Chapter 12
Terminological and Conceptual Meta-commentaries on Practices-Developing Research

Niklas Pramling (iD) **and Cecilia Wallerstedt**

Abstract In this commentary concluding this volume (Wallerstedt, Brooks, Ødegaard & Pramling, this volume), we discuss three principal matters: (i) what constitutes problems in research carried out in collaboration between researchers and ECEC personnel, (ii) limitations and ethical dilemmas that we find particular to such research, and finally (iii) the very terminology employed for this kind of research and its participating groups of collaborators.

Introduction

In this final chapter of this volume (Wallerstedt, Brooks, Ødegaard & Pramling, this volume), we will discuss three principal matters.[1] The first concerns what constitutes problems in collaborative research between researchers and ECEC professionals, and we emphasise the importance of not regarding problems as self-evident or as existing facts; simply put, problems need to be problematised. The second issue of consideration involves limitations and ethical dilemmas that we find are specific to this kind of research. The third issue we discuss, and end the volume with, is the very terminology used to refer to participants in research conducted in collaboration between researchers and ECEC personnel and how to refer to and conceptualise this

---

[1] The reasoning in this chapter in part builds on work conducted with funding from the Swedish Institute for Educational Research (Skolfi 2016/112), which is gratefully acknowledged.

N. Pramling (✉)
University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden
e-mail: niklas.pramling@ped.gu.se

C. Wallerstedt
Department of Education, Communication and Learning, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden

kind of research. These strands of reasoning are examples of the semiotic mediation (Wertsch, 2007) and possible re-mediation (Nilsen et al., 2021) of languaging, that is, how language use does not merely refer to the pre-existing but is also a part of constituting the objects of reference as being of a particular kind – and, consequently, re-mediating implies re-constituting what something is taken *as*. Furthermore, since languaging has material consequences, re-mediating implies a shift in what follows from our language, for instance, in research, concerning how we go about studying addressed phenomena and how relationships between participants are formed (cf. Pramling & Peterson, this volume, Chap. 10; Shotter, 1993).

Problematising the Problems Addressed in Collaborative Research

An issue that is almost always raised in relation to collaborative research between researchers and teachers (in our case, ECEC professionals) is the origin of the questions posed and the problems addressed. Even if approaches to such research differ – with action research clearly taking a stand for and, amongst other things being defined by, addressing teachers' questions and problems – they all discuss and relate to this issue. The reason for addressing this issue is that knowledge generated through such research should be relevant to the key participants from educational institutions, primarily teachers. This issue is therefore related to the matter of pragmatic validity. This quality assurance (validity) is sometimes taken quite far in methodological discussions. For example, Nuthall (2004) clarifies: 'By the pragmatic validity of research, I mean research that actually answers the question of how teaching is related to learning in a way that is comprehensible and practically useful for teachers' (p. 273). A key question here is what it means for knowledge to be 'useful': practically applicable, perceived by teachers to be relevant to understanding a part of their work, something that leads to measurable results in children's learning and/or something else. It is critical, we argue, to not reduce (this kind of) research to simple instrumentality and 'deliverability', that is, as input-output models; this would be very unfortunate and would severely restrict the potential value of collaborative research. There are many issues that are not of this kind that are, arguably, just as relevant to generating new knowledge about what is of interest and relevance for both the research community and the agents of educational institutions, such as preschool teachers and preschool heads.

It is pivotal that the knowledge generated through collaboration between researchers and ECEC professionals be relevant not only to the research community but also to the agents of educational institutions. What is more problematic is the premise that the questions (and the problems they address) need to come from the teachers (or other personnel at educational institutions), which indicates an assumption that posing researchable questions does not presume having a research education. However, learning to pose fruitful and theoretically motivated research

questions is an important part of a research education. Hence, even if the questions and problems addressed in such research stem from the agents of educational institutions, researcher contribution is needed to shape these into questions that can be answered through empirical research. Closely related to this and also, we argue, in need of more careful consideration is what problems are addressed by posing particular questions. In the next section, we will take a detour of sorts to arrive at a number of points in relation to this matter.

