

Beyond the competent child

Exploring contemporary childhoods in the Nordic welfare societies

**Helene Brembeck, Barbro Johansson,
and Jan Kampmann (eds.)**

Roskilde University Press

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Introduction

It is very often assumed that Norden has been at the forefront of developing high quality standards when it comes to the everyday life of children. Understandings and practices seem to have developed in order to respect children's rights to participation and agency. The idea of "the competent child" often appears in present day discussions and descriptions of modern childhood in Norden. During the past few years, there has been a rather widespread presupposition of the child being competent enough to interact with adults on equal terms, a child being able to take part in and negotiate the family's purchases, as well as putting-up with a working day in school.

The competent child is seen as reflexive, autonomous and robust. The concept of "the competent child" has been dealt with in both Nordic child culture research and pedagogical research (e.g. Ehn and Löfgren 1996, Eide and Winger 1996, Sommer, 1998, Frykman 1998, Juul 1998, Juncker 1998, Tufte, Kampmann and Juncker, 2001, Tufte, Kampmann and Hassel, 2003). Media studies have used the concepts of "the strong viewer" or the "culture-strong child" (Drotner 1995, Rönnberg 1987). It seems as if the idea of the competent child is a fundamental part of the modernity project in most Nordic countries, relating to modern institutions such as the "negotiating family" at home and the dialogical pedagogy in school, pre-school and day care institutions.

During the last hundred years, Norden has attained an international reputation for attending to the child as an individual with rights of its own, pointing to the nation-state as having the duty of safeguarding this – even long before the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The conception of the competent child also has a great impact on generational relations as it calls for adults to re-

nounce part of their authority, and instead, to become trusted friends. It is fair to claim that ideas of children as competent (and adults as their friends) are deeply embedded in the structure of the Nordic welfare states.

Even though the idea of a robust and competent Nordic child can be traced from the beginning and throughout history, there are specific meanings, concerns, worries and expectations attached to this child at the beginning of the 21st century. One important and perhaps alarming effect of viewing the child as competent is that it causes changes in the relations between adults and children. There is an on-going public debate about problems concerning children in school as well as in the family. It is asserted that many adults are confused and even frightened by the competent child. Questions arise, such as: How should one behave in relation to these new children who obviously have rights (to have their own way, rights to a good childhood etc) when adults seemingly have no rights at all? Not least teachers frequently express their powerlessness in relation to children, who disturb their classmates and show no respect for adults. Should the adult recognize his/her own childishness and become the children's friend and equal? Or do things become worse if the adult "abdicates" from his/her responsibility? How to perceive "the good adult"? The problems does not seem smaller from a child's perspective. Does the idea of the competent child give children new possibilities or just present them with new obstacles? Is it really in the best interest of the child? It might give children too great a responsibility, i.e., deciding on his or her own which one of the parents to live with in case of divorce, dragging them at an early age into the lonely, modern dilemma of too many choices and too few real possibilities. Is it just about new hidden ways of governing children, where children's understanding of themselves as competent come into conflict with implicit or explicit contrary views, which they experience, causing frustration and uncertainty? Or is it just an excuse for scrupulous businessmen to sell more by arguing that children are competent enough to decide for themselves?

The contributors to this volume are researchers from different disciplines in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. We found the conception of the competent child closely related to modern demo-

cratic values, children's equal rights and value, and children's perceived ability to take responsibility for themselves, all being phenomena that are well-known in Nordic contexts.

At the same time we see the term and the kind of understanding that it embraced as very much related to the specific kind of *societalization* (translation of the German word *Vergesellschaftung*) of childhood that could be said to be the case in the Nordic countries. The term societalization characterizes those "processes by which the particularistic structures and expressive relationships of small systems and communities (*Gemeinschaft*) are absorbed into universalistic structures and changed to instrumental relationships" (Sünker 1991: 154). The question is to what degree the Nordic welfare states have elaborated this kind of societalization, and how this has had an impact on our understanding and approach to children and childhood, signalled through the idea and rhetoric of the competent child.

