

“Rock in the Swing”

The importance of aesthetic dimensions in children’s language development Some narratives, a criticism, a draft and an invitation

In Denmark three-year-old children are to have their language screened – allegedly to help them develop a language that will be useful when they start school. This initiative mostly focuses on children who are supposed to face difficulties in school – especially children whose mother tongue is different from Danish.

The screening material concentrates on testing pronunciation and glossary and is thus consistent with the predominant view: Everything must be measured, counted and weighed - trained and tested.

According to this view language is considered something relatively isolated, made of sounds and glossary - mainly independent of mental, physical, cultural and social dimensions.

But that is not the way it is. Language is personal as well as social and cultural.

Mental as well as physical. Language is weaved into topical life and sub-culture - as well as being background pattern:

- When a small child for example is swinging, it is simultaneously inspired to narrative singing; often contemplatively and often in serious, dialogical fun with another co-swinging child.
- When a small child verbally expresses that “I do not like sprouts”, it will experience vital things about its own influence: either the grown up will say “but then do not eat it, darling”, or (more likely), “nonsense, you have not even tasted it”.
- When children produce their own songs in joyful rebellion against grown-ups’ allegations about perfect childhood idyl it is not necessarily their intention that we actually hear it – more likely it voices a strong feeling of community, opposing the grown-ups’ tendency to overall regulation. And this cultural community might be co-constituted by gender, age, class, and ethnicity.

Thus the small child’s development and production of language takes place in a live, streaming mosaic of many aesthetic, personal, and social dimensions.

So we do not support children when we control their sounds and count their words. On the contrary - and more likely - we intensify marginalisation and social grading.

We do support children when we support their relations, communities and dialogues; to and with grown-ups, to and with other children.

When we acknowledge and respect their mother tongue (any dialect, sociolect, Farsi, Arabic etc) - and when we give room and challenges to hopping, climbing, singing, swinging, imaginations and narratives.

We are worried that the current policy of education in Denmark do not leave room for all these aesthetic dimensions – for instance in the education of social educators where the latest instruction underestimates the importance of small children’s aesthetic expressions and productions. We do think that these dimensions are of extreme significance when it comes to the development of language and therefore should be deeply rooted in the education as well as in day-care institutions. We hereby invite others to join us in working with this.