

## VIDA Conference 24 May 2012 - Highlights and general conclusions

### Workshop 1: Child Care Experiences and Cognitive Development up to School Entry

Facilitators: Stine Trentemøller and Mette Gørtz

Conclusions: 18 month Language

- CDI weak measure?
- Great individual variability in CDI scores
- Bayley MDI more strongly associated with 36 month language than CDI (.58 vs. .27)
- Maternal report (may discuss child more with grandparent?)
- Mean hours grandparent only boosts language for more advantaged
- Less advantaged may have less choice to ask grandparent?

Conclusions: Language Development at 36 months

- Gross division by dominant care type not related to language development
- For both advantaged and disadvantaged families major factors are within the family
- Some insight comes from looking at hours by type
- Specifically if there is more father care in toddlerhood, in more advantaged families, children's language may tend to lag (possibly not father's choice to be carer?)
- May need encouragement to attend preschool so children can have more varied experiences
- (More nanny hours only type associated with more preschool hours 18 to 35 months)

Conclusions: BAS Outcomes at 51 Months

- Beneficial effect of group care over whole time for cognitive development can only be assumed for higher social class, too few in lower group
- Some group care, especially 18 to 35, is beneficial for wider range of families
- Exclusive maternal care with no substantial amount of home or group care puts more middle class children at a disadvantage, especially with more school related non-verbal puzzles
- Children gain some cognitive advantage with the experience of group care, particularly in their second and third year
- Subsequently no obvious cognitive gain from group care
- Remaining exclusively with mother (or father) may be a disadvantage
- Can identify by attitudes expressed in postnatal period
- Families not positive about maternal employment before formal schooling (especially with higher SES and education) should be encouraged to get some group experience for children before age 5
- Less likely to occur now, free offer for all from age 3, 40% to be offered from age 2

Conclusions: School Readiness and Child Care

- Dominant group care in toddler phase and more nursery and preschool (not playgroup) experiences throughout boost letter knowledge
- No impact on phonemic awareness
- Dividing by disadvantage no impact for lower education and social class group
- Maternal factors (especially HLE and responsivity) important for both groups
- Mean HLE significantly different ( $p < .001$ , out of 42)
  - Low SES/Ed 19.3
  - High SES/Ed 22.5

Final points:

- Complexity of identifying child care effects
  - Total hours
  - Hours by phase
  - Dominant by phase
  - Dominant from birth to starting school
- Some evidence of ways to enhance child development though high quality group experiences
- These are available more often to more advantaged families, though possible improvements since the study took place

## Workshop 2: Research and Policy

Facilitators: Camilla Wang og Edward Melhuish

### The first point

A close interplay of knowledge and research, practice and education is a prerequisite for quality - or in the words of VIDA: Competence for lasting renewal. This interplay is central to VIDA and should be strengthened through a much closer and more systematic interaction between the three elements.

*Analytical basis:* We see a gap between educational research and training of educators, which is not really recognized. It continues to exist because of a naive and amply proven untenable notion that research results will find their own way to the relevant practice. In fact, the longstanding absence of a thorough analysis of the need for a different type of transfer of knowledge is a research and education political riddle. And that is despite much attention to quality in the field of education, including a stronger foundation of research and knowledge for educators' work – particularly that efforts that involve disadvantaged children.

### The second point

In the VIDA project, participants (educators) are active co-creators of the transfer of research knowledge in practice (i.e. getting from what we know to what we do) – they are not simply passive recipients of knowledge to be directly and flawlessly converted. The VIDA education centers on professional processes of reflection linking research-based knowledge with practical experiences. This holds a far greater potential than developing pedagogical handbooks with a limited range and durability.

*Analytical basis:* in recent years, expectations that educational work is becoming research-based have increased. In terms of actions, two main initiatives are: 1) a tendency to collect, synthesize and disseminate research in ways that makes it more accessible for educators in practice and 2) a tendency to develop evidence-based programs that in very instructive manners prescribe certain educational actions.

The weak point of the first initiative is that from experience we know it is very difficult to change practice through databases or constructive communication. The weak point of the second initiative is disregard for educators', important, professional judgment and stimulation of their competence for innovation, based on a productive transaction between research knowledge and experience.