We wanted to acquire a deeper understanding of questions concerning Nordicism and children's competence and we thought that a way to reach this goal would be to study the discourses, as well as the materiality of present-day Nordic childhoods. What is competence really about? How has it been interpreted and integrated in different arenas of childhood? Will the concept also work in a postmodern situation or are other concepts needed to better understand children and childhood in Norden? Is there such a thing as a "Nordic child"? And, if there is, has "the Nordic case" something to add to the understanding of childhoods and childhood concepts in other parts of the world?

Embarking on a project with the aim of reaching "beyond the competent child" may seem a bit presumptuous. Nevertheless we regard it an urgent and challenging task. The competent child is apparent in a lot of diverse arenas and there is a tendency to a one-sided celebration of this child. We find it important to penetrate the idea, distinguish different parties, implications and consequences, in short to open the "black box" (Latour 1998) labelled "the competent child". Since the notion seems to have been specifically present in Norden, we have access to a large amount of data to help us discuss, problematize and nuance the issue. By critically reworking and deconstructing how "the competent child" has become so central in Norden, we hope to contribute to a more

general international discussion about how the conceptualising and understanding of children and childhood are at present undergoing fundamental shifts.

In this volume we will concentrate the discussion to some fields where children's competence often is brought to the fore. These are laws and child policy, education and the market. Our point of departure is the circumstances in Norden, but we also take into account the fact that our specific Nordic examples are closely related to the world around us at all levels.

The background

The background of this book was the assembly, in the spring of 1999, of Nordic childhood researchers who were joined by a feeling that Nordic childhoods were undergoing changes of a magnitude that demanded rethinking of taken for granted concepts. A radical shift seemed to have occurred in the way childhood had been conceived of during the last three or four decades of the 20th century. This appeared to have something to do with increased globalisation and medialisation disembedding traditional values of a good and decent childhood. Not least the gradual inclusion of one Nordic country after the other in the European Union seemed to threaten the welfare system that Northerners are generally proud of, and that has given the region its international reputation. However, the nature of this transition was a bit diffuse for the assembled researchers as well as its "Nordicness". The change seemed to be similar but not identical in the five Nordic countries. In an attempt to better understand the character of what was going on NordBarn, the Nordic network for research and research training on Nordic conceptions of childhood, was established and funded by NorFa, The Nordic Research Academy. For five years the now 29 researchers, senior researchers as well as graduate students, representing seven research environments in the five Nordic countries have met regularly in order to address the task. This anthology is one of the results of this work, others being, e.g., research proposals and the mobility of senior researchers as well as doctoral students.

NordBarn includes researchers from several disciplines, such as pedagogics, ethnology, psychology, media studies, social work, sociology and folkloristics, all joined by a common interest in the changing significations of childhood in a societal perspective. In the network the notion “conceptions of childhood” has been given a broad definition. It includes studies of children’s childhoods, childhood as a social category, childhood as representation as well as childhood as a relational process of construction. Conceptions of childhoods are perceived as multiple and contradictory permeated with power relations based on generation, gender, ethnicity, social class etc. The network, as well as this anthology, could be seen as a meeting ground for discursive and material views of childhood.

The construction of Nordicness

Our starting point is that “the Nordic child” is primarily a construction, a rhetorical figure of thought with fluid content that from time to time has been presented to serve its purpose in ideological, political contexts. There have been two other multi-disciplinary and cross-national studies about Nordicness in the last decade, although none of them focus specifically on children. Both projects reject the existence of a consistent understanding of the term “Nordicness” in the five Nordic countries, and even more fiercely, the existence of a common “Nordic identity”. Rather, Nordicness and the North “are seen as a permanent process of problem resolution”, as Sørensen and Stråth put it (1997:20). This process can be described as “a production of meaning, dissolution of meaning, new production of meaning, etc., where the historical and cultural constant seems to be the lack of an intrinsic polarisation and tradition of submission” (ibid.). The idea of Nordicness seems primarily to have been used as a reinforcing element in the building of national identities. It has also been used when Norden have felt a threat from Europe or the rest of the world. The idea of Norden has from time to time “functioned as a demarcation from Europe: a democratic, Protestant, progressive, and egalitarian North against a Catholic, conservative and capitalist Europe” (Stråth and Sørensen 1997:22). In many re-

spects this resembles the situation we have today, where voices in the debate claim “the good Nordic values” regarding children, childhood, upbringing etc., to be threatened, be it by American Disneyfication or European conservatism. Seen in this way, the NordBarn researchers continue an age-old strategy of sticking together, examining similarities and differences, and mobilising “Nordicness” in the face of a perceived foreign threat.

