

Chapter 1

Introduction to Children's Exploration and Cultural Formation



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The notions and ideas of the United Nations (UN) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which are outlined in *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (UN, 2015), can be seen as an introduction to how exploration can be brought more directly into early childhood education, thus leading to children's cultural formation both locally and globally. In this document, the UN and UNESCO ask for a loci-based, ecological, integral education. This educational process combines historical knowledge recognizing cycles and planetary boundaries with children's equity and well-being in efforts to build better education programs for the future also along with critique that challenge the UN and research for not going far enough (Boldermo & Ødegaard, 2019; Holden, Linnerud, Banister, Schwanitz, & Wierling, 2018). With this book, we hope to take a step in this direction by bringing exploration and cultural formation into the debate while outlining our visions for future early childhood education (EEC). In line with Wals (2017), we find that children's exploration and cultural formation are important for their creation of meaningful and compassionate lives, where both the nonhuman and human worlds on the Earth is the key questions of our time.

Contributors' shared attempt throughout this book is to not only examine and conceptualise exploration and cultural formation through locally situated cases but also direct their contributions toward global educational concepts. The contributors provide different windows into how children may explore in everyday practice settings in kindergarten. In Chap. 2, Hedegaard outlines how exploration has been

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approached earlier in EEC and gives her own version of how children's exploration as a radical local activity is important for supporting their cultural formation. How teachers may create conditions for children's exploration that are oriented to both the local community and the global world is debated by Ødegaard (Chap. 6). Chapters 9, 10 and 11, the authors also point out the necessity of teachers' global orientation to transcend everyday experiences related to teachers' introduction of different subject areas in kindergarten (e.g. science, music and drama). The authors contributions combine local events with a global outlook.

The different authors explain how explorative activities in local activity settings are dependent on the institutional dynamics of personal relations and how practitioners and children interact with artefacts and material conditions. An example illustrating this is Hammer's approach (Chap. 9) to create a budding scientific community in kindergarten. Hammer points to the importance of taking note of children's wondering about natural phenomena and then using their wonder as a jumping-off point for introducing science concepts. For example, children may wonder about what happens to a dead animal, and the adult notices the children's wonder. In this case, teacher and children then, together, explore the specific animal's life and what happens when animals die; that exploration may lead to an opportunity to introduce concepts like ecological niches and ecosystems. When teachers connect local events with general knowledge, the local events become connected to theoretical concepts as a radical-local learning activity (Hedegaard, this chapter).

1.1 A Cultural Historical Approach to Children's Exploration and Cultural Formation

The educational analyses and illustrations in the different chapters build on a cultural-historical approach that brings together the substantial philosophies of Lev Vygotsky (1997) and Michael Bakhtin (1991) and adds contemporary global awareness of education for sustainable futures to create productive new conceptualisations for exploration and cultural formation. We argue the dialectically and dialogically approaches from, respectively, Vygotsky and Bakhtin, both belong to a socioepistemological tradition, well-established within early childhood education and childhood studies; we will build on productive integration of these two positions. For elaboration, see e.g. Matusov (2011), White, (2014) and Stetsenko (2007).

Culture refers to traditions for practice in institutions and local communities as manifested in interactions and the production of living conditions (Hedegaard, 1999). It is the interactions between teacher and children in different activities that are the focus of the cases of ECE practice that are presented. A historical perspective is introduced by focusing on traditional practices.

The practice of children's participation in activities is an ongoing process; traditions influence the actual activities and, thereby, contribute to children's cultural formation. Children are born into pre-existing communities, and those children become participants in institutional practice (i.e. family, kindergarten) where tradi-

tions encompass the nuclear family and kindergarten. The activities within these practice traditions frame children's potential development and cultural formation. Conversely, children also influence the activities they participate in, thereby contributing to changes in the practices at home and kindergarten. History can be related both to how the institutions in a society change and to how society, itself, changes (see Hedegaard, Chap. 2, Fig. 1). History is also related to children's development as a process that, for each person, takes place through their movement along the trajectories that the institutions in a society create for their upbringing and education.