What Problems to Address and What Does It Mean to Solve Them?

While addressing the problems of the agents of educational institutions – often referred to with the everyday notion of 'the practice' (cf. below) – is integral to collaborative research in which researchers and teachers participate, what constitutes a problem and what it means to address it – or, in more common terms, solve it – tend to remain unreflected on. What problems are, we argue, is not often discussed. That the question of what constitutes a problem to address in research is left unscrutinised is reflected, we argue, in the focus being directed towards solutions to problems. However, as argued by Schön (1993), there would be a point in paying more attention to what he refers to as 'problem-setting' rather than merely focusing on 'problem-solving'. The concept of problem-setting denotes accounts of 'what is wrong and what needs fixing' (Schön, 1993, p. 138). That is, how we constitute something *as* a problem sets the frame for, and is generative for, our investigation; it directs our attention (i.e., makes us pay attention to some things while making us rationally blind to other things). Neglecting to reflect on what we constitute as problems to address in research and only focusing on how to solve – unproblematised – problems is therefore problematic (!). One simple example would be whether we constitute a teaching problem in terms of teachers (teachers' planning, carrying out, and evaluating), children (children's capabilities, talents, interests, and attention or lack thereof), or relationships (communication between participants) or in some other terms. How we constitute problems in research is inherently related to our theoretical point of view (theoretical premises, principles, and concepts). It is vital to critically scrutinise what we set as problems to be solved and not merely take them for granted in finding solutions.

Having argued the importance of participants in collaborative research paying more attention to problem-setting (Schön, 1993) and not jumping ahead to problem-solving, we would also like to render some inspirational reflection on the latter; that is, what it means to solve a problem. In their classic treatise on the *Metaphors we Live By* – that is, the metaphors that are formative of and generative for how we conceive of and conceptualise phenomena – Lakoff and Johnson (1980) render a fortuitous example. An exchange student at the University of California at Berkeley attending a seminar on metaphor mentioned a 'wondrous' metaphor he kept hearing

on campus: 'the solution of my problems' (p. 143). The student understood this expression as a chemical metaphor and was surprised to learn that other participants did not see it as a metaphor (in this way). While stemming from a form of misunderstanding, this way of understanding the expression of solutions to problems, as Lakoff and Johnson discuss, is worth pondering over:

> It gives us a view of problems as things that never disappear utterly and that cannot be solved once and for all. All of your problems are always present, only they may be dissolved and in solution, or they may be in solid form. The best you can hope for is to find a catalyst that will make one problem dissolve without making another one precipitate out. And since you do not have complete control over what goes into the solution, you are constantly finding old and new problems precipitating out and present problems dissolving, partly because of your efforts and partly despite anything you do. (p. 143f.)

Understanding the 'solution to a problem' as such a chemical metaphor, they further argue, implies that 'problems are not the kind of things that can be made to disappear forever. To treat them as things that can be "solved" once and for all is pointless' (p. 144). Understood in this sense or, in Lakoff and Johnson's terms, 'liv[ing] by this metaphor' implies:

> direct[ing] your energies toward finding out what catalysts will dissolve your most pressing problems for the longest time without precipitating our worse ones. The reappearance of a problem is viewed as a natural occurrence rather than a failure on your part to find 'the right way to solve it'. (p. 144)

What we set as problems to be researched and, indeed, what we understand a problem to be – as cogently illustrated by the chemical metaphor example – are generative for how we go about knowledging. The language we use, with its inherent metaphorics and perspectivity – theoretically captured in the concept of semiotic mediation (Wertsch, 2007) – is constitutive rather than reflective of pre-existing reality (problems). Re-mediating and thus re-constituting what *is* the problem is a vital part of 'solving' *it*. Problems can therefore not simply be addressed as if they were unquestionable facts (the allegedly 'actual' problems teachers face); rather, problem-setting is an important part of knowledging and a practice that is contingent on theoretical resources (tool-kits, cf. Wells, 1999) allowing shifting perspectives.

