" (Ahrenkiel et al 2013).

Gestural knowledge is thus linked to the creation of *coherence* in day care work. We observed in our project many situations where the social educators were successful in creating smooth transitions from one situation to another, so that they are not perceived by the children as disruptive. These include the transition from the home to the institution where it is important to the child how this is handled. They also include transitions between different kinds of activities in the course of the day.

## Seeking out unnoticed professional competence—empirical examples

In the research project, we wanted to gain insight into how professional competence unfolds in day care centres. We decided to develop a research design combining three methodological approaches: observations of daily work practices, qualitative interviews with social educators, and a two-day workshop for each of the day care centres.<sup>1</sup> Two day care centres were chosen to provide variation in the social and educational background and ethnicity of the parents. The day care centres are located in two different areas, one with a mainly middle class/professional population, the other with a greater variety including a large proportion of low-skilled workers and immigrants.

Our observations can be described as a kind of "semi-participatory observation" (Monaco & Pontecorvo 2010) as we in varying degrees involved ourselves in the daily practice. Our starting point was to generally remain passive and observing, but many times we were addressed directly by the children, asked by the social educators to offer an extra hand, or even felt we "had" to act in certain situations, e.g., seeing a little child lying unnoticed in the playground unable to get up by himself. We carried out observations for two weeks in both day care centres from the opening in early morning until closing in late afternoon.

The interviews were semi-structured with questions on how the social educators perceived professional competence, their own professional development, and how they experienced the recent developments in their field. The interviews also included questions where we asked the social educators to reflect on some of our observations in order to get their view and interpretation of the different situations.

The workshops were organized with inspiration from so-called "research workshops" (Nielsen 2005) where the social educators were engaged in three processes:



critical perspectives on the present situation, an open utopian perspective of what child care and day care centres could be, and a realization process where the utopian perspective is re-examined with the aim of producing ideas for concrete initiatives. We as researchers then comment and introduce perspectives from research. A total of about 30 social educators participated in the interviews and workshops.

In the following, we will present and discuss empirical examples from three observations and one scene from the workshop. We have chosen these examples because they can provide insight into the double perspective on unnoticed professional competence: How unnoticed competence is embedded in daily practice and how the unnoticed competence may currently be under pressure. To underline the double perspective, we have paired the examples and discuss them in pairs. We chose not to take similar examples but rather those that complement each other. The first two examples were chosen because they show different dimensions of the possibilities and obstacles for creating coherence and the social educators' acknowledgement of unnoticed aspects of professional competence.

### The lunch

Our first example is taken from a lunch situation involving a group of three- to four-year-old children in the day care centre. In day care centres, lunch situations are often used as opportunities to focus on how children act in larger contexts. Social educators emphasize the importance of situations like lunch and afternoon breaks with snacks. Although the situations are not reflected upon as formal learning settings, in practice they function as distinct opportunities for social educators to interact with the children in larger groups and observe how they interact with each other. But mealtimes are not of great importance from the perspective of the curriculum with its scheduled learning activities.

Nina (the social educator) wants the two children Sarah and Richard to hand out plates and all the children's lunch boxes, so she leads them to the lunch trolley. All the other children are seated at the tables. When Nina asks Sarah to give a lunch box to Emily, she is about to burst into tears. Nina keeps urging Sarah to bring the lunch box to Emily, but Sarah refuses. Nina suggests that she points Emily out to Sarah. Sarah reluctantly agrees. Then Sarah and Nina both walk over to Emily and Nina hands the lunch box to her while Sarah stands next to her. Then they return to the lunch trolley and "read" the name on the next lunch box. The name is "Peter." Nina says out loud that she will now show Sarah who Peter is. Sarah takes the lunch box and a plate from the trolley and follows Nina. Nina leads her to Peter's seat, and they hand the lunch box and the plate to him together. Now Sarah dares to hand over the next lunch box to an unfamiliar and older child herself. Nina says out loud that all the children have to have received their lunch box and plate, and they have to keep quiet and wait till Sarah and Richard have said "welcome" before anybody can start to eat. After everyone has unpacked their lunch, Sarah and Richard stand at the trolley and say "welcome." Sarah is visibly relieved and proud she has managed to hand out all the lunch boxes to the other children.