Fleer, Hedegaard and Tudge (2009) have criticized some contemporary constructions of childhood. They criticize the way some globalized discourses reify, measure and name children as universal and general (i.e. ready for learning, schooling and the economic market) without considering that children live and develop within concrete local practices that encompass unique conditions, cases and events. Children's cultural formation signifies more than the process of gaining knowledge and skills. While knowledgeable citizens know how things work and know the essence of great books and ideas, this intellectual understanding of knowledge is not enough to support changing practices to foster sustainable living. Educational researchers and pedagogues must attend to values that are the most important for personal lives—both those lived in the present and future civilizations and lives on the planet Earth. The adult generations globally have a duty to protect and act upon the best interests of every child: the child's right to live and to develop to his or her full potential with a sensitivity to local culture and nature. To create optimal conditions for children both today and in the future, we believe that a wholeness approach, understood as an ecological foundation of education, is of the utmost importance in early childhood—the most formative years—as well as later for lifelong cultural formation.

The authors of this book, in agreement with Fleer et al. (2009), argue that new visions for the future must build upon the human capacity to explore, to discover and create, and to form and to be formed in ecological interplay with the local culture, nature and societies where children live. Children live complex, situational local lives, which are more or less impacted by the dynamics of global discourses on education at a time when sustainability is high on the global agenda. To find a way out of 'unsustainability', the driving argument in Ødegaard's chapter of this book is that the cultural and creative dimensions of sustainability need to be given more attention. 'Unsustainability' is a concept meaning that something is not valued to be continued or maintained because it can destroy relationships, be harmful for someone, will eventually be empty or could jeopardize humankind and the planet in the long run. The cultural dimension of sustainability contains a wide range of important areas relevant for ECE (e.g. local heritage, arts, diversity of nature, Internet, and indigenous culture).

In this book, we draw to a large extent upon examples from Norway, but we also include examples from China (Chaps. 4 and 8) and from Greenland (Chap. 2). Play is conceptualised as central to childhood development and is viewed as the main activity of early childhood. Education has to draw on local cultures, which implies variation between local communities; however, it must also be oriented to both national guidelines and UNICEF *Early Learning and Development Guidelines*. In

Chap. 8, Hu demonstrates this variation between the practices described by kindergarten professionals in three different provinces in China. Hu points out how material and cultural traditions influenced the practices in different ways yet also related to the national guidelines. The practices in kindergarten must both support children's exploration and culture formation and take different conditions and traditions into consideration. In Chap. 4, which discusses outdoor kindergarten practices in a Chinese kindergarten and a Norwegian kindergarten, Værum and Birkeland demonstrate that it is possible to focus on play and exploration under very different conditions. Their chapter illustrates how the material conditions and weather conditions may influence kindergarten children's outdoor activities differently, even if both kindergartens and their respective countries follow the same UNICEF guidelines.

In Chap. 5, Grindheim points out the importance of nature as a factor together with culture, in line with Værum and Birkeland's argument that weather conditions are important. In both chapters, the authors argue for extending the model presented in Hedegaard's chapter to apply to the conditions in nature. Grindheim outlines a methodology for how to do research into the complexity of a wholeness approach to education focusing on children's cultural formation. The methodology Grindheim advocates is constructed around microanalyses of different types of conflicts between the societal concept of education, the actual educational setting and conditions in kindergarten, and children's interaction.

A focus on conflict as a way to understand children's social interaction is also the theme in Chap. 3, where Skoglund argues that conflicts in children's interaction can be a way for children to explore their social situations. Skoglund opines that conflicts need not indicate bullying.

1.2 Examining Cultures of Exploration

This book examines the educational conditions that support cultures of exploration in kindergartens. The chapters conceptualise cultures of exploration, whether those cultures are created through children's own passionate engagement or are demanded of them through undertaking specific tasks within different institutional settings. The conditions for children's exploration are a web of activities in different settings with social relationships and artefacts. *Artefacts* carry history and meaning from other places and times. It is in the activities with artefacts and social relations that children's explorative actions take place, and these activities are where they acquire cultural competencies and motive orientations (see Hedegaard, Table 1, this book). From the perspective of the present book, children are viewed as agents in their daily activities, and the analytical focus is placed on how both teachers and children contribute to and participate in exploratory activities. Both children and adults learn through participating in everyday activities, and collaborative exploration has the potential to provide experience that can benefit and support intergenerational activities that create cultures of exploration in educational set-

tings. Ødemotland, in Chap. 11, outlines process drama as a model that can be used in kindergarten practice so both teachers and children can be inspired to approach complex themes in the local environment.

