Doctoral theses at NTNU, 2020:344

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A cross-cultural study of kindergarten practices in China and Norway

Doctoral thesis

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Norwegian University of Science and Technology
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ISBN 978-82-326-5035-7 (printed ver.)
ISBN 978-82-326-5035-4 (electronic ver.)
ISSN 1503-8181

Doctoral theses at NTNU, 2020:344

Printed by NTNU Grafisk senter

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Looking back at my journey towards finalizing my thesis, I can see an exciting and surprising landscape, but also detours, dead ends and roundabouts. All the encounters on my journey have formed me as an early childhood education researcher.

I want to use this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude.

To *the staff and children in Lotus and Glacier Buttercup kindergartens* who generously shared their everyday practices with me.

To *my employer* Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL), former Bergen University College (BUC) who made this project possible by allocating a scholarship, and giving me the opportunity to develop collaboration with China within early childhood education.

To *my supervisors,* Professor *Anne Trine Kjørholt* at the Norwegian Center for Child Research at NTNU and Professor *Inger Eriksson* at University of Stockholm. They have been of tremendous help and have supported me in good as well as bad days during the project.

To *my colleague Dr. Min He* at East China Normal University who has been an organizer, mediator, interpreter and discussant during the process. Without her, this project would have been less possible.

To Professor *Elin Eriksen Ødegaard,* as head of the Norwegian Research Council financed project Kindergarten as an Arena of Cultural Formation (BDA) and later as director of Kindergarten knowledge research center (KINDknow). She has inspired my work and been of great support.

To *my colleagues* in the BDA research group for having faith in my project and particularly my fellow doctoral candidates *Liv Torunn Grindheim*, *Ida Marie Lysså* and *Geir Aaserud.*

To the supportive *NAFOL network,* the national doctoral school for teacher educators, and especially the academic leader at the time Professor *Anna-Lena Østern.*

To *Lei Wang Hodneland* who initiated the China - Norway collaboration at HVL (BUC), *Anne Synnøve Ekrene Hammer,* my research fellow in the initial phase of the project and *Siv Ødemotland* who I have shared unforgettable experiences with in China.

To *my dear family* who has been patient and tolerant during the whole process.

To *my grandfather* who was a sailor in the “Far East” during the depression years and who wrote vivid letters to the family about his experiences from China and to my *grandmother* who kept these letters for generations to come and in this way evoked my curiosity for China.

A special thank goes to my *husband Halvard* who has supported and challenged me and helped me to keep balanced through the long process.

Thank you all!

Åsta Birkeland

ABSTRACT

The thesis contributes to knowledge regarding cultural formation ideals in kindergarten practices in different cultural contexts in a historical time of increased focus on individualization in early childhood education globally. The main questions addressed are two-folded: What characterizes the different kindergarten practices in kindergartens in China and in Norway, and which cultural formation ideals can be traced in the individualizing and collectivizing practices in kindergartens in the two countries?

The approach to these questions is a cross-cultural case study of two kindergartens situated indifferent cultural contexts—*Lotus kindergarten* in China, and *Glacier Buttercup Kindergarten* in Norway. The focus of the study is broad, but is limited to three impact areas. The research questions are elaborated and explored within the purview of three thematic topics: 1) Artefacts displayed on the walls in the kindergartens, 2) Teaching approaches in natural science events and 3) Regulation of time in everyday practices. The thematic topics constitute different manifestations of social practices.

The methodological approach is poly-vocal video- and photo-cued interviews with kindergarten teachers in both kindergartens. The interviews are analyzed from a cultural historical activity theoretical perspective especially inspired by Aleksei Leontiev and Anna Stetsenko.

The findings indicate that cultural formation ideals in both kindergartens are multifaceted and somewhat conflicting. In the Chinese kindergarten, traces of the self-cultivating and interdependent child were identified as well as the competitive and individualized child. In the Norwegian kindergarten, cultural formation ideals included the authentic and unique child, the autonomous and self-regulated child as well as the democratic citizen with human rights.

The study demonstrates the importance of doing small-scale cross-cultural studies in order to understand educational practice in a historical and cultural perspective. The poly-vocal approach contributes to destabilizing and problematizing taken for granted assumptions and practices in early childhood education in both countries. Tracing cultural formation ideals is furthermore contesting and opposing limited focus on short term learning goals and rather ask for what kind of human being early childhood education is promoting. Finally, the study contributes to a more multifaceted understanding of individualization.

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PRELUDE

For almost two decades, both my educational and research interests have been to focus on intercultural education as part of early childhood teacher education[1] and cross-cultural studies of early childhood education and care[2] in China and Norway. My first visit to China was in 2004, as a participant in a delegation of teachers from the teacher education program at Bergen University College. The intention of this first visit was to establish an institutional collaboration with Chinese universities and teacher educations. Concurrently, I initiated and developed a program as part of early childhood teacher education that was entitled *Cultural Understanding and Comparative Education*. The intention of this program was to promote cultural understanding in general and to enhance insight into the relationship between early childhood education and cultural values. The focus in the program was early childhood education in China.

Throughout this program, I stayed in China for both short and long periods, alone and with teacher students. These visits gave me the opportunity to study in a multitude of kindergartens and conduct discussions with Chinese kindergarten teachers, teacher educators, and researchers. The collaboration also gave me the chance to be a host for numerous delegations of Chinese kindergarten teachers and researchers who have come to Norway to observe Norwegian kindergartens.

[1] In China, the teachers in early childhood education are called *laoshi* 老师 (old and respected) and *barnehagelærer* (kindergarten teacher) in Norway. The terms "kindergarten teacher" and "teacher" will be used to represent the kindergarten teachers both in China and Norway.

[2] The early childhood education and care institutions for children aged 3–6 years are called *You'eryuan* 幼儿园 in China and are full-time institutions. Institutions for children below three years old are called nurseries. Recently, there has been a trend to integrate nurseries and kindergartens, at least from the two-year old children onward (Zhu, 2008). Pre-primary classes offer early education for children aged five to six for one year. These classes place greater emphasis on academics (Zhu, 2008). The educational institutions for children aged between one and six years in Norway are called *Barnehage* (kindergarten). These are full-time institutions for children aged 1–6 years. In this thesis, early childhood education and care institutions in China and Norway will generally be referred to as kindergarten.

In this period, I experienced a continuous movement between China and Norway, which has brought up questions to practices in Norwegian as well as the Chinese early childhood education. All together, these experiences have demonstrated the potentials in the interplay and dialogue between "insiders" and "outsiders" by conducting cross-cultural studies (Blosser & Kubow, 2016; Maguth & Hilburn, 2015; McNess, Arthur, & Crossley, 2016). I have repeatedly experienced how kindergarten practices are taken for granted and are considered as something "natural" and not "cultural."

The continuous moving back and forth between the urban cities of Beijing and Shanghai to the quiet rural area in Voss, Norway, where I live, have constituted my storied landscape (Clandinin, 2013). I am embedded in stories that have shaped my understanding of the practices in kindergarten in China and Norway. The importance of repeated visits has become explicit whenever I have gone with a new group of Norwegian students to China and they experience Chinese kindergartens for the first time. In this process, my questions to the students have changed and so have my answers to their questions. In this sense, the knowledge construction and insights into kindergarten in China and Norway has been like a hermeneutic spiral (Ödman, 2007). Through this long-term commitment, I have generated new experiences of kindergarten in China and Norway and thereby I have discovered new details in the educational landscape in both countries.

During the years of collaboration with Chinese universities and kindergartens, I have faced fundamental preconceptions of "the other," such as preconceptions of the collective, uniformed kindergarten in China and the individualized, child-centered kindergarten in Norway. These assumptions are expressed among early childhood education teachers, students, and university professors in China as well as in Norway. In these meetings, the participants have expressed ambivalence toward early childhood education in the "foreign" country. The Norwegian

students, early childhood education teachers, and teacher educators have expressed how exciting and exotic it is to study Chinese early childhood education. On the other hand, they express doubt with regard to whether there is anything to learn from China. "It is so different from us," they say. On the other hand, Chinese students and teachers express a strong wish to learn from the "West"[3]. When I give lectures in China, the teachers often say, "Please tell us what we can do better!" I am not always sure whether this is an expression of eagerness to learn and an idea that there is something to learn or whether it is an expression of politeness, because I also meet incorporated skepticism toward the values of the "West." The following episode illustrates this skepticism:

> I had been observing in the kindergarten in China most of the day. Repeatedly, I observed that one of the boys was moving on the outskirts of the group of children. He was occupied with his own things. No one seemed to pay any attention to the actions of this child. When I asked the teachers at the end of the day why he seemed to live his life on the outskirts of the group, they explained with a small laugh: "He has stayed two years in the West with his parents and has been exposed to individualization, so you see, there is nothing we can do about him".