Around this lunch situation many well-established routines are handled by both children and adults: rubbish bins are ready in advance, trolleys are ready, the children sit down in

fixed positions when they have finished washing their hands, etc. Sarah has experienced lunch distribution many times before and knows what should happen. But she does not dare to be the one handing out lunch boxes. Nina sees this and uses the familiar situation as a “background” to help and challenge Sarah to continue. She does so by developing the actions to be taken by Sarah gradually until Sarah finally dares to stand in front of all the children and say “*welcome*.”

Even if the lunch and the routines around it may seem just practical or banal, the social educators view them as important for the children to interact and be able to stand up in front of the rest of the children—to be responsible for the important task of organizing lunch. In the above situation, the “rules” that the social educators have set are broken: The social educator intervenes and walks around with the child until the child feels confident about doing it herself—step by step. The rule-breaking leads to a successful situation and the child is being included and acknowledged for her ability to carry out the task. If this should be “translated” into learning and competence development, the situation helps to develop the child’s social competences. Although acknowledged as important situations, lunches are not described as prime learning arenas in educational curricula. But this situation reveals that learning and competence development can indeed be in focus. The actions taken by the social educator show her reflecting that learning is part of everyday practical activities—in itself an unnoticed professional competence under pressure.

Interpreting the situation, it seems that the social educator prefers to let the situation and actions continue instead of, for example, asking another child to hand out lunch boxes or doing it herself. Discussing the situation with the social educator later, she said that she had found it “*natural*” to let the child continue in the situation and that she was well aware that the girl might have difficulty in carrying out the task. She adds that she sensed how the girl was getting increasingly nervous about the situation and that she knew her colleague shared this feeling and would “*easily understand*” her motives for intervening in the task. This could be interpreted as an example of how gestural knowledge is embedded in professional competence: both as part of the ongoing verbal and nonverbal communication with children and as the mutual understanding of the situation between the two social educators.

### **The pedagogical system Step by Step**

In the next empirical example, we follow two employees in a day care centre, a social educator and an assistant. They are conducting an exercise based on the pedagogical system *Step by Step*, in which the described goals are to develop children’s social skills, empathy, and ability to articulate their own and other children’s feelings. The scene here is from an exercise with four-year-olds. Marlene, the social educator and Norma, the assistant, use the relevant kit, consisting of a box with a series of images of children clearly showing different emotions, cards with different types of questions, and instructions on how to use the material. There are clear set rules for how to work with the pictures and how to speak and what to speak about. Children must sit on the floor in a circle, they must put up a finger when they want to say something, toys are not allowed, and several other rules. The children know the rules and hear them repeated constantly. In addition to developing children’s capacity for empathy and teaching them to verbalize,



understand, and work with emotions, the purpose is also to develop impulse control, self-control, and management of aggression through the repeated rules for ways of talking and behavior.

The children sit in a circle on the floor together with Marlene and Norma. Marlene leads the Step by Step activity. She takes a large photo poster from the Step by Step box of materials. It is a photo of a girl who looks sad. Marlene talks to the children about how the girl feels. Several children express in different ways that the girl is sad. Marlene asks the children: “When are you sad?” One of the boys, Svend, replies: “When my father is shouting in my face.” He turns around and picks up a toy. Norma says: “Svend, you need to put the toy away.” Svend does not respond, but looks down at the toy. Norma takes the toy from him. Svend gets very upset; he gets up and runs into the playroom. Norma runs after him to talk to him and after a while gets him back into the circle.