Exploration by young children is central to their development as persons. To explore is a play-related action—a social situation that affects what and how objects or relations are explored. In Chap. 7, Eikset and Ødegaard show how the early educational approach of Fröebel's play pedagogy favoured children's exploration and can be seen as the foundation for later evolution of such an approach. Supporting children's play activity gives children the opportunity to become explorative, curious and self-controlling, as well as emotionally expressive in their relationships to the environment and the persons around them. Children's experiences are widened by their new discoveries and understandings. In ECE, different aspects of discoveries may be opened through activities (e.g. music, dance, nature, language, mathematics). It is a child's engagement and joy in exploration and curiosity, as well as understandings, knowledge and skills in relation to different topics and areas, that create meaningful competencies and life experiences. In addition, emotions like anger, lust, confusion and compassion are relevant to understanding motives that could drive explorative practices. In Chap. 10, Schei and Ødegaard analyse children's exploration of music and of becoming musical; their analysis demonstrates how explorative play with music and children's musicality can lead to musicking (which means that listening, rehearsing, performing, practicing and composing are not separate events, rather we do music, when musicking). Exploration has the potential to break the dichotomy of play versus learning. This book brings an argument of exploration as a pedagogical approach for ECE and, at the same time, also brings to the forefront problematic attempts to universalize exploration. New understandings of layered and imbedded cultural values and activities have been crucial to the team of researchers and contributors to this book.

The concept of learning is sometimes articulated as contrary to the concept of play, but both play and learning are main aspects of young children's lives and will, therefore, easily be connected. The authors of the book share the conviction that the concept of exploration can bridge understandings of play and learning as processes. We share the belief with many early childhood researchers that play, creativity, imagination and experiences are the basic activities of early childhood, and that these activities must be trusted to be of high value for future ECE (e.g., Anning, Cullen & Fleeer, 2004; Bodrova, 2008; Chaiklin & Hedegaard, 2009; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Gradovski et al., 2019; Li, Pan, & Wang, 2018; Nsmnang, 2009; Ødegaard, 2015).

We believe that early childhood tradition and history have the potential to outline pedagogical models built on historical grounded knowledge and explorative attempts (see Hedegaard, Chap. 2 and Ødegaard, Chap. 6). The present book will contribute theoretical insights necessary for understanding and creating children's cultures of exploration. The book will explore how both teachers and children are intertwined in collaborative practice that controls, hinders, develops or transforms both children and teachers alike. Institutional practices can support or hinder different forms of curiosity, creativity and exploration; therefore, the awareness of the cultural aspects of institutional practices is of high importance.

1.3 ‘Glocalisation’ – Revisiting the Global and the Local in Early Childhood Education

An ecological wholeness approach in education calls upon new theories and understandings of teachers and children in institutional contexts. As pedagogues, we believe that such a wholeness approach, considering wider ecological relations as well as the minor relations, will give the best educational conditions for children today and in the future. It is crucial that education break the main discourse of education (i.e. as a market) and restore the strength found historically in ECE. The dynamics of modern childhood penetrate children’s lives through climate change, media, migration, travel, economics and technology, all of which cry for contextual sensitivity in educational policy and pedagogical practices. Globalisation may imply better life conditions for some and worse for other, marginalized groups (Bauman, 1989). It is, therefore, a crucial issue for the experienced generation: how to create a life together with children to approach this question of social equity as well as changes in climate and environment that are a present reality across the globe. It is important that educators and researchers both understand young children in the context of their local cultural-historical heritage and needs, and understand that their childhood is going on now, as we speak. It is a continuous challenge to create conditions for children to have a sense of local heritage at the same time as they learn to understand and manoeuvre in a globally changing world. Indeed, one can learn from history and the present, but our task is to create new pedagogies that are relevant for children in their everyday lives, now and in the future.