This teacher conveys an understanding of individualization as something that damages the child. I encountered another example of ambivalence when a group of Norwegian kindergarten

[3] According to Hayhoe (2007) and Hayhoe & Pan (2001) categories like "East" and "West" are themselves conventions that reflect a somewhat distorted understanding of the globe and its dimensions. The use of "East" and "West" is ambiguous and has many connotations. In this thesis, the "West" is defined as "West"ern Europe and North America. The "East" is in this thesis mainly used to refer to China. These are well-established notions (by the "West"), although North America just as well can be defined as "East" in relation to China. The colonizing aspects and Euro-centrism of the concepts are questioned in Edward Said *Orientalism* (2003). The notions of the "Global South" (also known as developing countries/majority world/poor countries) and the "Global North" (known as Europe, North America, and Australia/New Zealand/minority world) have been criticized as conceptually inadequate because of inequities within countries as well as between countries and because of the number of countries that do not fit into either category (Penn, 2002; 2010).

teacher students visited China and observed a Chinese kindergarten for several days. One of the students reflected on the experience afterwards in the following manner:

> I really like the structure in the Chinese kindergarten. The life there seems predictable for the children. They know what is going to happen, and when. The transitions between activities are so calm and smooth. However, where do we find children's participation and influence? We (in Norway) think this is important, but I cannot see children's participation in the Chinese kindergarten.

This comment from the Norwegian student illustrates an understanding of children's participation as something juxtaposed to collective activities. It made me wonder if this is an expression of a western way of defining and understanding children's participation and influence.

The third example is from a group of Chinese kindergarten teachers visiting Norwegian kindergartens. The example demonstrates a clear critical voice from a Chinese teacher. She questions the children's responsibility and the teacher's role.

> The Norwegian kindergarten is so relaxed. I would like to work there. They seem to have plenty of time and small demands to reach specific goals. The teachers just sit there and observe the children when they are playing outdoors. It seems like they do not want to disturb the children. What do the teachers want to achieve by being so laid-back? It almost looks like the children have the responsibility for their educational outcome.

These narratives are examples of how everyday practices in kindergarten have implications of different ideals of children and childhood. Further, the narratives elucidate how social practices can be interpreted and understood differently. These experiences triggered my interest to

understand the cultural variations in the social practices and ideals in everyday life in kindergarten.

When the research project entitled *Kindergarten as an Arena for Cultural Formation* (Barnehagen som Danningsarena, BDA) was established, I got an opportunity to take part. The BDA project was conducted at the Centre of Educational Research at Bergen University College, Norway with Professor Elin Eriksen Ødegaard as the project manager. The Norwegian Research Council, Programme for Strategic University projects as well as Bergen University College have financed the project.

BDA is an interdisciplinary research project that emphasizes conditions for children's cultural formation, children's meaning making and educational practices in kindergarten. The BDA project consists of numerous sub-projects with social epistemological perspectives (Ødegaard & Kruger, 2012). Historical and cultural perspectives on children and childhood, (James & Prout, 1990; Jenks, 1982), and cultural formation in kindergarten are essential in the project. However, the design and analytical perspectives differ in the sub-projects.

The BDA project explores conditions for *danning*/cultural formation, primarily in the Norwegian kindergarten (Grindheim, 2014; Kallestad & Ødegaard, 2013; Schei, 2013). Grindheim specifically explores democratic *danning*/formation in Norwegian kindergartens doing citizenship. Three studies, including this one, focus on childhood and early childhood education and care in China. Ida Marie Lysså makes an inquiry into childhood within the context of Chinese kindergartens by specifically focusing on disciplining (2018). Anne Synnøve Ekrene Hammer and Min He (2016) make a comparative study of the teaching approaches in natural science in kindergartens in both China and Norway. The present study made it possible to follow up my interest for cultural variations in early childhood education practices with BDA's focus on cultural formation.

PART 1 FRAMING THE STUDY

The topic of this thesis is cultural formation ideals in early childhood education with a cross-cultural perspective. The two following chapters will frame the study.

Chapter 1: Introduction

I will first give the background and motivation for the topic. Furthermore, the chapter clarifies the concept of cultural formation and formation ideals. The chapter will also outline the purpose of the research, the main research questions and the sub questions in the articles. Finally, the chapter gives an overall view of the structure of the thesis.

Background

"Appropriate" ways of imparting early childhood education have historically been spread from West Europe and North America to other parts of the world (Fleer, Hedegaard, & Tudge, 2009b; Penn, 2002; Wollons, 2000). According to Wollons (2000), historically, the spread of ideas has been through visiting educators and missionaries. Currently, international organizations such as OECD (Bennett, 2006), UNESCO (Burnett, 2006), and the World Bank (Penn, 2002) as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a decisive role in this ongoing distribution. Certain values and norms are decontextualized, naturalized, and, consequently, perceived to be universally good for children (Fleer et al., 2009b). In contemporary political documents and curriculum guidelines, similarities in discourses can be identified globally (Fleer et al., 2009b). However, the manner in which general ideas have been adopted varies greatly across nations. Despite similar ideas, the local practices of implementation of ideas differ. The practices can be considered as hybrids between "cultural loans" and local adjustments (Bray, 2014).

According to Appadurai (1996), new educational ideas introduced into societies become quickly indigenized and brought into the service of state ideologies and counter ideologies,

creating a local version suited to that context. These local versions are partially due to societal values, beliefs, and goals as well as a society's access to resources and societal and institutional demands; these versions imply that transformation is complex and must be understood from a historical perspective (Fleer et al., 2009b; Freitas, Shelton, & Sperb, 2009; Wollons, 2000).

> We believe that in order to understand the global-local tension involved in implementing early childhood care and education policies in any society, it is essential to know the history of that society, given that the changes that take place are always a transformation of what has been and not a simple substitution of the old by the new. (Freitas et al., 2009, p. 288)

Since the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989, notions like "child-centered education," "individualized teaching," and "children's rights to participation" within early childhood education have become prevalent within political documents and curriculum reforms worldwide and represent ideals of early childhood education (Clark, Kjørholt, & Moss, 2005; Fleer, Hedegaard, & Tudge, 2009a; Kjørholt & Penn, 2019; Kjørholt & Seland, 2012; Vandenbroeck, 2006; Vandenbroeck & Bie, 2006). These notions give indications of ideal educational processes. However, it is not obvious how such notions take form in different local practices. Concepts such as "freedom," "child-centered," "choice," "participation," "whole child," and "seeing the child" are "now so much part of our linguistic landscape that they are often presumed to go without saying as real, identifiable conditions or practices" (McArdle & McWilliam, 2005, p. 325). Well-known terms like these need to be analyzed within educational practices in order to understand their educational implications.

Recent educational reforms in early childhood education in China as well as in Norway, as reflected in policy documents, indicate increased emphasize on individualization in teaching approaches and similarities in childhood paradigm based on the individualized child with

agency and rights (Gao & Huo, 2017; Grindheim, 2014; Pan, Wang, & Li, 2018). These ideals are explicit ideals in the respective political documents. On the other hand, analysis of situated practices can provide a more nuanced picture of these ideals in the guidelines.

Another and seemingly contradictory political concern globally, is the concern about children's academic learning as a human investment. At a time when political authorities are globally concerned with children's learning as a human investment (Heckman, 2011; Kjørholt, 2013; Kjørholt & Penn, 2019; Moss, 2014; Penn, 2010), there is a need to counteract this one-sided approach to learning aspects of early childhood education by questioning what kind of human being is promoted through practices in the kindergartens. Following Biesta (2010) there is a need to ask what the purpose of education is. Also Johansson (2018) addresses this question by asking what kind of citizen that is brought up in kindergarten.

One way of approaching this global diffusion of contradictory ideas is to conduct cross-cultural studies of local practices. Such studies provide an opportunity to trace notions of cultural formation in kindergartens situated in different cultural historical contexts. The research interest of the present study is to deepen our knowledge regarding cultural formation ideals in kindergarten practices in different cultural contexts at a time when discourses of individualization are spreading globally, including in China and Norway.

Cultural formation and the "ideal" child

Any early childhood institution is multi-motivated. One motive is to create change and transformation of the children involved. The transformation processes of human beings may be described by concepts such as socialization, disciplining, formation, civilization, learning, upbringing, enculturation, and development processes (Gilliam, Gulløv, Bach, & Olwig, 2015; Kemp, 2015; Lysså, 2012; Steinsholt & Dobson, 2011). The different concepts provide different connotations to the transformation process, such as becoming a citizen, becoming a part of a

group and culture, or becoming a competent and skilled person. However, all the concepts mentioned above involve a formation process that includes a relation between the individual and culture. The different concepts also provide different connotations of the agency of the child and to the power relationship between children and teachers.

Cultural formation is in this thesis closely related to the Norwegian concept of *danning.* This concept can be traced back to periods in European history, such as the Greek Paideia in ancient times, the Christian Imago Dei—which means "to be shaped in the picture of God" specifically in medieval times, and the German Bildung in the Enlightenment period (Steinsholt & Dobson, 2011; Straume, 2013; Ødegaard & Kruger, 2012). In all these origins of the concept of *danning*, there is an assumption that human beings have a potential for formation (Steinsholt & Dobson, 2011; Straume, 2013). The result of *danning* cannot be traced in the results of exams, but in the life you live (Fossheim, 2013).

Every culture and historical period have ideals and norms for this transformation process. As such, the concept of *danning* indicates a transformation to a specific form with ideal traits (Koselleck, 2007; Ødegaard & Kruger, 2012). From this perspective of the concept, the transformation process is supposed to "fill the form".