One’s immediate impression of the situation is that it is being carried out according to the intention behind it. The children understand what they are supposed to do and they join the activity without reservation. They immediately see that the girl in the photo is sad, and they can put it into words when Marlene asks about the feeling of being sad. The children appear to follow the rules laid down; they are attentive and do what is expected of them. Svend’s response to the question on what makes him sad and what he says is fully meaningful in the situation, but when he takes the toy—maybe to seek comfort—Norma chooses to focus on the rules they have set and thereby on Svend breaking the rules. In the template for Step by Step, there is little help available on how to deal with the situation that arises. There are no instructions on how to handle children’s emotional reactions, only general directions about behavior and social conventions. Norma thus chooses to stick to the rules and takes the toy away from Svend. He reacts further by leaving the circle—which is not allowed either. She follows him, trying to comfort him and bring him back to the session. However, the group’s intimacy and concentration on the exercise is broken.

Step by Step aims to teach children to manage emotions through language and recognition and in order for children to learn to recognize and handle different emotions, there are set rules for their behavior. The rules are clearly specified and in this situation the social educator adheres to them strictly. The problem is that the rules of the concept include no indication of how to handle situations like the one with Svend. By sticking strictly to the rules, the two social educators’ experience and knowledge of how to handle the difficult situation is blocked. Reflecting on the situation afterward, the social educators involved were not happy with their own reactions. They felt they had not done enough to include Svend’s reactions in the situation and they had difficulty in continuing the exercise in a meaningful way for both Svend and the rest of the children. However, they also stick to the formalities of the concept and look for a practical solution: “*Next time we should put the toys further away.*” It would be too easy to conclude that the reason for this is that the social educators are not well prepared for such things to happen or that they do not master the Step by Step system well enough. Rather, what happens is that the social educators follow the formalities and the application-oriented knowledge, while excluding their otherwise well-established competences and knowledge of how to engage with the individual child and respond to emotional expressions and at the same time keep the collective activity in mind. Reflecting on the situation later,

one of the social educators said: *“Of course we know why Svend reacts the way he does, the difficulty is both having a focus on the projects we work with and the individual child’s needs. The two things sometimes clash.”*

There seems to be a connection between the increased focus on evidence-based competence development, the implementation of pedagogical concepts, and what the social educators focus their attention on. The emphasis on learning curricula in day care centres is linked to an increase in the implementation of many different pedagogical systems and concepts. Fixed and well-described methods can come in handy when there is a need to document and evaluate. Many of these systems or concepts—Marte Meo, Step by Step, Work Assessment Method, Multiple Intelligences, Common Language, just to name a few—are not new but are increasingly being implemented. Common to the pedagogical systems—or learning technologies—is the fact that they facilitate a direct link to the increased interest in using evidence-based knowledge and ensuring academic quality through controlled processes as a way to professionalize the work of social educators (Biesta 2007). The systems provide solutions to some of the demands social educators are facing from politicians, administrators, parents, and colleagues. The pedagogical systems work well in making intentions transparent to parents through the predefined set of values and the corresponding template for how the work of social educators is to be carried out. But the templates also have a downside—they risk fixing social educators’ work in a set pattern, thus preventing professional development and the ability to adapt their actions to the situation. This involves the risk of excluding the professional competences and knowledge embedded in everyday practices.

### Comparing the two examples

In both of the two empirical examples, unnoticed professional competence is involved. Unnoticed professional competence and knowledge means having a common perspective on both the individual child and the group of children as a whole; it is knowledge and experience of how you best engage with children when they express strong emotions, knowledge about how you work with a colleague, etc. These unnoticed aspects can work either with or against formal, theoretical knowledge on the same issues. If the theoretical knowledge is embedded in working with a specific pedagogical system like the Step by Step exercise, the danger is that the unnoticed knowledge is suppressed and the necessary combination of types of knowledge is lost. When we take the two examples and combine them with the analyses by ourselves (Ahrenkiel et al 2012) and others (Jensen et al 2010) of developments in the day care sector, it seems that the learning and competence agenda tend to put pressure on unnoticed professional competence and knowledge. This pressure may lead to activities being carried out in too rigid interpretations of pedagogical systems, which further adds to the process of suppressing unnoticed professional competence.