“The Nordic child” can however not be conceived of as a solely rhetorical construction. In both of the studies referred to above equality, individual freedom and ‘liberal education’ (bildning/dannelse – again referring to the German Bildung) are brought out as concepts that in various combinations and with differing meanings have been part of conceptions of “Nordicness”. Also, even if these concepts can be primarily conceived of as rhetorical figures of thought, there is a genuine historic basis in the jurisdiction and social and political organisation of the countries in the North that has allowed these concepts to gain strength.¹ There have been historical conditions of possibility that have rendered certain understandings of the Nordic child possible, and others impossible, and thus provided the background for the debate about children and childhood at various historic moments. Thus we will now dwell for a moment on such enabling conditions.

Historically, farming has been the main occupation of Nordic inhabitants. Even if the Vikings are known as seafarers, pirates, warriors and tradesmen, conquering great parts of Europe, their way of life was dependent on “hay, domestic animals and peasant virtues”, as Berggren et. al. (1993:210) put it. The mobility of the Vikings has however continued. Norwegian Vikings founded the Icelandic nation. Large areas in Sweden and Norway have been inhabited by Finns. Swedes have emigrated to Finland, Danes to the nearby Scania etc. The migration between the Nordic countries continues today thanks to a free Nordic labour market. The Nordic languages have been cultural bridges, but also barriers; Finnish is quite a different language and Icelandic is today hardly understood by the Scandinavians. The Nordic mythology and the Icelandic sagas of the Snorre-Edda, written in Old Norse, have however greatly contributed to a Nordic consciousness, emphasising the importance of language-relatedness.²

The Nordic peasant society was built upon combinations of freedom and self-government. The household was the basic legal and economic unit, including family members, but also farmhands, maids and relatives unable to support themselves. All grown-up men were part of the village community settling conflicts, upholding the village ethics, organising common work tasks and arranging for care of the elderly, disabled, orphans etc (c.f. Bringéus 1986, Hellspong and Löfgren 1994). Göran Therborn (1993) asserts that the feudal system never had the same impact in Norden as it had on the European continent. An ethos of solidarity prevailed, and it was also important not to show yourself better than anybody else. All men should be equal. The solidarity however generally stopped at the village border. The good and descent life was the one lived by the peasant freeholders of the village, and there was a mistrust of foreigners. Disability was often explained by evil powers coming from the outside that you had to protect yourself from. The borders between what was acceptable moral behaviour, and what was not, were sometimes very strict, giving few possibilities for "the others", the dark strangers, to be part of Nordic culture and village life.

In the peasant village it was important to be aware of your social position and not think that you were better than any of the other villagers. From that position you could however, use your good luck and expand your possibilities. This ambiguous ideology of a fixed social position and possibilities for mobility is a Nordic characteristic. In Norden, where the exercise of justice by ordinary people rather than by a central power has been the case since the middle Ages, there have always been possibilities for a greater individual mobility than in other European countries where nobility and the king have had a monopolising influence. The Northerners have always regarded themselves as inviolable individuals, and Berggren et.al maintains (1993:279) that this principle is still part of Nordic welfare societies, where the ambiguity of personal freedom and collective obligation is the basic theme. Where in other parts of the world national identities have been modernised and subordinated to global value systems, in Norden modernity itself has been nationalised. Age old ideals of freedom and equality have been moulded into the Nordic version of modernity (Berggren et.al. 1993:230).