An important assumption in this study is to see kindergarten as a social practice, an activity, which provides conditions for cultural formation. The focus is to see cultural formation as a concept of processes and less as an ideal final form. As a processual concept, cultural formation indicates that the transformation is a continuous and lifelong formation process of the human being (Lysså, 2012; Ødegaard & Kruger, 2012). Another important assumption is that the process of cultural formation is not limited to specific situations, but is always ongoing. Cultural formation processes do not limit the attention to learning sessions in the kindergarten but focus on a broader aspect of influences, such as material and structural conditions, artefacts available,

architecture, and the actions among the participants in social practices (Ødegaard & Kruger, 2012).

Kindergarten is structured by traditions and social motives embedded in social practices. This creates conditions for what is possible to do and these are important formative conditions. Time, the type of room, habits, rituals and the use of artefacts are also examples of such conditions for formation processes (Ødegaard & Kruger, 2012).

As stated, cultural formation is in this thesis defined broadly as a formation process through participation in cultural practices. The concept is processual, meaning that cultural formation is going on anytime by participating in cultural practices. Cultural formation is in this thesis a descriptive concept more than a normative concept. However, the object of this thesis is to trace and identify cultural formation ideals in the practices in kindergartens. In this way, the purpose of the project is to identify the normative aspects of the cultural formation in different cultural contexts. The cultural formation ideals in the kindergartens include ideals of the transformation process as well as the result of the transformation process.

These assumptions of cultural formation have implications for the present study and contribute with different lenses for tracing cultural formation ideals in the social practices in kindergartens. First, there is an assumption that time regulation will have an impact on the cultural formation of children in kindergarten. Second, aspects of the material world, like decorations on the walls in the kindergarten, can also have implications for cultural formation. Finally, natural science activities, which is often identified as learning activities, can be used as a perspective to make an inquiry of cultural formation ideals.

The concept of cultural formation also implies that the child takes part in his/her own formation. As such, the concept is related to the participating and agentive child within the social studies of children and childhood (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998) and the cultural historical wholeness

approach (Fleer et al., 2009b). This perspective also has implications for this study. Children participate in their own formation process despite different social practices in kindergarten.

Cultural formation as a social process indicates that the subject is not something separated from culture. On the contrary, by participating and realizing a social practices, the individual and the culture become inseparable (Stetsenko, 2009). As a human being, you participate in, are shaped by, and shape cultural practices. Such perspectives on cultural formation may indicate a rupture in the traditional dichotomy between the individual and culture, which give illusions about culture as something outside and surrounding the individual. On the contrary, culture is manifested in tool-mediated actions that mediate human knowledge generated in generations.

> Through this collaborative process (involving development and passing on, from generation to generation, the collective experiences reified in cultural tools, including language), people not only constantly transform and create their environment, they also create and constantly transform their very life, consequently changing themselves in fundamental ways while, in and through this process, becoming human and gaining self-knowledge about the world. (Stetsenko, 2009, p. 137)

From this perspective, the human nature is a process of overcoming and transcending its own limitations through collaborative, continuous practices aimed at purposefully changing the world (Stetsenko, 2009). Stetsenko concludes this argument in the following manner: “In other words, it is a process of historical becoming by humans not as merely creatures of nature, but as agents of their own lives, agents whose nature is to purposefully transform their world” (2009, p. 138).

Education represents a normative practice with embedded values and ideals regarding children and childhood (Biesta, 2010). What characterizes the ideal child or ideal childhood is not universal, rather these characteristics are historically and culturally specific and convey

plurality and diversity of childhoods (James et al., 1998; Nsamenang, 2009). As stated earlier, cultural formation both focuses on the formation process and the result of transformation processes. This implies that cultural formation ideals are ideals related to the formation process and the human being to become. By tracing cultural formation ideals, it is crucial to identify conceptualizations of children and childhood.

The overarching aim of the study and research questions

Although the Nordic early childhood education model (Einarsdottir et al. 2015;Einarsdottir & Wagner, 2006;Hammarström-Lewenhagen, 2013;Ringsmose & Kragh Müller, 2017;Wagner & Einarsdottir, 2008) has received increasing international interest, the cross-cultural studies involving Norwegian early childhood education have limited scope (see more in chapter 2). Internationally, there is a growing research interest in Chinese early childhood education. The most comprehensive cross-cultural study involving China is entitled "Preschool in Three Cultures. Japan, China, and the United States" (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989) and "Preschool in Three Cultures. Revisited" (Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009).

Tobin and his colleagues' studies (2009; 1989) have motivated the present study to be conducted as a cross-cultural study. By deliberately using the outsider and insider views on the practices in kindergarten, it is possible to create distance to the familiar and closeness to the unknown (Tobin, 1999; Tobin et al., 2009; Tobin et al., 1989). This can contribute to disturbing taken-for-granted assumptions and practices. The outsider sees something different from the insider and asks other questions. In this manner, the more or less taken-for-granted notions regarding the practices in Chinese and Norwegian kindergarten can be confronted by new questions and inquiries. The purpose of conducting a cross-cultural study has primarily been epistemological in order to understand the cultural and historical grounding of social practices, and not "identifying best practices" (Alexander, Broadfoot, & Phillips, 1999; Bray, 2014; Crossley & Watson, 2003).

The starting point of the present study was to bring attention to prevailing preconceptions of differences between social practices in kindergartens in the East and the West concerning individualization and collectivization. The aim is to trace cultural formation ideals in kindergartens in a historical time where ideals regarding the individualized, autonomous, and self-regulated child and individualized teaching are spreading globally (Kjørholt, 2013; Moss, 2014).

The main questions addressed in this thesis are given below:

- What characterizes the different kindergarten practices in kindergartens in China and in Norway?
- Which cultural formation ideals can be traced in the individualizing and collectivizing practices in kindergartens in the two countries?

The focus is kindergarten teachers' practices in two kindergartens in different cultures, in this case China and Norway. The thesis explores cultural formation ideals in kindergarten practices in a historical time of increased focus on individualization in early childhood education in the perspectives of the Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). The approach to these questions is a cross-cultural study of two kindergartens—*Lotus kindergarten* in China, and *Glacier Buttercup Kindergarten* in Norway. The study has an explorative design tracing cultural formation ideals in the two kindergartens in a specific time and place.

The focus of the study is rather broad, but will be limited to three impact areas to explore the social practices in the kindergarten. The research questions are elaborated and explored within the purview of three thematic topics:

1. *Artefacts displayed on the walls in the kindergartens*
2. *Teaching of natural science*
3. *Regulation of time in everyday practices*

The thematic topics constitute different manifestations of social practices and lead to the origination of different streams of cultural formation ideals. The thematic topics resulted in three different articles. In addition, one article has been published with a methodological purpose.

Table 1: Overview of thematic focus and overarching questions in the articles

Thematic focus	**Overarching questions**	**Article**
Artefacts displayed on the walls in the kindergartens	*What do the artefacts on the kindergarten's walls seek to elicit?* *What contradictions and paradoxes are discernable in the formative ideals?* *How can these indirectly offer an understanding of the objective of the kindergarten practice?* *What cultural formation ideals are revealed?*	*Barnehagens vegger som danningsagenter—en komparativ analyse.* *The walls in the kindergarten as agents of cultural formation—a comparative analysis.* Published in Ødegaard (2012) *Barnehagen som Danningsarena* (Kindergarten as an Arena for Cultural Formation) Bergen: Fagbokforlaget. A scientific peer-reviewed anthology as part of a joint publication for the BDA project.
Teaching of natural science	*How do the kindergarten teachers practice and understand the phenomena of cultivating children's interests, rights, and autonomy?*	*Kindergarten Teachers' Educational Ideals: Tensions and Contradictions* Published in *Cultural Historical Psychology* 2013, *Vol. 8* (2). A special issue edited by Inna Koreponova & Elin Eriksen Ødegaard

Regulation of time	*How is time regulated and organized in one kindergarten in two different countries?* *What are the intentions and goals of the specific structuring of time in the everyday life of these kindergartens?* *What are the societal and institutionalized expectations and demands embedded in how this regulation of time operates?* *What contradictions are embedded in daily time regulation in kindergartens in Norway and China?*	*Temporal settings in kindergarten: a lens to trace historical and current cultural formation ideals?* Published in *European Early Childhood Education and Research* 2019, *Vol. 27* (1)
Methodological study	**Major questions**	**Article**
Identifying dilemmas associated with photo elicitation in comparative early childhood education and care research	*What are the dilemmas related to the process of taking photos and selecting those to be used in interviews with kindergarten teachers?* *What kind of dilemmas can be identified in relation to the positions of the researcher, the interpreter and the kindergarten teachers in the interviews?*	*Research Dilemmas Associated with Photo Elicitation in Comparative Early Childhood Education Research* Published in *Research in Comparative and International Education 2013, Vol.8* (4), 455–467.

The structure of the thesis

Chapter 2 traces the purposes and ideals of early childhood education in China and Norway from a historical perspective. The same chapter includes relevant research on practices within early childhood education concurrent to the curriculum reforms in both countries. Chapter 3 elaborates selected theoretical concepts and perspectives from CHAT. These theoretical perspectives provide important inputs to analyze differing objects of early childhood education as well as an understanding of contradictory objects that exist side by side in kindergarten practices. Chapter 4 discusses the methodological approach of the study. In this chapter, the methodological article will be discussed. Chapter 5 provides a summary of the three articles with thematic focus. Chapter 6 is a discussion of the cultural formation ideals. Finally, the chapter includes implications for further research.