The Step by Step exercise observed came close to creating exactly the opposite of coherence, namely a disintegration of the situation leading to a breakdown and a missed opportunity to include the child’s reactions. The formal rules were kept to, but this formality stood in clear contrast to the emotional elements and thus led to what could be interpreted as a lack of coherence. In the lunch situation, the social educator draws highly on her unnoticed professional competence and knowledge when she allows rules



to be broken, resulting in a situation which develops successfully. The social educator was able to create coherence because she caught the unexpected turn and developed it into a powerful (learning) experience for the child and at the same time managed to maintain her focus on the group of children. If she had not been able to improvise and lead the child and keep the overall goal of the “exercise” for all the children in mind, the situation could very well have led to a similar loss of coherence and rhythm in the activities. In the two situations, the children react strongly with gestures and in the Step by Step exercise the social educators’ response does not meet the child’s needs, thus leading to the breakdown of the situation. In contrast, in the lunch situation, the social educator chose to respond and follow the child’s gestural communication, resulting in a transformation of the child’s expression of embarrassment and sadness (at not being able to carry out the task) to obvious pride and happiness. Gestural knowledge thus played an important role in both situations, but with different consequences.

The Step by Step exercise was carried out in a strict rule-based manner, whereas the lunch scene involved more flexible and self-defined regulations where the social educator improvised and bent the rules. Everyday life in day care centres is full of different types of regulations, but rules and regulations are also broken or “bent” all the time; we observed numerous examples of this and it was also a recurring theme in interviews and workshops. Social educators must constantly make decisions on whether or not to interfere and regulate or to stand back and let the situations develop in their own rhythm and structure. In some situations, the social educators discuss what should be done and sometimes the assessment and decision of the moment is made by one social educator. This judgment and decision have an influence on the children and the other social educators, and observations and interviews reveal the importance of the social educators having shared knowledge about the impact and consequences of the decisions. We have tried to capture this with the notion of gestural knowledge, which includes both verbal and nonverbal communication in the context of a variety of actions and decisions being made. If one social educator out in the playground thinks it important to accompany a child indoors, this must be aligned with the other educators who for their part must understand the consequences (for example that they now have to take over the responsibility of an outdoor activity). The actions and decisions of social educators are closely interrelated; this is rooted in the highly collective nature of their work. In the following, we will discuss two examples of how the collective orientation in day care work is manifested and connected to the unnoticed competence.

### **Collective development of professional competence—empirical examples**

Day care work is collective or collaborative in a special way which differentiates it from most other types of work. Most of the working day the social educators directly “work together,” meaning that they are together with other social educators and the children in the same room or in the playground. They constantly need to adjust and coordinate their actions both verbally and tacitly. The notion of gestural knowledge captures the exchange of intentions between the social educators. It is developed over time in the shared practice among social educators and is a central part of the unnoticed professional competence.

The development of gestural knowledge is not just a result of practical knowledge shared in everyday practice. It is also developed as a product of the social educators' educational background and, e.g., participation in courses. However, in our study, we focus on everyday practice in day care centres and how the development of professional competence is dependent on the social educators' time and space to discuss everyday life experiences and share views on pedagogy, activities, etc. Social educators take the opportunity to exchange information on adjusting plans during the day, but these situations seemingly cannot allow for more thorough discussions. Among social educators, the discussion among colleagues of daily work practices is highly valued, and in the following we discuss two examples of settings where social educators reflect on their daily work. The first example is from a formal activity in the day care centre, a staff meeting, and the second example is from one of the workshops. The examples will show the importance of framing social educators' collective reflections and how this is connected to awareness of unnoticed professional competence.