### **The third point**

Actors at the level of policy must act as guarantor and ambassador of a future society and must therefore be ready to 'order' and stimulate longitudinal and sustainable educational quality. We must ask our politicians to help promote the close interplay of educational research, educational practice and educational training - which is currently being tested in the VIDA project with promising results.

### *Analytical basis:*

Education research will never be able to provide politicians with all relevant answers concurrently with the emergence of new issues and needs. Municipal organizations in this field are very familiar with the method of seeking to improve educational quality through development projects, and they are equally familiar with the fact that to sustain the new practice after the end of the project and implement this practice in other daycare centers external to the project is extremely difficult. Politicians must thus increasingly work on the creation of close and innovative relations between research, practice and education both as regards the basic training of educators and their continuing training and development.

## **Workshop 3: Intervention and Experimental Design**

Facilitators: Anders Holm and Tarjei Havnes

### **Highlights and general conclusions**

At its core, VIDA is a knowledge-based intervention that tries to change the approach and behavior towards disadvantaged children of day care center staff in preschools. The intervention is delivered through reading, discussion and focus on what has proven to be established research results in the research literature on disadvantaged children and the effects of social stratification.

Development and delivery of a treatment is a multi-stage research project. First researchers have to design a new approach to deal with an issue of relevance, e.g. develop new practices towards disadvantaged children and perhaps test the effectiveness of the intervention in one or several pilot studies. Next the treatment has to be designed or altered so that it suits a partic-

ular context. This happens for instance when one tries to implement a treatment developed in one context into another context. Such an example could be when the treatment “the incredible years”, an intervention against disruptive preschool children developed by psychologist in the US, is being transferred and implemented in Denmark. And finally a treatment has to be implemented into the daily practice among ordinary caseworkers. This final step requires that the guidelines and principles of the intervention are thoroughly followed by practitioners. The extent to which case workers are willing and able to follow these guidelines is often termed *felicity*. We denote the three phases of the delivery of a treatment as the development phase, the adaptation phase and the implementation phase.

The research project VIDA captures many of these steps in one. VIDA is based on its predecessor Action Competences in Social Pedagogical Work with Socially Endangered Children and Youth (the ASP-program). This project entailed a knowledge-based intervention on the daily practices of preschool day care center staff towards disadvantaged children. The effectiveness of ASP was tested through a randomized controlled trial. It has proved to deliver a small but significant average effect on the behavior and well-being of the children as perceived by the day-care center staff. The treatment was primarily a change of focus of the day care center staff on the practices towards disadvantaged children through reading and discussion of relevant research and practical literature. The day care center staff was guided in this process by researchers and university college teachers. In VIDA the facilitation process is now entirely done by university college teachers and researchers are no longer directly involved. In this respect VIDA and ASP differ in that the RCT in ASP tested the development phase whereas the RCT in VIDA is testing the implementation phase.

This is because that we know that the RCT in ASP showed that the core idea of a knowledge-based intervention on the awareness of the approach of the day care center staff toward disadvantaged has proven effective. Therefore we can argue that the VIDA project tests the implementation phase of the approach. This is done by comparing effect sizes from ASP with VIDA. If effect sizes in VIDA are as large as in ASP there is no effect loss due to felicity and the implementation of College University teachers are as effective as when researchers themselves are instructing day care center staff about the content of VIDA/ASP.

A contrast to RCT-based tests of different stages of the development and implementation of an intervention is the so-called natural experiments. Here, researchers do not decide which parts of the implementation phase is under investigation. The natural experiment allows the researcher to investigate what has been implemented by a third party, e.g. policy makers that have implemented a large scale change in the coverage of publically funded day care facilities. The advantage of natural experiments is a large external validity, i.e. that the objects under investigation are completely unaware of the fact that they are taking part in a research evaluation. The advantage of the RCT is that researchers can decide which part of the implementation process they want to study. The disadvantage is of course the smaller external validity as part of the observed effect, especially when studying felicity, is that the objects under investigation, e.g. preschool center staff, may be aware that they are part of a research project and adjust behavior accordingly.