Chapter 2: Historical traces of purposes and ideals in Chinese and Norwegian early childhood education

Through the history of early childhood education in China and Norway, different aims and ideals can be identified. However, in the initial periods of kindergartens in both countries, we can barely speak about a policy level or national government policy. The starting point for the kindergartens in both countries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was characterized by small-scale private initiatives by philanthropic and religious organizations (Bai, 2000; Huo, Neuman, & Nanakida, 2015; Korsvold, 2013b). In addition, Chinese kindergartens were initiated by missionaries (Bai, 2000). Nevertheless, the initiators in this early phase also expressed purposes and ideals for the kindergarten.

When describing shifting aims and ideals through the history of kindergartens, it is a fallacy to describe phases where one purposes or ideal is replaced by another ideal. This is obviously not the case. Rather, the history of kindergartens in both countries must be understood as a development of different layers of aims and ideals. One aim does not necessarily disappear, although a "new" purpose points towards another route in educational reforms. There may also be conflicting and contradictory ideals and purposes that are directly expressed in the same educational reform, as will be demonstrated in the history of kindergartens in China and Norway.

This chapter provides an outline of shifting purposes and ideals in Chinese and Norwegian early childhood education institutions in the twentieth century up until now. This is important as a background to understand contemporary educational practices. The chapter will further provide an overview of research focusing on the consequences of the reforms for children's participatory rights and individualized teaching. First, I provide a short description of the search for relevant literature and discuss a few challenges in this work.

Data search for related research and literature

The search for relevant literature has been a challenging process. The project is defined as a cross-cultural study. One crucial challenge was to delimit a cultural analysis. I have limited the search for literature to research that specifically focuses on and discusses cultural values related to early childhood education. An additional challenge was to identify relevant literature on kindergarten in China. As a Norwegian researcher and a teacher in kindergarten teacher education for numerous years, it has been more manageable to obtain an overview of the research in the Norwegian kindergarten field. In contrast, to obtain an overview of existing literature on kindergarten in China has been time-consuming and challenging. Consequently, I had to begin with a broad approach in the search for literature in order to become familiar with different aspects of early childhood education in China. The search for relevant literature has been a continuous process. The main resources have been the databases Bib Sys, Google Scholar, Eric, and Norart.[4]

One of the limitations and challenges of these databases has been that their main language is English. Thus, articles written in Norwegian and Chinese are excluded from this source, except for Norart where most of the articles are written in Norwegian. My Chinese knowledge is not sufficient to read articles and literature in Chinese. However, I searched the Chinese database called the China Knowledge Resource Integrated Database. This database has abstracts of Chinese articles in English and represents some of the contemporary early childhood education research in China. It is also a database of Chinese doctoral theses. Two colleagues in China, one from Beijing Normal University and one from East China Normal University, helped update me on this literature. I have also been oriented toward the international conferences

[4] Key words for search have been different aspect of educational and cultural ideals, beliefs, cultural formation and educational reforms. Other important key words have been individualization, autonomy, children's participation and children's rights.

ECERA[5] and the OMEP[6] conferences in the period of 2011 – 2019 to find relevant names and publications as well. The limitation of much of the Norwegian literature is that it is written in Norwegian. This is not a limitation to me as a researcher, but is a challenge related to transparency for the non-Norwegian reader.

Historical traces of purposes and ideals in Chinese early childhood education

Wollons (2000) describes the spread of the idea of kindergarten idea as a global one in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[7] According to Wollons, this idea was first spread from Froebel's Germany to the Nordic countries and then to the United States. Further, the idea was spread from USA to Japan and from Japan to China (Bai, 2000; Wollons, 2000). This diffusion of the kindergarten idea is also a history of transformation. Every nation has to make local adjustments to accommodate kindergarten, not merely as a part of nation building but also in order to obtain approval from parents so that the kindergartens could be relevant to their own children (Wollons, 2000). "The processes of educational diffusion among nations are also histories of borrowing" (Wollons, 2000, p.4). China and Norway have been no exceptions.

After the "open door policy"[8] in China in the 1980s, Chinese kindergartens have been open to influences from early childhood education in the west (Pan et al., 2018; Rao & Li, 2009; Zhu & Zhang, 2008; Zhu & Zhou, 2005). However, this is not a new situation. From when the first Chinese kindergarten was established by the Japanese in 1904, the educational ideas of kindergarten have been influenced by ideas specifically from Japan, USA, and the former

[5] ECERA: European Early Childhood Education Research Association
[6] OMEP: Organisation Mondiale pour l' Education Prescolaire: World Organization for Early Childhood Education
[7] Wollons (2000) describes this diffusion in three distinct categories depending on the distance to the original Froebel's ideas and teaching. The primary diffusion was direct acquisition from Froebel as could be identified in the Nordic countries, «West»ern Europe and USA. Secondary acquisition were those models taken from kindergartens that had gone through a process of transformation. Tertiary acquisition were those taken from models twice removed from the original. China as an example.
[8] The open door policy in China refers to the new policy announced by Deng Xiaoping in December 1978 to open the door to foreign businesses that wanted to set up in China. This influenced areas other than the economic policy, such as opening for educational influences from abroad (Hansen, Thøgersen, & Wellens, 2018).

Soviet Union. Concurrent to these influences, there have been forces within China working to adjust these ideas to Chinese culture and tradition (Bai, 2000; Rao & Li, 2009; Tobin et al., 2009).

Chinese early childhood education researchers emphasize that the history of kindergarten in China kindergarten reveal three distinct cultural influences, one from the traditional Chinese culture and Confucian thinking, one from Marxism, and one from (non-Marxist) western thinking (Zhu & Zhang, 2008). These cultural influences exist side-by-side in early childhood education in China today and can be identified at a policy level (Pan et al., 2018; Zhu & Zhang, 2008; Zhu & Zhou, 2005). These ideas will be further explored in the following.

As already mentioned, the idea of kindergarten came to China through Japan in the beginning of the twentieth century. In China, educational leaders and researchers at this time were convinced that the supremacy of Japan and the West was due to education (Bai, 2000). Distinguished leaders were convinced that China must be inspired by Japan, since China and Japan were related in terms of moral values as well as language. This is why China is described as being primarily influenced by Japan in the establishment of the first kindergartens towards the end of the Qing dynasty[9]. This made it possible to be receptive to ideas from the west—for example, from the "father" of kindergarten, the German educator Froebel—and simultaneously maintain traditional Chinese values. The name of the kindergarten was a loan from both Japan and Froebel: *Youzhiyuan* combines two words: *youzhi* means young and ignorant, and *yuan* means garden. Thus, kindergarten means a *garden for the young and ignorant*. The word reveals both the view of children at that time as well as the meaning of kindergarten (Bai, 2000).

[9] Qing dynasty from 1644–1911

Moral learning and social order

In 1903, a group of 20 Japanese kindergarten teachers came to China to establish a kindergarten in Wuchang in the Hubei Province. The curriculum plan, the content, and organization were all translated from Japanese (Gu, 2000), and Froebel's ideas were introduced to China through Japanese translations. In addition, Japanese teachers, educational material, and equipment were imported from Japan. In this respect, the first Chinese kindergarten was a true copy of Japanese kindergartens (Bai 2000).[10]

The diffusion of the kindergarten idea from Japan was possible not only due to the language, but also due to the sharing of the philosophy of Confucius (Bai, 2000). At that time, the Chinese educational system was influenced by Confucianism (Bai, 2000; Kinney, 1995, 2004; Tillman, 2013; Wollons, 2000). The kindergarten was an exclusive institution for children, with the purpose of infusing children with moral deeds in order to become good human beings. Virtues such as benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and honesty are important qualities in Confucianism (Bai, 2000; F. Liu, 2013). The belief is that endurance and hard work will lead to wisdom. No person will have anything free. A Chinese word of wisdom says that *a jade that is not polished, cannot be used. A human being that has not studied cannot know righteousness*. Hard and continuous work is also necessary in order to learn and memorize the characters in the Chinese language. Therefore, memorizing was an important part of the Confucian educational tradition. The aims and ideals of this period in kindergarten can be described as the development of moral deeds and hard work.

In addition to moral learning, Confucianism emphasizes social order and harmony in the society (F. Liu, 2013; Zhao & Biesta, 2011). Society can be described as sustained by the principle of

[10] A small number of Froebelian and Montessori kindergartens were also established in China by "West"ern (mostly American) missionaries during this early period. These kindergartens were part of a welfare plan to help poor families. The kindergartens called Meng Yang Yuan, hired widows to teach young children to indiscriminately copy programs from the "West" (Gu, 2000).

hierarchy; the people are subordinate to the leader, the son is subordinate to the father, woman is subordinate to man, student is subordinate to teacher, and friend is subordinate to a friend. In education, these principles are expressed in the position of the teacher and the child. Maintaining discipline in the classroom is considered as the most valuable virtue and quality of the teacher (Chen-Hafteck & Zhuoya, 2008; Rao & Li, 2009).