### **The staff meeting**

Both day care centre leaders and social educators generally consider it very important to prioritize staff meetings, as we have seen in this study. With the increasing pressure on resources, there is also pressure on the opportunities and time for meetings. However, meetings are held also because there has been an increase in the workload that has to be dealt with. At staff meetings, all the formalities about, e.g., documentation and regulation have to be discussed (or at least communicated). This has often resulted in less time for more open discussions at the meetings about everyday aspects of work in the day care centres.

The following scene is from a staff meeting where the leader introduces a scheme where all the children will be evaluated in order to spot those in need of special attention and to draw up an action plan which often involves consultants from the local council.

Gunvor goes to the next issue on the agenda which is individual action plans. She explains that they must go through all the children based on a form that has been prepared for the work with learning curricula. The local authority has decided that all day care centres must describe their work with the six themes within the three areas: activities, routines and child culture. Gunvor says to the staff: "When we are going to work professionally with relationships, we have a form to describe children's development in three areas." They will mark each child with a green, yellow or red dot, and Gunvor explains how the form should be used: "If now for example we take Sofie, how are things with her and activities? She will probably get a dark red." Lene says she probably would use orange, because she can see that Sofie "is working on it." Gunvor says that if someone gets a red dot they need to make an action plan, but if there is someone who has one or two yellow dots, this might not be sufficient for starting the whole process. Gunvor shows instructions on how to make observations, focus points, goal descriptions and parent interviews. She says: "Of course we do everything already, now it's just expressed in a different way. You already have special attention for children who get a red dot here, but this is an attempt to document the work we do already."



The discussion that follows shows on the one hand that the social educators are taking the opportunity to discuss important issues in the children's life in the day care centre. On the other hand, it is also clear that the overriding goal for the discussion—the marking of children and the individual action plans—has a tendency to direct the conversation. The discussion at the staff meeting is basically about finding out how the form is to be filled out, i.e., which one of the three colored dots is the right one. The discussion at the meeting is not directed on the basis of concrete experiences with the children, and the goal- and documentation-oriented logic dominates and stifles the opportunity for a freer discussion.

Two hours are set aside for filling out the form for all 20 children. This in itself puts pressure on the staff to draw rapid conclusions for each child. The leader herself shows some ambiguity toward the procedure saying that they are already aware of potential problems with certain children, but that the form makes it possible to document this information. The social educators also have some direct or indirect criticism of the form and procedures. Discussing a particular child, one of the social educators says she would mark her orange (which doesn't exist as a possible color in the form) and others suggest that more colors should be added. Another one says the three categories—activities, routines, and child culture—are too undifferentiated, and yet another warns against marking positively the children who are generally perceived as charming. In this way, it is clear that there is a general skepticism toward the use of standardized categories in relation to the children—a skepticism that shows that the social educators have a thorough knowledge of the children, and thus find it difficult to describe them in too narrow terms and simplistic categories for marking. However, the criticism and suggestions for change in the form are left behind and the procedures and rationale of working with it are accepted. The girl Sophie who is discussed in the example had already been “spotted” by the social educators and they have a variety of experiences with and opinions about her, but both time pressure and the instrumental logic of the form leave little opportunity to unfold and integrate those experiences.

### Washing hands

The following scene is a collective reflection after a role play in the workshop in the project. The role play was part of a theme where the social educators worked with what they would describe as successful and difficult situations in their work. In the scene, the social educator with the help of colleagues first plays a scene where she struggles with four-year-old Jacob to get him to wash his hands before eating (a general rule in the day care centre).

- Lisbeth: “It’s hard to get Jacob to wash his hands. I don’t know if it’s soap or water he’s afraid of. I tried one day when we had plenty of time. He would not put his hand under the water. I said: Now let’s try to put your hand inside together. No! I stood with him for half an hour. He said: ‘My grandfather says no!’ But how hard can it be to put your hand under the water?”
- Hanne: “Can’t you talk to his mother? How does he get a bath?”
- Anne: “The other kids say, ‘It’s ok, it won’t hurt you.’”
- Ditte: “What’s it all about: he wants to decide things himself, or he doesn’t like it?”