Limitations and Ethical Considerations

What we have considered in this chapter so far is how problems are constituted. We have touched upon an aspect of an ethical nature that is also visible throughout this anthology. This aspect is twofold. Firstly, conducting relevant research is an ethical responsibility of researchers, and in this case, it means that research should be relevant to preschool teachers and other educational actors and, in the long run, should also benefit children. Secondly, the process of problem-setting and problem-solving in research and collaboration projects, as discussed in this book, is a

power-balancing act. When doing research in close collaboration between academia and preschools, there should be an ambition to strive for equal conditions for participation among researchers as well as teachers.

We want to underline that the kind of research we discuss in this book is just *one* branch of research within the field of educational science. What we describe here cannot be considered an all-encompassing development of the discipline. There will still be a need for experimental research, collaborations with other disciplines besides preschools, philosophical discussions, and other scientific contributions. One reason for this is that theoretical development is as important as the development of methods in educational practice. There might be an emerging tendency towards an overemphasis on the latter (i.e., practice development). Acknowledging *practices-developing* (in the plural; see below) *research* as *one* particular form of research on its own terms can help in tackling other ethical dilemmas. Eriksson (2018) points to two ethical problems that arise when one tries to adopt traditional ethical standards in action research of different kinds. The first concerns anonymity. To not expose the identity of the participants in research is normally a basic rule; but when teachers choose to participate in a research collaboration, they might want to post information about the project on the preschool's website and may write their own texts and make presentations about the project in different fora – not allowing them to do so would, arguably, be unethical. It should be self-evident that they are to be given full credit for their work. The second problem that Eriksson discusses is voluntarism. When a school (e.g., through the preschool head) decides to participate in a research and development project, it is not, of course, necessarily the case that all the teachers there have the same interest in participating. Research is voluntary, but practice development in a school is mandatory. There is an obvious risk that these boundaries will become blurred, and they need careful consideration when one is setting up and carrying out a project.

We want to add another problem that occurs in relation to newly developed restrictions and forms of ethical review of research that are now often required (in order to later be published in a research journal, for example). These reviews generally require a clear plan for the research in which all steps are well defined and described, in good time before a project starts. However, as could be learned from the examples offered in this book, *practices-developing research* projects often develop in a different way. If one allows the process of collaboration to be dynamic and dialogical, not every aspect of a project can be defined in advance. A collaboration typically lasts a long time, and it can sometimes be hard to determine where it crosses the border from an initiative of collaboration to a research project in need of ethical review. We want to emphasise that these issues of ethical consideration do not entail a suggestion to relieve *practices-developing research* from ethical responsibility, rather the opposite. This anthology provides many examples of how an ethical awareness is critical in all steps, from the first contact between participants, through the process, to after the project is finished. It should also be considered that teachers and researchers may have different ethical guidelines, rules, and education. These differences should be communicated and coordinated.

Labelling and Conceptualising Collaborative Research Between Researchers and ECEC Professionals

In this volume, examples of, experiences from, and insights into research with early childhood education and care (ECEC) professionals have been presented and discussed. Drawing on many examples of actual projects, the intention has been to contribute to informing the methodology for such research. The individual chapters provide ample examples of how such research can be designed and organised and, most importantly, what knowledge contributions it can make to research and to the development of ECEC institutions. In this final chapter, we will take a meta-perspective on the terminology of this research and draw some conclusions that can inform further conceptualisation.

Looking at the terminology used for the kind of research in which researchers and representatives of educational institutions (e.g., ECEC teachers) collaborate, we can see that different names are used, which is also discussed in this volume's introductory chapter (Wallerstedt & Nilsen, this volume, Chap. 1). Widely used terms are '*practice-near research*' and '*practice-developing research*'. Other terms used are 'combined research and development project' (Pramling et al., 2019; Stavholm et al., 2021), 'praxeology' (Pascal & Bertram, 2012; Winterbottom & Mazzocco, 2016), 'researcher-practitioner cooperation' (Wagner, 1997), 'practice-oriented' (Björklund & Palmér, this volume, Chap. 3), and 'participatory preschool practice development project' (Åkerblom, this volume, Chap. 6). These are all, of course, legitimate names for the research they denote. Since language as a cultural tool-kit (Wells, 1999) not only refers to what is spoken about but also provides a perspective – theoretically labelled semiotic mediation (Wertsch, 2007), as we have already discussed – it may be useful to briefly address what perspectives these different names constitute and what their implications are. Here, we will focus particularly on the use of 'practice' in these names.