In the Confucian tradition, the child was defined in relation to the expectations and demands of the family and society in contradiction to a self that is limited from the surroundings. In Confucianism, the self is united with others. One meaning of this definition of the child is that the child belongs to a community outside itself. As mentioned earlier, this is illustrated in the Chinese language where the character for human being, *ren*, includes both the human being and the society as well as the culture that makes existence meaningful (F. Liu, 2013).

In this initial phase of the Chinese kindergartens, the ideals of Confucianism were rather prevalent. The moral education of the child was the aim of education. "They were both the transmitters of family values from one generation to the next and the means by which families perpetuated themselves" (Gu, 2000, p. 114). In addition, the children were separated by gender. The male child would carry on the family tradition and bring honor to his ancestors. They were the carriers of the family line. The female child was not regarded as a member of her birth family after she got married. She became kind of an outsider to her father's family after marriage.[11] Women were required to submit first to the fathers, then to their husbands, and finally to their sons. Both girls and boys were considered as passive, subordinate objects, with no expectations of being developed individually. "Traditionally, feudal education took 'filial piety' as the point of departure and 'loyalty' as its end result" (Gu, 2000, p. 115).

[11] This is evident in the name of the mother's mother in Chinese: translated it means "the outside grandmother"

Education for democracy

After the First World War, Chinese teachers and educational leaders opposed Japanese influence in education due to the Versailles Treaty, which gave Japan extra-territorial rights in China. Influenced by the May Forth Movement[12] (J. Wang, 2007), numerous Chinese educators were now looking toward USA and Europe (Bai, 2000). They considered Confucianism to hamper the development of China. A few influential Chinese students with scholarships went to the United States to study John Dewey's philosophy and be educated in progressive American schools. Hu Shih was one of the most prominent of these students (J. Wang, 2007). He ensured that Dewey was invited to China as a visiting scholar in 1919, when Dewey was already visiting Japan. Dewey's stay in China was prolonged, so he stayed for two years, from 1919–1921 where he was giving lectures in Nanjing, Beijing, and Shanghai; his ideas were translated to Chinese. "Education for democracy," "learning by doing," "development of individuality," "education for life," and "child-centered education" were influential ideas at all educational levels in China (J. Wang, 2007). Thus, in his time, Dewey was the highest authority within education in China (Gu, 2000; J. Wang, 2007).

The May Forth Movement, also called the first cultural revolution, was an intellectual movement that opposed tradition and the influence of Confucianism (Zhang, 2013). It was an attempt to replace Confucius with Dewey as the new intellectual icon (J. Wang, 2007). However, there was an intellectual battle within education in the 1920s and 1930s between pragmatists influenced by Dewey, traditionalists/Confucianists, and the evolving communist movement(Tillman, 2013). This explains why Dewey's impact on Chinese education was limited.[13]

[12] May Fourth refers to the incident May 4, 1919 where students opposed the Versailles Treaty as a betrayal of China.
[13] More about Dewey's influence is provided in J. C. Wang (2007) *John Dewey in China. To teach and to learn.*

Even if Dewey did not have the influence at the policy level that numerous teachers had hoped for, he influenced many teachers. The most important teacher within early childhood education is Chen Heqin (1892–1982), who initiated the first progressive kindergarten in Nanjing in 1923. He had studied with Kilpatrick[14], a student of Dewey, in the United States and created a theme-based curriculum entitled "Living Education" influenced by the progressive school (Tillman, 2013). According to Tillman, Chen was an advocate for family reform who sought to democratize (not overturn) Chinese family structures by, for example, transforming the patriarchal father into a modern "companion" (p. 86). Tillman further argues that Chen's teachings gave scientific authority to Chinese kindergartens as important grounds for citizenship training of the young child and cultivated "kindergarten teachers as the intermediaries between child and state" (p. 92). Ultimately, China's indigenous field of child psychology disseminated the concept of a sentimentalized childhood to a broad audience.

Simultaneously, Chen Heqin was skeptical of China's uncritical imitation of western ideals in the 1920s and gave the following warning:

> At present, almost all Chinese kindergartens just follow the American model. The children are listening to American stories, watching American pictures, singing American songs, playing with American toys. (….) We should not deny any American stuff, but we have to be aware that our children are not American children, and we have our own history, circumstance and conditions. Something that is useful in America, will not necessarily be useful in China. (Chen Heqin in Gu, 2000, p. 121)

[14] William Heard Kilpatrick (1870–1965) was a student of Dewey and later a professor at Columbia University, USA. He initiated the project method as a reaction to the traditional school and emphasized the fundamental importance of the child's interest. Kilpatrick went further than Dewey and was close to naturalistic romantics in this regard (J. Wang, 2007).

In addition, other Chinese educators were influenced by the democratic and pragmatic educational ideals of the West and explored early childhood educational theories and methods suitable to Chinese conditions (J. Wang, 2007). However, these early Chinese educators "implemented" their ideas only to a limited extent. In a nationwide scope, their ideas had little impact on the ideology of "traditional education" (Gu, 2000). The notions of the ideal child were remained most influenced by Confucian ideology (Gu, 2000).

Nation-building

After the Communist Party came into power in 1949 and with Mao Zedong as Chairman, kindergartens became part of a political ideology. With the foundation of the People's Republic of China, Dewey's thoughts were criticized and considered to be an expression of American imperialism (Gu, 2000). The state ideologies of the 1950s, in the form of "re-education campaigns," defined not only early childhood experts but also children and their caregivers (Tillman, 2013, p. 203). Dewey's "pragmatism" came under attack along with the "bourgeois reformers" who were his students, such as Hu Shi and Tao Xingzhi (Tillman, 2013); Chen Heqin fell from grace to re-education. Missionary and foreign-funded schools and institutions were divested of American funds, labelled "cultural imperialism and slave education," and were reorganized by municipal governments (Tillman, 2013). Tillman describes how child psychologists lost their authority as a result of the ideological campaigns and how caregivers were trained in political thought.

The educational and political leaders turned to the Soviet Union for inspiration with Marxist values and ideology for kindergartens (Tillman, 2013, 2018). Political and ideological education came into focus, with emphasis on the collective and building of the socialist human being. The children were required to be brought up through the collective to the collective (Hung, 2014). The Soviet model for early education was teacher-directed and concerned with teaching subjects.

When Mao Zedong launched the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, education was even more emphasized as an important strategy for strengthening socialism and communism (Hung, 2014). Former teachers were removed and replaced to a large extent by revolutionary students and Red Guard Soldiers with no education or experience of kindergartens (Gu, 2000; Hung, 2014). Education was supposed to be de-ideologized from capitalism and from the early phase of socialism. Even the previous curriculum from the socialist era in the 1950s was considered as bourgeois and banned. Political and ideological education was given even more priority and the aim was to eliminate class differences[15]. The socialist kindergarten was required to prepare the children to become workers with a socialist conscience and inheritors of the socialist cause (Gu, 2000; Sidel, 1974). The children were named "extra small red guards" and were supposed to "listen to the words of Chairman Mao, read his books and be a good child of Mao" (Gu, 2000, p. 132). Official self-criticism and self-regulation became important classroom activities in the 1950s, as teachers emphasized discipline and student activism (Hung, 2014; Tillman, 2013). A "sentimentalized childhood of free play" was replaced with student activism, as wartime activities such as "choreographed dances and scripted play[…]became the hallmark of Chinese Communist childhood" (Tillman, 2013, p. 203).

According to Yan (2009) in spite of the importance of the collective, the communist era can be considered as the first step towards individualization in China. The farmer collectives and the working units in the cities were disembedding the individual from the family and kinship. Numerous children were separated from their families, living the entire week in boarding kindergarten, a practice that partly survived into the 21 century. The children were supposed to become new citizens, independent from their families and kinships, attached to the aims of the

[15] During the Cultural Revolution, the blood theory was about class belonging. The children belonged to different classes as per their families: The five reds consisted of workers, poor peasants, soldiers, revolutionaries, and martyrs. The five blacks were children of landlords, rich peasants, reactionaries, evildoers, and right-wing activists (Gu, 2000).

Communist Party and with a new conscience of class belonging. In the guidelines, this was apparent in the goals of kindergartens: children were supposed to love the Communist Party and develop into socialist citizens (Hung, 2014).

The one-child policy and new reforms

After the death of Chairman Mao in 1976, education continued to be emphasized and was considered as an important tool to modernize and bring about the necessary changes into the Chinese society. This was apparent from the dramatic increase in the number of kindergartens in the period of 1974–1976—from 40,267 kindergartens in 1974 to 442,650 kindergartens in 1976 (Chinese Education Yearbook). After 10 years of ideological confinement brought about by the Cultural Revolution, kindergartens were influenced by the open-door policy and the one-child policy. The one-child policy, which was installed in 1979, was part of China's family planning policy, which consists of late marriage, late child-bearing, and single-child families (Yan, 2009). The implementation of the single-child policy was a concern of families and educators as well as political leaders. Although most urban citizens have accepted that there was no alternative other than imposing birth control, kindergarten teachers, parents, and educators were afraid of spoiling the child and believed that kindergarten could prevent this (Tobin et al., 1989). The solitary child in the family has the full attention from two parents and four grandparents (the 4-2-1 syndrome). In addition, the children are pressured to be cultivated as "the perfect only child" (Gu, 2000). Therefore, the importance of the experiences in the collective group was emphasized in the kindergartens.