- Lisbeth: “The other children are told that they can’t get food until they’ve washed their hands.”
- Hanne: “Have you tried to wash toys?”
- Lisbeth: “I’ve tried to put my hand next to his. Then I say: ‘Try to do what I’m doing.’ Then he says: ‘I can’t.’”
- Sidsel: “He’s a model child at home.”
- Ditte: “It’s hard. Is he afraid of the water, or does he want to be a little boy?”
- Hanne: “It may be both.”
- Lisbeth: “We sat there for half an hour.”
- Hanne: “He’s so stubborn.”
- Lisbeth: “We’ve also tried playing ‘let’s see who’s first.’”

In this scene the social educators share their various experiences of Jacob and reflect on both reasons for his refusal to wash his hands and on possible solutions. They realize, however, that they cannot understand—and overcome—this deadlock solely on the basis of their institutional experience with Jacob. It calls for knowledge of how things work out in the family: How does he get a bath at home? What does it mean that “grandfather says no?” Is Jacob allowed to be a baby at home? It shows that they must share and adjust their understandings and their practice with the parents so that they can support and avoid working against each other.

The discussion of the situation with Jacob also includes a number of questions about institutional practice. Lisbeth has sat for half an hour with him, without succeeding in getting him to wash his hands. Her story about it involves not only invitations to the others for reflection about what they would do but also important issues in relation to other social educators, because spending half an hour with Jacob meant that she could not participate in the mealtime situation with the other children who had long since begun to eat. In this way, the focus is not just on what the conflict means for Jacob but also for the whole group of children. She also raises questions about how best to create positive social qualities in such conflict situations (with or without Jacob) and how to balance maintaining routines with deviations from the routines in specific situations. The implicit considerations educators must constantly make in relation to the reestablishment of routines and flexible deviations from them become explicit in the discussion of this scene. In this way, the example demonstrates a need for continuous reflection on institutional rules and routines. The workshop offered distance from everyday practice and sufficient time for discussions, which as this example showed is a fruitful way to support the creation of positive social qualities in institutional routines and rituals.

### Comparing the two examples

The scene from the workshop and the scene from the staff meeting obviously have different rationales and logics. The workshop was organized away from the day care centre, allowing the social educators adequate time to reflect on daily practice and develop ideas for new initiatives. The staff meeting had a tight agenda with the specific goals of documenting the identification of certain categories of children and launching individual action plans. However, the common features are the social educators’ experiences with the children and their reflections on these experiences.



The work with the form at the staff meeting shows that the steering logic of the form and the goal of launching individual learning plans seem to narrow and limit the discussion. The children need to be marked with little time to take experiences into account and it is thus especially difficult to find time and space to reflect on and develop the unnoticed aspects of professional competence. By contrast, in the workshops in our project, we and the social educators became aware of the potential of free space for collective development of not least unnoticed aspects of professional competence. The unnoticed professional competence seemed to be more easily marginalized in the formal meeting with a fixed agenda than in the more open setting with opportunities to delve deeply into everyday experiences.

In interviews, the social educators showed mixed feelings toward working with individual learning plans, educational curricula, etc. On the one hand, they sometimes find that it may enhance the recognition of social educators' status as professionals who, like other professional groups, are capable of planning, implementing, and documenting work in accordance with regulations. On the other hand, they may experience that the changes are driven by control and distrust in the ability of social educators to work in a professionally responsible manner and that the focus on educational curricula leads to a reduced understanding of what is important in their work. Like employees in other fields, social educators have a social orientation in work which is both related to what the work does for others and more broadly related to the development of society in general (Sennett 2008). It is a widespread prejudice that "ordinary social educators" are only interested in the immediate, concrete tasks of the institutions. But this is not correct. In the workshops, we framed a discussion with the theme *Why do we have day care centres?* and the discussion revolved around the role of day care centres in society, the meaning of a good childhood, social inequality, etc. The unnoticed aspects of professional competence are embedded in such reflections on the role and meaning of work. They are present in many situations that can be seen as "just" practical, but the social educators relate the unnoticed aspects to the broader meaning of having day care centres and their social orientation in work (Nielsen 1997).