Sörensen and Stråth (1997:1) argue that besides freedom and equality there has been a particular inflection of the Enlightenment in Norden in comparison with the rest of the West. The peasant figure, usually treated and thought of with contempt as rude, ill-bred, and uneducated, was seen as the mythical incarnation of education, freedom and equality. This mythical historical derivation of a free peasantry with roots in the Viking Age was the reason why Romanticism in the North was pragmatic and individual-oriented. The specific Nordic Protestant ethic was not only different from the Catholic cultures, but openly hostile to them - the principle of unconditional personal freedom and the supreme value of the individual prevailed (ibid:4). Freedom, equality and education (bildning/dannelse), were the core values of the ambitious Enlightenment programme of Danish clergyman N.F.S. Grundtvig in the 19th century. It is difficult to exaggerate his influence not only in Denmark but all over Norden (ibid: 8). Against the artificial Latin-based scholarship at the universities, Grundtvig put the 'real' education (dannelse/bildning/bildung) as an emancipative instrument in the hands of the peasants. Folkehøgskolen ('folk high schools') became a veritable movement, which spread from Denmark to the other Nordic countries. They became formation and education centres, where the popular thirst for knowledge was satisfied.

Equality, upheld by a strong society, collective responsibility in combination with individual freedom is the basis for the Nordic "family of nations" (Therborn 1993), "The Scandinavian model" (Esping-Andersen 1995) or, more commonly "the welfare state". This is shown for example in a co-ordinated Nordic social policy including a progressive child and family policy. Sweden followed by Denmark and Finland scores highest on a list of state compensation for expenses to families with children in Europe, Norway and Iceland not being included in the sample (Ditch et.al. 1996:54). In Therborn's compilation of the development of children's rights in Western nations, Norway and Sweden having the highest scores closely followed by Denmark and Finland. Iceland is not included (Therborn 1993:256). Kristina Bartley (1998) found, in her comparison between some European countries, that the Nordic countries were more child oriented than Great Britain, Germany and France.

Norway was the first country in the world to inaugurate legal prohibitions against corporal punishment of children (1972), followed in the coming decade by Sweden, Finland and Denmark (Therborn 1993). Norway was the first nation to establish a special authority, Barnombudsman (1980), whose responsibility it is to see to that children's needs and interests are taken care of at all levels of society. This can be regarded as an expression of the Nordic quest for equality and individual rights also for children, mothers and fathers. More than one hundred years ago, Swedish pedagogue and novelist Ellen Key urged the government to make the 20th century into the century of the child (Key 1900). And in the 1930s Alva and Gunnar Myrdahl were strong advocates of state childcare as a way to improve the low birth rates. Marianne Gullestad (1997) claims that there is an idea about similarity in the Nordic countries, which is expressed in efforts to handle differences between people. For example, people can try to play down differences or they can use strategies to actively create and recreate those ideas about similarity (ibid., Runfors 2003).

Turning to Michel Foucault (1993) "the Nordic child" could be understood as clusters of statements, discourses, originating from certain social contexts and thus, contingent, diverse, ambivalent and possible to deconstruct. What is possible to say seems self-evident and natural. But this naturalness is always a construction where other ways to think and speak have been excluded. Humans always act to exclude certain types of knowledge from 'the truth' and instead legitimise their own versions. This way discourses do not happen in a vacuum, but in a constant battle with other discourses and practices. There is therefore reason to consider the social contexts where the various statements of the Nordic child have arisen.

The construction of the competent child

The concept of the competent child could be conceived of as part of the Nordic rural tradition, but it is also clearly influenced by Rousseau's romantic view of the child (Stein 1984, Selmer-Olsen 1990). The Nordic

rural child was considered a competent worker, taking care of younger siblings, guarding animals in the woods during long days on their own and engaging in other chores considered appropriate for their age and gender. The generational relations were however far from democratic. Children were expected to show an unconditional obedience to adults and to keep out of their way (Brembeck 1986). As shown in the chapter by Makkonen these were also the expectations among ordinary people in the 1930s. The ideal of reformers like Alva and Gunnar Myrdal had reached only a small segment of intellectuals.