The name 'practice-based research' clearly states that such research needs to start in 'practice'. Building on a traditional distinction between 'practice' and 'theory', this implies that the grounding is taken in ECEC rather than in research (state-of-the-art empirical knowledge and/or theoretical advancement). Such a stance, starting in and with 'practice' and, more specifically aligned with such a perspective, the teachers' questions, is a hallmark of action research.

The name 'practice-near research' differs from the previous one, remaining open as to where the incentive (and questions and problems) for such research stems from. The specification of 'near practice' implies that research of this kind could not be conducted in a laboratory setting but has to relate to – be in the proximity of – the educational institution (or 'practice') being researched. The name 'practice-oriented' lies close to these two names and, like them, implies that the 'practice' is there and known beforehand; and its singular form implies that it can be equated with the educational institution (e.g., preschool) addressed.

What remains unconceptualised in these names is what concept of 'practice' is employed. Rather, both formulations imply a common-sense or everyday notion of

'practice', as a contrast to 'theory' and as more or less synonymous with what goes on at the ECEC institution. We do not suggest that 'practice' *is* defined in a name, of course, but merely that the form of the labels *implies* that 'practice' is a term without theoretical specification. Based on these simple observations and comments, here we will elaborate on the inherent perspectivity (semiotic mediation) of the names employed for research with ECEC personnel and their implications. Finally, we will suggest an alternative term that, we argue, avoids some of the problems inherent in the other alternatives, as a way forward for conceptualising collaborative research between researchers and ECEC personnel.

On the Distinction Between 'Researcher' and 'Practitioner' and the Label of 'Practice-Developing Research'

Questioning the usefulness of labelling participants in practice-near research in terms of the distinction 'practitioner' (teacher) and 'theoretician' (researcher), Alexandersson (2006) argues:

> The distinction 'practitioner' and 'theoretician' is questionable if this difference refers to anything other than teachers and researchers having different work. Their actions are different as their work is of different kinds and has different aims. Teachers are responsible for pedagogical work: They teach/lead children's and adults' learning. Researchers study work: They research. The two therefore have different knowledge interests. Knowledge building may also differ. Research, in contrast to pedagogical work, is of a public character, but rarely do teachers need to make their work processes public – that is, in text for someone else to formulate their premises, approaches, and results. This is, however, necessary in researchers' work. (p. 365, our translation)

By labelling participants in practice-near research as if one group were concerned with practice and another with theory, we reproduce a societal hierarchy according to which theory is higher (metaphorically speaking, that is, better, more advanced; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and practice lower (see also the next section of this chapter). Such a distinction risks making us rationally blind to the fact that theory in science is grounded in practical (empirical) investigation, and practice (e.g. teaching) is informed by theory (whether this is explicit or implicit, and whether or not the individual is aware of this).

In the above quote, Alexandersson also argues that clarifying premises and communicating principles, while integral to the work of researchers, are not a part of the work of teachers. However, it may be questioned whether this is still true (Alexandersson's text is from 2006). Arguably, today teachers are expected to be able to formulate – to both children's guardians and preschool heads as well as each other within the work team – the principles and foundations of their work with children. Hence, we argue that the work of teachers – in our case, preschool teachers – has also become more public, with demands on the ability to make known and explicit one's professional knowledge. With this emerging, or more emphasised, contemporary trend, practice-developing research becomes even more important.

Such research, we suggest, does not simply reproduce the traditional practice of preschool teachers on the one hand or of researchers on the other. Rather, other practices are constituted, whereby teachers and researchers take on roles and tasks that have traditionally not been particularly included in their professional work.