However, this emphasis on the collective group was challenged by the fact that the traditional state examinations were reinstated in 1979 (H. Wang, 2007). Competition and hard work on the part of the individual in order to get entrance to the best kindergartens, elementary schools,

junior high, senior high, and later universities[16] were the results of the reintroduction of state examinations and represented a contrast and conflict with the importance of the collective.

Increased globalization, marked liberalism, commercialization, and privatization of the Chinese society, beginning with open-door politics in late 1980s (Gu, 2000; Yan, 2009) , added to these conflicting aims. From being a part of the Chinese welfare system, numerous kindergartens closed down or were privatized and received limited financial support. The result was that private kindergartens were dependent on sponsors and the gap between public and private kindergartens was increasing. The curriculum was also influenced by these private enterprises that introduced western models of early childhood education such as *High Scope*, *Reggio Emilia*, *Montessori*, and *Multiple Intelligences* kindergartens (Gu, 2000).

These reforms, described as modern, led to several changes within early childhood education. The first reform of the kindergartens after the open door policy was *Regulations on Kindergarten Education Practice—Trial Version* in 1989. This was a top-down curriculum led by the central government and symbolized new ideals and aims of the kindergartens. These regulations were considered a milestone with the beginning of promoting a scientific development of kindergarten education (Gu, 2000, p. 36). To further the reform, the Ministry of Education (renamed from National Education Commission) issued the *Guidelines for Kindergarten Education Practice—Trial Version* as a supplement in 2001 (Pan & Liu, 2008).

> These two policy documents legitimized the educational ideologies and related practices about "respecting children", active learning", teaching for individual learning needs,

[16] All kindergartens, schools, and universities are placed in a hierarchy depending on material and human resources. In the kindergarten field, there are model kindergartens, which are the top kindergartens. Further, the kindergartens are divided into levels 1–3, where level 1 is the best.

> play based teaching and learning, teaching through daily life in kindergartens and quality kindergarten education. (Pan & Liu, 2008, p. 34)[17]

From 2001 onward, the aim to love the communist party and shape children into socialist citizens has been eliminated from the curriculum guidelines.[18] The kindergarten shall still contribute to shape the Chinese human being with love for the nation (Chen, 2012). The previous curriculum reforms in China are once again influenced by progressive western ideals of childhood, being child-centered and emphasizing the importance of children's own-initiated activities but now in an evolving late-modern society (Ministry of Education, 2012).

As described, kindergarten in China has different roots and has been influenced by foreign ideas in shifting times. The history of the Chinese kindergarten illustrates how a nation alters between isolation and being open to other influences in order to create new reforms in early childhood education (Tobin et al., 2009). This is in accordance with Schriewer (2012), who claims that all nations alter between importing ideas from abroad (as China did in the 1920s and after 1980) and closing foreign influence (as China did to an extreme degree during the cultural revolution).

Contemporary early childhood education in China

One of the most comprehensive research projects examining cultural practices, values, and ideals in kindergartens have been conducted by Tobin, Davidson, and Wu in their study from 1989, *Preschool in Three Cultures* (Tobin et al., 1989) and in the follow up study by Tobin, Hsueh, and Karasawa in 2009, *Preschool in Three Cultures revisited* (Tobin et al., 2009). Both studies examine kindergartens in three countries—Japan, China, and the United States—from a cultural perspective. The research project is a study of kindergartens in three cultures, as well

[17] Kindergarten teacher education in China is still on different educational levels. The education at university level is oriented towards international trends within ECE. Approximately 25% of the time is used to train children in skills such as singing, dance, storytelling, and crafts. Further, 25% of the time is used to learn English and 50% of the time is used to teach educational and political theory.

[18] In 1996 the general principle in chapter 1 in the Regulations for Kindergarten was changed from: "The tasks of kindergarten are to (…) provide facilities for parents to take part in construction of socialism" to "The tasks of kindergarten are to (…) provide facilities for parents to work and study".

as an examination of three cultures seen through the perspectives of the kindergartens (Tobin et al., 1989).

The study from 1989 is an ethnographic study illuminating how kindergartens from China, Japan, and the United States reflect cultural norms and values in the respective countries. Tobin and his team (1989) indicate how the educational practice in kindergarten in China supports collectivism with roots in Confucianism and Chinese socialism. As one of their informants said, "We are better than the Soviets in being good communists. We have had thousands of years of practice! Doing things collectively comes naturally to us." (Tobin et al., 1989, p. 125). In the study from 1989, the teachers and parents emphasized that education for the collective is important as juxtaposed on the one-child policy and the possible consequences of spoiling the child. The kindergarten was considered the ideal place to teach children the concept of collectivity. In other words, at that time, the kindergarten was expected to be a counterculture to the family policy and teachers are expected to bring children under firm control by "guan," which can be translated into "govern," "loving control," "educate," "to care for," and "to love" (Tobin et al., 1989, p. 93). Moreover, according to Tobin and his colleagues' informants, a structured environment with structured group activities was considered the best to maintain order, and decrease the risk of conflict among children.

The Chinese notions of the group are linked to the concept of order. A disorderly collection of children is not a group. However, emphasizing the importance of the group and the collective is not limited to classmates and the kindergarten but is related to something larger, to their nation. The objective of the teachers is to instill a feeling of citizenship:

> Our job here is to produce the next generation of Chinese citizens and leaders [….] We stress to the children a love of China, a love of socialism and a feeling of patriotism to prepare them to fulfill their responsibilities to our country when they become adults. (Tobin et al., 1989, p. 109)

The Tobin and his team's study from 2009 integrated histography as a method. The researchers revisited the same kindergartens in order to study continuity and changes in the teaching practices. The purpose of this study was to illuminate what they saw as continuity in the everyday practices of the kindergarten teachers and to identify possible changes in these practices.

According to Tobin and his team, the Chinese teachers were concerned about how to improve the standard of living and at the same time not to lose touch with traditional Chinese and socialist virtues, including diligence, self-sacrifice, frugality, and communalism (Tobin et al., 2009). The educational reform marks a shift in values. Parents and teachers are no longer concerned about spoiling children as a threat to the mental health of children. Independence, self-confidence, and creativity are no longer considered as weaknesses; rather, they are considered as values and are congruent with the needs of the emerging market economy. Still following Tobin and his colleagues, the teachers are caught between parents' pressure for academic results and curriculum reforms stating that require more play and children's initiatives. The parents were referred to as "customers" and, according to the teachers, they can be rather aggressive in blaming the teachers for injuries and other failures in the daily practices.

Tobin and his team (2009) indicate the fact that the majority of comparative and international studies of education provide a foreground for social and political forces. Their approach foregrounds culture. Their arguments are that culture functions as a source of continuity and as a brake on the impact of globalization, rationalization, and economic change. "Preschools are institutions that both reflect and help to perpetuate the cultures and societies of which they are a part" (Tobin et al., 2009, p. 225). According to Tobin and his colleagues, cultural practices are more resilient and resistant to change than what was predicted of them. The global economy

requires new citizens, but Chinese educators do not want to produce "little venture capitalists." The new ideals must be balanced with moral grounding in either traditional Confucian ideas or socialist values. Otherwise, "The Trap of Modernization" will lead to social and moral crisis. Nevertheless, Tobin and his team (2009) found that some of the informants reported a lack of balance and that the "capitalist reforms" have produced a new kind of personality that is lacking in altruism and characterized with hedonism and egoism.

Other studies focus primarily on how the Chinese kindergartens have changed due to reforms. Gu's thesis from 2000 illuminates the educational reforms in Chinese kindergartens in the 1990s. She does this in the light of social, cultural, political, and economic changes. She indicates the fact that few research projects have studied curriculum reforms in a sociocultural context. According to Gu (2000), this has prevented a critical analysis of the political ideologies accompanying the reforms. In her research, she explores how politicians, kindergarten teachers, and parents experience these changes and how these experiences can be interpreted and understood.

Gu's research is based on kindergartens in the big cities in three economically prosperous areas of China: Shanghai, Beijing, and Hangzhou. She uses both historical analysis and case studies of kindergartens in China. The historical analysis is undertaken at a macro level; this implies grasping political and ideological changes at a national level. The other research approach was conducting field work to see how the implementation of curriculum reforms was executed at a local level. She interviewed both kindergarten teachers and parents.

According to Gu (2000), collectivism and the collective has been a major trait of Chinese education. She claims that this is rooted both in Confucianism and Communism. When she asked teachers and parents about the most characterized hallmark of Chinese early childhood education, more than half of the respondents answered that it is the focus on collective activities

and collective education. Collectivism was considered as the far most valuable aspect of Chinese kindergarten. It was not just considered as the most characteristic trait of the kindergarten but also the most valuable and something that is worthwhile to preserve as an ideal for raising children and as a principle for organizing educational activities (Gu, 2000). However, it was somewhat unclear what the respondents meant by collectivism, both related to concrete work in the classroom and as a more abstract, cultural, and ideological concept. The concept of collectivism appears to be given a new meaning in a time of marketization and privatization, the one-child policy, and influence from the West.