## Workshop 4: Staff Competence Development

Facilitators: Ib Ravn and Jan Peeters

The publication “Forskning i kommunikation på møder” [Research on communication at meetings] (Ravn, 2011b) illustrates that one-way communication, such as managers’ presentations and typical unguided plenary discussions, are anything but optimal for learning - just as free discussion does not constitute a learning process. The participating speakers’ irrelevant associations, pointless anecdotes, emotional reactions and assorted prejudices tend to dilute the focus of the given discussion, and whether such discussions lead to a result is random (Ravn, 2012). A manager cannot lead a process if she is at the mercy of the participants’ whims, and it is likewise very challenging to guide a conversation in an inspiring, educational and innovative direction. Thus, it will be difficult to meet the prerequisites for organizational learning and practice-based innovation.

A manager should master concrete tools that enable her to manage the communication among her employees. From research and development projects we know that with such tools, managers can become competent facilitators who host better meetings. Particularly knowledge processes, such as distribution of information from the management, hold a potential for development and clarification that will help employees to understand messages, share knowledge, generate ideas and improve practice (Ravn og Rokkjær, 2006; Ravn 2011a, c, 2012, Christensen, 2007).

This is the underlying reason for offering managers participating in VIDA training in facilitation. Facilitation was introduced as a management tool based on and developed from the juxtaposition of themes such as management, exploitation of resources and the participants’ experiences (primarily understood as their resources and challenges). All themes were discussed, exchanged and handled in small, facilitated groups and talked about in pairs and in various plenary processes.

An essential prerequisite for transfer of the new knowledge and so-called ‘reflection propensity’ acquired during the VIDA training is that the managers communicate what they have learned to the rest of the staff at the local daycare center. If the individual manager takes on the role as facilitator, constructive conversations and development are more likely to emerge.

The role as facilitator seems well-suited to workplaces that have traditionally been established collectively, and where employees do not put their manager on a pedestal. Here, the manager’s challenge is to enact her leadership role in a new way that implies systematic involvement of the employees’ views and voices rather than a return to the authoritarian model.

In the past, managers simply let everyone at the meeting table speak and meetings thus easily lasted five hours. A modern manager must be more time efficient and this is where facilitated processes of participation and involvement come in play. Such processes include low-voiced conversation in pairs, mutual and appreciative interviews, ‘listen and swap’ sessions, silent reflection, strength detection in pairs, a quick round, recognition in trios, personal takeaways etc.

These processes result in more dynamic and proactive meetings than the usual round-table session where everyone recapitulates the previous week's activities and challenges.

Ongoing sustenance of organizational innovation through appreciative, problem-solving and knowledge-sharing meetings constitutes the primary focus at the next VIDA management course, to be held at the end of 2012.

## **Workshop 5: BEST PRACTICES IN VIDA**

Facilitators: Kristina Ø. Kristoffersen and Ulrik Brandi

Workshop 5 provided examples of how project participants work with new and innovative methods and tools introduced by the VIDA project. The following aspects of the VIDA intervention were addressed:

### 1. HOW DO WE SUPPORT CHILDRENS LEARNING AND WELL-BEING?

- It is important to establish a structured and well-planned progress to create a sound foundation for development.
- Good measurement tools help to carefully manage development of the individual child and the group of children.

### 2. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE INVOLVEMENT OF PARENTS

- To create sustainable changes the parents must feel they are met, seen and understood by the day-care staff – the group of staff should not instruct and teach the parents.
- Active involvement of parents is important for creating sustainable change and learning in the day-care institution.

### 3. HOW DO WE DEVELOP AN INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT?

- During the VIDA experiment the day care centre has come to see the overall child community as a more explicit part embedded in the given learning context.
- Changes in form and content of the educational practice are supported by a participatory and active learning understanding where children and staff is involved.

### 4. HOW DO WE CREATE AND SUSTAIN STAFF COMPETENCES AND SPUR KNOWLEDGE SHARING AND LEARNING IN THE ORGANISATION?

- Together the staff practices ways to apply the new knowledge. Knowledge-sharing and transfer require an appreciative environment where one can experiment and learn from successes as well as failures.
- The VIDA experiment has emphasized the importance of sense of ownership among the staff as a basis for implementing changes into the educational practice.