However, from a slow beginning children as well as parents have been increasingly differently conceived of, as well as differently constructed and reconstructed, as social categories starting from the late 1960s. From this period and during the following decade, childhood in Norden was heavily involved in processes of modernisation, most prominently witnessed in an extensive expansion of day-care institutions and after-school recreation centres. Developmental psychology was the most prominent contributor of child perspectives. Children's age-specific needs, often depicted as universal and static, were taken-for-granted core ideas. The concept of socialisation united childhood researchers. The transmission or reproduction of cultural norms and values was essential. In pedagogical ideological rhetoric this was a period of great optimism. With the aid of pedagogy it would be possible to create a meaningful everyday life through the structuring of activities, which were considered to be for the good of the child. Children were related to in terms of "teachability" and "developmentality" (Dahlberg and Hultqvist 2001). The teacher had obvious agency, while the child responded to or reacted to the teacher's actions. The core organising principle was about "disciplining the body and training the mind" (ibid.). Practically speaking, the "governing of time, space and body" was in focus (Kampmann, this volume). In Foucaultian terms this was a producing technology, aimed at developing specific components for the versatile development of the child. The basis was a focus on the shortcomings of the child, on what it was not yet able to do on its own.

From the 1990s socialisation at the day-care institution can increasingly be seen as the "normal" way to grow up in the Nordic countries, which also implies that this area was submitted to the same kind of

demands of economic efficiency, rationalisation and quality control as other parts of the public sector. As already mentioned, we can understand this kind of development as a growing societalization of childhood in the Nordic countries. From an early age children get used to being in groups and develop capabilities for finding and keeping a position in a collective, which implies the competence to communicate and create relations with many people, adults as well as other children. The Nordic countries ratified the CRC in the beginning of the 90s, and it has an ongoing impact on lawmaking, child policy and debates on children's conditions on all levels of society. Norway, Sweden and Iceland have established a special authority, "Barnombudsmannen" – Denmark's equivalent being "Børnerådet" (The National Council of Children) - , whose mission it is to ensure that children's voices are heard and their points of view considered. The 1990s is also the decade when the welfare system in Norden started to shake. An economic decline caused repeated cuts in public expenses, which not least affected schools and day-care institutions. The number of teachers and other school staff decreased significantly. Moreover, the public sector has, during this period, become increasingly market oriented, and thereby submitted to demands on economic efficiency, rationalisation and quality control.

Sociologist Leena Alanen has coined the notion "generationing", to talk about the practices through which one becomes a child in relation to those who are not children (Alanen 2001). Child is a relational concept, which is understood only in relation to its opposite, the adult (Alanen, 2000, 2001 and 2004). Generationing takes place in all situations when age is made meaningful in one way or another, and it is made in a lot of areas, in a lot of different ways, and by children as well as by adults. The concept helps us to look upon the generational order as something in process, instead of regarding it as a fixed structure, which individuals adjust or do not adjust to. Power relations are constantly contested and re-established. The powerful holds his power only as long as the other actants of the network accepts the hierarchy (Latour 1998). Foucault also points to the fact that there is always a struggle over discourse and different truth claims are made, competing with each other (Foucault 1972). In the terminology of Michel Callon and Bruno Latour, parts of the generational order can be regarded as a "black box", those

matters that are not called into question, “that which no longer needs to be considered, those things whose contents have become a matter of indifference” (Callon & Latour 1981:285).

The competent child within childhood research

In childhood research the notion of the competent child has been on the agenda at least since the early 1990s. The relations between adults and children have been discussed and problematized in terms of children’s status as respectively “beings” and “becomings”. It has been argued that today’s children are valued mostly from what they will become in the future, after being developed, socialized and educated. A consequence of this view of childhood is the naturalization of adults’ authority and power exercise upon children (Qvortrup 1987, James and Prout 1990, Alanen 1992). A new understanding of the child has been presented: that of a social and cultural being, an adequate member of society, who acts, reflects and contributes to its own growth as well as the growth of society. Children are attributed agency and constructions of subjectivities are understood as ongoing processes where identities are negotiated. Culture is not primarily regarded as a process of transmission from adults to children, but as a process of the continuous construction of meaning that children as much as adults participate in.

It is mainly sociologists who have theorized childhood in this way and worked to establish what was defined as a new paradigm within childhood research. In *Theorizing childhood* (1998) Allison James, Chris Jenks and Alan Prout try to develop a platform from which childhood could be conceived of outside the dualism child – adult. This new theorizing of childhood was nurtured not only from the universities, but also from professionals in school and child care as well as parents. It equipped children with a status of agency, admitting them to act outside common theories of socialization, which up until now had been the main source to conceive of children. So, while the main status of the child as a “becoming” is its dependence and need for protection, the child as a “being” takes part in the activities of the society on principally