Gu asks if following collective norms implies ignoring individual differences and interests between the children and whether a collective ideology is incompatible with competition in contemporary China.[19] She finds that talent and individual achievements no longer has negative connotations in kindergartens in China. On the contrary, individual talent is considered as prosocial and not antisocial. Kindergarten teachers do not ban competition as long as it follows socially accepted channels serving the collective. On the other hand, according to the informants, being self-absorbed threatens the collective (Gu, 2000). Competition increases enthusiasm. The proverb '*A soldier who is not willing to be a marshal is not a good soldier*' is symptomatic for this thinking (Gu, 2000, p. 171). To praise individual children in public and to mention names after performance is accepted and frequently employed. Children are used as models from the group. As one of the teachers in Gu's thesis expresses:

> I don't see anything wrong with pushing individual children forward. Of course, we don't encourage the behavior of, for example, comparing who dresses well or badly, but

[19] In 1973, the Kessen group found that teachers in China were reluctant to use concepts such as "innate differences", "exceptional children", and "children with disabilities". In the midst of the 1980s, the kindergarten teachers appeared to be less reluctant to use such concepts. On the contrary, they were eager to put forward "supernormal" children or "gifted children" (Kessen, 1975) . Stevenson et al. (1981) reports, through a survey of Chinese developmental psychological studies, that research on individual differences first took place in a Chinese journal in 1980.

> we do encourage the spirit of competition in learning, work, behavior, and moral character of the children. (Gu, 2000, p. 170)

Several other studies make inquiries into how kindergartens in China have reacted to contemporary curriculum reforms and the conflicting values and ideals the teachers' experience (Pan & Liu, 2008; Rao & Li, 2009). A study conducted by Rao and Li (2009) focuses on kindergarten teachers' assumptions regarding play and learning and finds that the teachers find the ideas in the curriculum guidelines difficult to coincide with deeply rooted cultural values of learning. The democratic relationship between teacher and child is not consistent with Confucianism and the idea of obedience towards the teacher. Learning is considered as useful, but play is not. These attitudes also coincided with the ideas in the cultural revolution of which activities were useful knowledge and which not. According to Rao and Li (2009), changing the attitudes of the teacher as "a fountain of knowledge feeding the ducks" appears difficult. Despite this, they found that 65% of the time was used for play-based activities in contrast to collective teaching. Play was dominated by "eduplay" being directed by the teacher and used as a tool to learn academic skills. Only 17 % of the time was used for what western kindergartens would call free play initiated by the children themselves.

Pan & Liu (2008) compare curricular practices in Chinese kindergartens influenced by the top-down curriculum reforms in China. Their point of departure is that previous research has been based on a common assumption that the transformation of teachers' practices was brought about by transformation in their beliefs. These assumptions simplified the relationship between ideas and practices and neglected the influence of the institutional factor on teachers' practice. Their study compares the similarities and differences in curricular practices in kindergartens with different sponsoring bodies in the Shanxi province. A total of 26 kindergartens participated in the study. Pan and Liu indicate changes (described as progress by the researchers) in the arrangements of the indoor space related to equipment and furniture, the daily time schedule,

and the kindergarten teachers' attention to the individual needs of the children. On the other hand, they found very few changes in how the kindergarten teachers responded to children's initiatives, participation, and influence. Pan & Liu indicate the complexity of cultural norms and how these complicate what they describe as a transition from traditional to modern educational ideals.

Contemporary research within the early childhood education field in China point to dilemmas that numerous kindergarten teachers appear to be facing today. There is a contradiction between the curriculum reforms influenced by western discourses of children's rights, child-centered curriculum, and constructivism on the one hand and the Chinese cultural traditions voiced by the parents and the teachers themselves on the other (Hsueh, Hao, & Zhang, 2016; Jingbo & Elicker, 2005; Pan & Liu, 2008; Rao & Li, 2009; Tobin et al., 2009; Tobin et al., 1989). There is also a contradiction between the traditional emphasizing of collectivism on one hand and the increasing competition in the Chinese society on the other. A large number of these studies examine the complexity of educational ideals. Further, these studies emphasize how cultural and historical traces have a big impact on the teachers' practices with the consequence that the kindergarten teachers are negotiating between conflicting values and ideas. The studies also reveal that the teachers' discourses change more easily due to reforms than the teachers' practices.

Historical traces of purposes and ideals in Norwegian early childhood education

Early childhood education institutions in Norway have developed from two different institutional traditions: the *asylum/daycare institutions* and the *Froebel kindergartens* (Korsvold, 2005). These institutions originally had different histories, different aims, and were targeted to different groups of children. The history of these institutions is also a history of class differences in the Norwegian society in the last part of the nineteenth century and the beginning

of the twentieth century (Korsvold, 2005). These two institutions merged in 1975 with a joint law and a joint name, *kindergarten.*

Since this is the first establishment of early childhood education and care institutions in Norway, we can identify parallel aims and ideals. In the following account, I have named these parallel aims and ideals as *egalitarian equalization, independence and authenticity*, and *education for life*.

Egalitarian equalization

The *asylums* were established in 1837 in the bigger cities in Norway.[20] These institutions were fulltime institutions for children aged 1–7 years. The aims of the asylums were to give children from the working class care and protection, since many of these children were left alone when their parents worked (Balke, 1995; Korsvold, 2005). The *asylums*, as they were called in the nineteenth century, was never far-reaching and did not comprise a large proportion of the child population.

Care, protection, developing industrious workers, and disciplining the working class were the main purposes of the *asylums* (Grue, 1987; Korsvold, 2005, 2008). The activities comprised of moral and religious education, teaching of different subjects, teaching of skills, song, play, and physical training. The training of skills and the teaching of handicraft were considered as educational means but also had a purpose of survival for the labor class. In the 1920s, the asylums were no longer based on private charity. The local government took over and changed them into *day care institutions* (Korsvold, 2005). Nevertheless, the day care institutions had a distinct mandate of social compensation and equalization and can be considered as important

[20] Established by *The association for the friends of the suffering* (Selskabet de Nødlidendes Venner), the association consisted of wealthy citizens who assisted poor families with clothing and food. In 1837, the first asylum in Norway was established, *Byens asyl*, the asylum of the city.

forerunners of the social welfare model developed in post-war Norway (Korsvold, 2005, 2008; Kristjansson, 2006; Sadownik & Ødegaard, 2018).

These early initiatives in order to equalize different groups of children and compensate for unequal resources have been vital goals for early childhood education and care institutions in Norway throughout the twentieth century. As opposed to the private initiatives in the first half of the twentieth century, the responsibility of the state was gradually increasing by the shaping of the welfare model after the Second World War. Nothing has characterized recent Nordic history more than the development of the Nordic welfare state (Bennett, 2006; Einarsdottir et al. 2015; Einarsdottir & Wagner, 2006).[21]

At the core of the welfare system is the conviction that all citizens, including children, must enjoy a high quality of life and equal standards of living. This conviction was stated in early childhood education as well. The kindergarten was considered as both the goal and the means of realizing the full potential of an ideal social democracy and serving to develop the welfare state (Kristjansson, 2006). The social democratic society emphasized values such as freedom from poverty and oppression. Further, equal rights and obligations for children—independent of social background, geographic situatedness, gender, religion, or ethnicity—and solidarity were emphasized. Finally, the value of solidarity, including international solidarity as well as solidarity with the next generation, was a vital part of the welfare model (Strand, 2009). Social integration was an important goal and the kindergarten played a crucial role in this respect (Korsvold, 2005). The aims of equality and integration can be particularly traced in the Act of

[21]The Nordic countries include Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden and the regions and provinces Aaland Island, Faroe Island, and Greenland. These countries are not just grouped together geographically; to a large extent, the people also share certain ideals and ideology about children and childhood and cherished values such as egalitarianism, emancipation, democracy, solidarity, and the concept of the good childhood (Einarsdottir & Wagner, 2006).

Kindergarten of 1975, with the legal right of children with special needs to have a place in kindergarten.

Independence and authenticity

Concurrent to the development of asylums and day care institutions was the development of *Froebel kindergartens*. These institutions for children aged 3–7 years were only open for a few hours each day and could not meet the demands of the parents from the working class. Accordingly, the Froebel kindergartens were institutions that were primarily targeted to middle-class children (Grue, 1987; Holmlund, 1996; Korsvold, 2005). According to Korsvold (2005), the ideological foundation of the contemporary Norwegian kindergarten is not primarily found in the asylum but in the German kindergarten movement from Froebel. The main idea of the early Froebel kindergarten was to let children play in natural surroundings. Play was not supposed to be a longed-for break between other activities, as in asylums. On the contrary, play was supposed to be the main activity of the children. The aim was to have a happy childhood "here and now," with unlimited freedom to play. Therefore, teachers were required to provide adequate space, time, and careful consideration and planning for play. Childhood must be protected, and the children must be on their own in the "garden." Traces from romanticism and Rousseau are apparent in these ideals (Kjørholt, 2013).

Through education, the female leader was required to be qualified in the task of being *Kindleiterin*, which means the leader of children, being somewhat more than a teacher. We can still find traces of this idea in contemporary Norwegian kindergarten, where the head of the group of children is called a pedagogical leader and not a teacher (Ministry of Education and Research, 2006, 2017). The *Kindleiterin* represents an aim of kindergarten as being different

from school, with a teacher being "outwardly passive, active within" ("äußerlich passive, innerlich active") (Balke, 1995)[22].