The workshop offered presentations from four VIDA daycare centers:

### **1. Villa Maj, Gentofte**

A prerequisite for working in a goal-oriented manner with children's identity as learners is to follow a structured and well-planned progress through the experiments. The measurement tools that were developed during the process have enabled the preschool teachers to carefully follow the development of the individual child as well as the overall group of children in the process of implementing VIDA. That the measurement tools were developed during the process also made it possible to adjust the experiments to better match the children's participation and involvement. Thereby, all the children, regardless of their starting point, have further developed their competencies. In addition, the active involvement of parents in the experiments has made them capable of supporting the development of their child as a learner.

Summing up:

- It is a prerequisite to establish a structured and well-planned progress to create a sound foundation for development.
- Good measurement tools help to carefully manage development of the individual child and the group of children in this active learning process.
- Active involvement of parents is also important for creating sustainable change and learning in the day-care institution.

### **2. Viborgvejens daycare, Randers**

Organisational learning has been unfolded and achieved through video observations, analysis and evaluation. The daycare has emphasized inclusion and a collective understanding of our practice. They have worked with an active conception of learning as regards the children and an organisational learning conception in relation to the staff. They have systematically analyzed, evaluated and reflected upon their observations through video observations of assembled. One aim was to uncover processes of exclusions and better understand the effect of learning processes initiated in connection to themes of dialogue, narratives, etc. Based on an inquiring, reflective and innovative approach to their educational practice they now see the overall child community as a more explicit entity in a learning context. Changes in form and content are now, more so than previously, integrated by separation of groups based on e.g. age and gender, which supports a participatory and active learning process that equals how we work with

age-divided project groups in our educational practice. The VIDA experiment has also emphasized the importance of sense of ownership among the staff as a basis for implementing changes into the educational practice.

Summing up:

- Organisational learning has been unfolded and achieved through video observations, analysis and evaluation.
- The day care centre has worked with an active conception of learning as regards the children and an active conception of organisational learning in relation to the staff.
- During the VIDA experiment the day care centre has come to see the overall child community as a more explicit part embedded in the given learning context.
- Changes in form and content of the educational practice are supported by a participatory and active learning understanding where children and staff is involved.
- The VIDA experiment has emphasized the importance of sense of ownership among the staff as a basis for implementing changes into the educational practice.

### **3. Børnehuset Resenlund, Brøndby**

This daycare has worked with the resource-based (rather than the deficit perspective) approach in the VIDA+ experiment/intervention – this applies to the children as well as the involvement of parents. Moreover, the daycare has worked with applying an appreciative approach towards the children and the parents in VIDA+. Basically, their perspective, which is also reflected in their actions, is that the group of parents must feel they are met, seen and understood by the group of staff at the day-care. The staff is aware about not position themselves as experts who instruct the parents – they include and encourage the parents to participate and contribute in a friendly and gently manner. To reach this aim they have planned various forms of interaction and involvement of parents and children, including four workshops with a family therapist. To them the aim is to initiate dialogue among the parents, but also between parents and staff. They want to support the entire family.

Summing up:

- This daycare has worked with the resource-based approach in the VIDA+ experiment – both with regard to the children and involvement of parents.
- To create sustainable changes the parents must feel they are met, seen and understood by the day-care staff – the group of staff should not instruct and teach the parents.
- Parents must be included and encouraged to participate and contribute.

#### 4. Østbirk, Horsens

This daycare is specifically interested in how the educational staff commit them self to the task in a way that VIDA is going to have long-term effect on socially disadvantaged children. It is important the group of staff sense that the discourse about VIDA is meaningful and based on shared values and aims. The manager sees it as her task to continuously ensure a common focus on their goal. All employees must feel that their participation in the project is important. The leader feels that it is her responsibility to provide the framework and structure that allow the staff to participate actively and have an impact on how they progress towards their goal. The leader facilitates their VIDA process through reflective questions attached to theory, common analyses of narratives and evaluation.

Summing up

- Reflective questions are the basic tool for the organizational learning in this daycare.
- In this daycare, active and organizational learning is embedded in the experiments.
- Together the staff practices ways to apply the new knowledge. Knowledge-sharing and transfer require an appreciative environment where one can experiment and learn from successes as well as failures.