## Conclusion and perspectives

In this article, we have discussed the aspects of the professional competence of social educators that we have found useful to describe as unnoticed. An examination of the empirical examples has revealed that unnoticed professional competences are present in seemingly "banal" everyday situations. We have argued that these unnoticed aspects of professional competence are important for the children's experience of the day care centre and important for the social educators' collective orientation. We have also discussed how unnoticed professional competence is under pressure and risks losing attention when the emphasis is on learning outcome, curricula, documentation, etc. The pressure on unnoticed aspects of professional competence is most prominent in the more formal settings (such as meetings and planned learning activities), but other activities in day care centres are also affected by steering mechanisms. One example is when a social educator tells us that in taking pictures of a social activity planned in accordance with the educational curricula (as documentation), they are more inclined

to make sure all the children are in the picture so that no parent (or child) feels neglected than they are to show the intentions and benefit of the activity. She adds that the risk is that they are more focused on taking pictures and getting the right angle than they are on socializing with the children. So the demand for documentation turns into an urge to make their work “visible” in order to ensure the immediate recognition from parents and other important actors during their day, while the collective recognition based on professional activities with the children they are responsible for fades away.

However, the social educators have also demonstrated a strong commitment to the unnoticed aspects of professional competence. In everyday working life in the day care centres, this commitment might not be particularly visible, even for themselves. This may be due to the nature of unnoticed professional competence as something which is so obvious for them that they would not label it a competence. When given the time and space in alternative settings like the workshops, it became much clearer to them that important unnoticed professional competence was present, as we discussed in the “washing hands” example presented above. This example suggests that there is a potential to develop professional competence based on collective reflection if everyday life experiences are given time and space for reflection in both formal and informal settings.

With regard to further research in professional competence in “welfare work” (health, social, and educational work), our results suggest that searching for unnoticed aspects of professional competence may be a way to approach how professional competence is present in practical and seemingly “banal” everyday working situations. Our methodological triangulation has proven well suited for illuminating different perspectives on unnoticed professional competence. It has been possible to show the potential of collective reflection and development of unnoticed professional competence. It has also enabled us to demonstrate how the different steering mechanisms and demands for documentation of learning outcome, etc. affect how the unnoticed aspect is being perceived and potentially not recognized as an important part of professional competence.

Regarding discussions and strategies on professional development, our results suggest that greater attention should be paid to the importance of the unnoticed professional competence. The potential of strategies for professionalization is found in the link between the acknowledgment of professional work and a strategy of influence. But if the strategies merely mirror the steering technologies and do not critically oppose the exclusion of unnoticed competence as an important element in professionalism, they miss the opportunity to seriously develop professional competences that include the everyday life experiences of social educators. There is a danger of professionalism submitting to goal rationality (Moss 2010), so that in fact dequalification may take place if professional assessments previously based on everyday practice are instead based on standards, filling in forms, etc. Seen from this perspective, there is anything but recognition of the professional competence of social educators in the new requirements for evaluation and documentation. One of the social educators described it this way: *“I think it’s insulting, it’s as if the only thing that counts now is the few hours a week I’m obviously working on the curriculum goals. Then I start to think like this: What about before we got the curriculum, didn’t I do anything important then?”*



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## End notes

- <sup>1</sup> We refer to all pedagogical staff as social educators whether they have the formal 3½ year educational qualification or not. The day care centre leaders were also interviewed and participated in the workshops.