The Politics of Representation

Naming and categorising participants in research are not neutral processes. How research participants – whether they be teachers collaborating with researchers and/or children or other participants – are referred to can be seen as exemplifying what Mehan (1993) has labelled the politics of representation. This concept captures the fact that there is a perspective inherent in our terminology, even in the language of research. In the context of discussing research conducted in collaboration between researchers and ECEC personnel, it is vital, we argue, that the latter participants be referred to in terms of 'preschool teachers', which is their professional denomination (in Sweden and in many other countries), rather than with the more common term 'practitioner'. The problem with the term 'practitioner' in this context is that it is part of a tradition of argumentation (Billig, 1996) according to which it is in opposition to 'theoretician'. There are additional problems with this distinction in referring to ECEC teachers and researchers, but here we restrict the discussion to one. In Alexandersson's (2006) elaboration on the relationship between research and the development of educational practice, he argues, 'when the teaching profession is labelled as a practical profession, this ends up far down on a professional hierarchy. Teacher can then, as a profession, be held back – economically as well as when it comes to influence over the development of [preschool or] school' (p. 357, our translation). Phrased differently, when labelling ECEC teachers as 'practitioners', researchers unintentionally contribute to suppressing the profession of preschool teachers and thereby keeping them not only from being recognised as having a voice in the public debate and as agents driving the development of ECEC but also, in fact, from gaining standing as members of a profession per se. In combination with conducting research with ECEC personnel, how these participants are labelled in research is critical to how others perceive this group (and all that this entails, such as societal status and salary) as well as how members of the group perceive themselves and their possibilities to develop their collective agency. If research is to support young children through informing quality ECEC, researchers need to recognise the ECEC professionals by giving them appropriate acknowledgement as a professional group.

Practices-Developing Research

In a continuation of our reasoning on the politics of representation in research collaborations between ECEC professionals and researchers, there is an additional terminological issue we would like to raise. Having reflected on the texts in this volume

(Wallerstedt et al., this volume) as well as other research in this tradition, we suggest using the name *'practices-developing theory'* (i.e. in the *plural*) rather than 'practice-developing theory'. The rationale and reason for this suggestion is as follows. The word 'practice' is used both in an everyday sense and in a theoretical sense. According to the first alternative – that is, 'practice' as an everyday concept – preschool is described as a 'practice'. When taking this perspective – or using the word in this way – preschool is constituted in contrast to 'theory', according to a prevalent and long-standing tradition of argumentation (cf. Billig, 1996, and above). However, there are fundamental problems with this, as well as its ensuing image of preschool teachers as 'practitioners', as we have discussed. The word 'practice' is also used in research/theoretical language. In such cases, it refers to institutionalised activities (i.e. activities for which there are more or less established traditions that 'go beyond' the present activity; cf. Linell, 2014). Understood in this sense, Initiation-Response-Evaluation/Follow-up (IRE/IRF) would be a practice typical of schooling, and singing songs including all the children's names at circle time would be a practice in preschool, to give two examples. It is not only theoretical development, on an empirical basis, but also the development of educational practices (e.g., how teachers can contribute to imagination and play, inclusion, social justice, and many other important practices) that the knowledge-building of the kind of research this book discusses the methodology of arguably contributes to. In using the plural form – 'practices' – rather than the singular, we indicate that we are using the word in its theoretical sense rather than its everyday sense, in order to avoid re-constituting a common dichotomy between practice (preschool) and theory (research), a dichotomy that is arguably counterproductive to the kind of collaborative knowledge-building we give examples of and discuss the principles of, challenges with, and gains from here. This is an important meta-comment that we think should be kept in mind in the conducting of further research.

On a final note, the reasoning presented in this chapter can also be seen as a reflection on the topic of this book – *methodology understood as developing the practices of conducting research* with early childhood educational institutional personnel. This, consequently, entails an additional sense of '*practices-developing research*' in the plural.

References

Åkerblom, A. (this volume). Opening up new spaces for action: Challenges of participatory action research for preschool practice transformation in an introductory unit for immigrant children. In C. Wallerstedt, E. Brooks, E. E. Ødegaard, & N. Pramling (Eds.), *Methodology for research with early childhood education and care professionals*. Springer.