The authors of this book share the understanding of cultural traditions as deeply implicated in the developmental processes, holding that local considerations have to be reflected in education. Ødegaard introduces the concept of ‘glocalisation’ in Chap. 6 to point to the present situation for children and to emphasize the interconnectedness between an ecologically layered wholeness approach and the teacher practices that plays out in-between the global and the local. It was Roland Robertson (1995) who introduced the concept of ‘glocalisation’ in his classic, *Glocalization: Time–Space and Homogeneity–Heterogeneity*, where he commented on the assumption that globalisation refers to large-scale phenomena and that what one thinks of as local is, in fact, constructed in a trans-local setting and will often occur in a large-scale locality. He also argued against the presumption that globality is a consequence of modernity; what we call ‘modernity’ has developed historically in different places without any direct connection between them. With his critique of the polarised concept of the global and the local, Robertson invites the reader to a more dynamic understanding of the global and the local. ‘Glocalisation’ conceptualizes the idea that globalisation does not necessarily penetrate every aspect of the local culture, local traditions and views. In spite of globalisation, local conditions can be adopted, maintained and transformed into something beyond what existed beforehand. Glocalisation can be seen as a blend of local and global, which gives it additional meaning.

Awareness of the co-presence of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies and the inspiration to see the local in the global and the global in the local was later taken up in dialogues between Chinese and Norwegian researchers,¹ who proposed the concept of the 'glocal' teacher (Birkeland, 2015; Ødegaard, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c; Trippestad & Huang, 2015). Cases from Norway and China provided detailed insights into how culturally based values and practices are simultaneously global and local (see Chap. 4 by Værum and Birkeland). Ødegaard (in Chap. 6) proposes a model of the teacher calling for dialogical engagement as the teacher always will be locally present in the moment and at the same time living in and with global conditions. *Glocalised learning and teaching* refers to the curricular considerations and pedagogical framing of local and global community connectedness in relation to social responsibility, justice and sustainability. Illustrative cases and arguments for the importance of local communities' influence on implementation of globalised approaches to ECE have also been highlighted by researchers globally for some time (e.g., Chaiklin & Hedegaard, 2005; Hedegaard, 2014; Freitas, Terri, Shelton & Sperb, 2009; Nsmnang, 2009; Ødegaard, 2015; Pearson, 2011; Rogoff, 2003; Simpson, Lumsden & Clark, 2014; Tudge & Wang, 2009).

1.4 The Structure of the Book

This book is structured in three sections: (1) Children's agency and cultural formation, (2) teacher's support to children explorative activity, and (3) Content-specific explorative activities.

Section 1 is oriented to the children's perspective in EEC. In this section, Chap. 2 presents Hedegaard's wholeness approach to development. The chapter then outlines different approaches to supporting children's motivation for being explorative in kindergarten activities. In Chap. 3, Skogslund argues that when children create conflicts during exploration in play activities, they may be motivated to explore their relations to other children. Next, in Chap. 4, Værum and Birkeland present cases from Norway and China to demonstrate that weather and material conditions influence children's motives for exploration. Finally, in Chap. 5, Grindheim presents a methodological approach to studying children's explorative activities through focusing on conflict from different perspectives in children's and teacher's interaction.

¹Matters of globalisation—in educational reform and practice in teacher and preschool teacher education—have been addressed in many formats, including series of seminars and conferences, years of cooperation, cultural exchanges and many visits between scholars of East China Normal University (ECNU) and Bergen University College (BUC), and later a more extended collaboration with Beijing Normal University, Beijing Institute of Education and conference at North East Normal University.

Section 2 takes the teacher's perspective when analysing conditions for children's explorative activity. In Chap. 6, Ødegaard outlines a model for understanding children and teachers as collaborators, dialogically engaged in explorative activity in the context of pedagogical practices. The model are supported in Chap. 7, where Eikset, and Ødegaard argues with the ideas formulated by one of the originators of ECE, Fröebel, whose ideas also are very relevant to present-day ECE. Hu illustrates, in Chap. 8, how concepts and cultures of practice may vary although they relate to the same national ECE policy.

Part 3 takes the content perspective in ECE. Chapter 9 demonstrates how adults connect to children's wondering about natural phenomena and, thus, create possibilities for children's budding scientific activity. In Chap. 10, Schei and Ødegaard argue that children's exploration of music and musicality are important for children engaged in musicking. In Chap. 11, Ødemotland demonstrates how teachers can enrich children's play activity by using process drama activities. Together, these three chapters demonstrate how teachers' support of children's exploration within different areas can contribute to a wholeness approach in ECE that impacts multiple subject areas. These chapters demonstrate—through the diversity of relating to children's wonderings—the importance of teachers' relating to several subject areas in their ECE practice.

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