Alexandersson, M. (2006). Praxisnära forskning och lärayryrkets vetenskapliga bas. In B. Sandin, & R. Säljö (Eds.), *Utbildningsvetenskap – ett kunskapsområde under formering* [Educational science – A field of knowledge in formation] (pp. 355–376). Carlssons.

Billig, M. (1996). *Arguing and thinking: A rhetorical approach to social psychology* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Björklund, C., & Palmér, H. (this volume). Exploring mixed roles and goals in collaborative research: The example of toddler mathematics education. In C. Wallerstedt, E. Brooks, E. E. Ødegaard & N. Pramling (Eds.), *Methodology for research with early childhood education and care professionals*. Springer.

Eriksson, I. (2018). Lärares medverkan i praktiknära forskning: Förutsättningar och hinder [Teachers' participation in practice-near research: Conditions and obstacles]. *Utbildning & Lärande, 12*(1), 27–40.

Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago Press.

Linell, P. (2014). Interactivities, intersubjectivities and language: On dialogism and phenomenology. *Language and Dialogue, 4*(2), 165–193.

Mehan, H. (1993). Beneath the skin and between the ears: A case study in the politics of representation. In S. Chaiklin & J. Lave (Eds.), *Understanding practice: Perspectives on activity and context* (pp. 241–268). Cambridge University Press.

Nilsen, M., Lundin, M., Wallerstedt, C., & Pramling, N. (2021). Evolving and re-mediated activities when preschool children play analogue and digital memory games. *Early Years, 41*(2–3), 232–247.

Nuthall, G. (2004). Relating classroom teaching to student learning: A critical analysis of why research has failed to bridge the theory-practice gap. *Harvard Educational Review, 74*(3), 273–306.

Pascal, C., & Bertram, T. (2012). Praxis, ethics and power: Developing praxeology as a participatory paradigm for early childhood research. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 20*(4), 477–492.

Pramling, N., & Peterson, L. (this volume). The importance of de-reifying language in research with early childhood education and care professionals: A critical feature of workshop methodology. In C. Wallerstedt, E. Brooks, E. E. Ødegaard, & N. Pramling (Eds.), *Methodology for research with early childhood education and care professionals*. Springer.

Pramling, N., Wallerstedt, C., Lagerlöf, P., Björklund, C., Kultti, A., Palmér, H., Magnusson, M., Thulin, S., Jonsson, A., & Pramling Samuelsson, I. (2019). *Play-responsive teaching in early childhood education*. Springer. Open access: https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007%2F978-3-030-15958-0

Schön, D. A. (1993). Generative metaphor: A perspective on problem-setting in social policy. In A. Ortony (Ed.), *Metaphor and thought* (2nd ed., pp. 137–163). Cambridge University Press.

Shotter, J. (1993). *Conversational realities: Constructing life through language*. Sage.

Stavholm, E., Lagerlöf, P., & Wallerstedt, C. (2021). Appropriating the concept of metacommunication: An empirical study of the professional learning of an early childhood education workteam. *Teaching and Teacher Education*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2021.103306

Wagner, J. (1997). The unavoidable intervention of educational research: A framework for reconsidering researcher-practitioner cooperation. *Educational Researcher, 26*(7), 13–22.

Wallerstedt, C., & Nilsen, M. (this volume). Enabling knowledge development relevant for ECEC. In C. Wallerstedt, E. Brooks, E. E. Ødegaard, & N. Pramling (Eds.), *Methodology for research with early childhood education and care professionals*. Springer.

Wells, G. (1999). *Dialogic inquiry: Towards a sociocultural practice and theory of education*. Cambridge University Press.

Wertsch, J. V. (2007). Mediation. In H. Daniels, M. Cole, & J. V. Wertsch (Eds.), *The Cambridge companion to Vygotsky* (pp. 178–192). Cambridge University Press.

Winterbottom, C., & Mazzocco, P. J. (2016). Reconstructing teacher education: A praxeological approach to pre-service teacher education. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 24*(4), 495–507.