However, the kindergarten in Norway took more time to be established in comparison with other Nordic countries such as Finland, Sweden, and Denmark (Korsvold, 2005). One major cultural explanation has been the importance of independence and autonomy in Norway.[23] Both politicians and parents considered kindergartens as an expression of being dependent on others to raise children (Korsvold, 2008). Families (housewives) were supposed to manage raising their children by themselves. In order to accept kindergartens in Norway, the institutions were considered as a supplement to the home and were required to, in all aspects, have resemblance with the home. The home was considered the "natural" place for children (Korsvold, 2013a).

Developmental psychology as a scientific discipline was gradually having an impact on the ideals of the kindergartens. Children were constructed as being vulnerable, with needs of protection and intimate attention. The aim was to take care of the children and to raise them in accordance with the values of the home (Korsvold, 2005; Nilsen, 2000). This is one of the explanations for why the Norwegian kindergarten model still focuses on play and a homely atmosphere and places less emphasis on preparation for school than other European countries (Bennett, 2006). The kindergartens became a melting pot of civil values of society, women, and children (Korsvold, 2005, p. 73). "The good childhood here and now," "let children be children," "child centeredness," and a relaxed, loosely structured day have been prevailing characteristics of kindergarten in Norway. The OECD report in 1999 stated that the Norwegian

[22] Schrader-Breymann (1827–1899) was the grandniece of Friedrich Froebel and she established the folk kindergarten in Berlin and named it "*das Pestalozzi-Fröbel Haus.*" She was convinced that children must play undisturbed and participate in the household in a natural unstructured manner. Here, she departed from another Fröbel follower, Marenholtz-Bülow, who emphasized greater teacher structure. These two pioneer ladies can, to a certain extent be considered as models for the Nordic model and the central European kindergarten model (Balke, 1995).

[23] Contrary to Sweden and Denmark, Norway did not achieve sovereignty before 1905 and was subordinated to Denmark 1536–1814 and then to Sweden from 1814–1905.

kindergarten was both a justification and a reproduction of the good Norwegian childhood, protected from adult supervision and control and allowing children to play unhampered in nature and to choose their own activities (Kristjansson, 2006).

The first national curriculum plan was passed as a regulation of the Kindergarten Act in 1996.[24] Play, everyday activities, and social competence was the main focus of the plan and informal working methods and "invisible pedagogy" was emphasized (Bernstein, 1973). The communicative and social competent child was the aim of the work. The framework plan had a strong emphasize on the here-and-now perspective of childhood. Although the teachers are supposed to be goal- and future-directed, this framework plan emphasizes the importance of being sensitive to the interest of the children (*Rammeplan for barnehagen: Q-0903 B*, 1995, p. 31). This resulted in policy rhetoric with regard to being "sensitive to the interest of the child," "the good childhood here and now," and to see learning as encompassing both education and care.

Education for life

The Norwegian early childhood education may be said to have a tradition for emphasizing "education for life" more than "preparation for school" (Bennett, 2006; Korsvold, 2005, 2008, 2013a). Despite the fact that the Act of Kindergarten from 1975 stated that kindergarten is an educational institution, the first national guidelines for the content in the Norwegian kindergartens, were oriented towards qualifications needed in life such as relational skills and communicative skills and less on specific learning goals in order to prepare for school.

In the revision of the Act of Kindergarten in 2006 and subsequently in 2011, another aspect of preparing for life was highlighted by emphasizing children's participatory rights (Ministry of

[24] The curriculum plan is called a Framework Plan because the plan is a framework for the content and working methods. The plan states goals for teachers' work but does not specify goals for the children to attain.

Education and Research, 2006). The curriculum plan provides guidelines on the values, content, and tasks of kindergarten. All kindergartens are supposed to base their activities on the values established in the Framework Plan and on international conventions to which Norway is a signatory. In particular, the signing of the UN Declaration of Children's Rights in 1991 influenced how children's participatory rights were emphasized. The rights of the children were established as individualized rights in this plan, the right to participate, to be listened to, and to be taken into account. The latest curriculum reforms in Norway represent an even stronger emphasis on children's agency and participation (Ministry of Education and research, 2011, 2013, 2017). The Norwegian kindergarten, as part of the Nordic model, departs from other European countries (Einarsdottir & Wagner, 2006; Korsvold, 2005). This upbringing can be analyzed as an approach to preparing children for living in the Norwegian Society as well as a way of bringing democracy into the kindergarten life here and now.

However, parallel to this emphasis on preparation for life, an increased focus on preparation for school has been identified. This has been visible through administrative changes emphasizing early childhood education as part of the educational system and less as part of the family and welfare policy. In 2005, the responsibility for kindergartens was transferred from the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs to the Ministry of Education and Research. Thus, the government emphasized kindergarten as part of the educational system by considering kindergarten as the first step in lifelong learning and with external expectations to school-ready children (Østrem et al., 2009).

Concurrent to individual rights stated in the Act of Kindergarten and in the Framework Plan, there are important signals from the Ministry of Education and Research regarding the screening of children and for increasing control over the kindergartens. The low ranking on Pisa Tests emphasizes the educational leadership in Norway and creates a debate regarding how kindergarten can prevent this development and highlight kindergarten as a social investment

(Kjørholt, 2013). Further, the large population of "non-Norwegian" speakers and their integration into the Norwegian society[25] leads to political signals on mapping language abilities so that all children attain the same standard. As in China, there are indications of increased impact from neoliberal ideas on kindergarten in Norway, both in terms of aims and ideals. Thus, the new institutional system was constituted by juxtaposed aims/objectives such as care, providing a work force, cultural formation, social prevention, and compensation (Hammarström-Lewenhagen, 2013). Today, we can trace new objectives of kindergarten, such as kindergarten as the first step in the educational system, lifelong learning, and education for democracy.

Contemporary early childhood education in Norway

Internationally, there are a few cross-cultural studies involving kindergartens in Norway. A Norwegian overview in a report of kindergarten research indicates the lack of knowledge regarding the history of kindergartens in Norway in general and the normative and ideological foundation specifically (Gulbrandsen, Johansson, & Nilsen, 2002, p. 21). The recommendation in the report is that analysis of the kindergarten must include historical perspectives, preferably with comparative perspectives. Another overview of Norwegian kindergarten research, conducted a few years later, also recommends more comparative international studies that could provide "interesting perspectives on specific themes" (Borg, Backe-Hansen, & Kristiansen, 2008, p. 10).

One exception is the work of Marit Alvestad et al. that focuses on the understanding of kindergarten teachers of aspects of planning and practice in kindergartens in Norway, Sweden, and New Zealand (Alvestad, 2001; Alvestad & Berge, 2009; Alvestad & Duncan, 2006; Alvestad & Samuelsson, 2001). According to Alvestad, the main values in the Norwegian

[25] One out of four citizens in Oslo (the capital of Norway) is an immigrant with another native language (SSB 2019).

curriculum plan from 1996 onwards based on a conservative, cultural tradition related to the tradition of the social democratic welfare state (Alvestad, 2001, p. 79). Another relevant study is the historical comparative study of Tora Korsvold (2008), in which she analyses Norwegian, Swedish, and German children and childhood (included kindergartens) in the light of the welfare model.

The tradition of the Norwegian kindergarten has been a continuous reification of child-centeredness. However, until the 1990s, research on the social practices in kindergarten in Norway was scarce (Gulbrandsen et al., 2002). In several studies by Bae (2009, 2010), the focus is on the importance of children's influence on the daily curriculum and their subjectivity. The individual child has a right to its own experience and is to be considered a subject within the frame of the community; the uniqueness of the child is emphasized. Bae's concept of recognition mainly has a psychological approach, is normative, and is indicated as a universal value in any teacher-children relationships.

This normative approach to children's participation is questioned in a study of children's participation in Norway in the 1990s (Kjørholt, 2004). The point of departure of this study is the UN convention of the rights of children. Kjørholt makes an inquiry into how to understand the increasing hegemony of contemporary discourses on children and participation in Norway. Kjørholt states that this hegemonic position of the participatory child in Norway is almost taken for granted like a truth and with no need to be further elaborated and discussed (Kjørholt, 2004, p. 229). She states that "the call for children's voices seems to have a tremendous rhetorical power in many contexts" (Kjørholt, 2004, p. 1). Kjørholt questions if the dominant focus on the right of the individual child to participate is at the expense of the collective and the cultural values that constitute the community that the child participates in.

Research on social practices in the Norwegian early childhood education has since highlighted the introduction of the Kindergarten Act of 2005 that includes the legal right of children to participate and have an influence in kindergarten. In a short time, a discourse of children as citizens, and not just as future citizens, has been established almost like an ethical imperative, which is barely questioned (Børhaug, 2010). A large amount of the kindergarten research has been devoted to the participatory rights of children, but with somewhat different focus (Sandvik, 2013).

Børhaug focuses on participation as part of the democratic formation, citizenship, and education of children (Børhaug, 2010). According to Børhaug, children in kindergarten have a legal right to participate in decisions that affect them. Børhaug states that it is unclear how this right is implemented, in particular, how much influence children are allowed to have? Børhaug concludes that there is a substantial variation regarding how much children are allowed to participate, in what matters, and how influential they are (Børhaug, 2010). Grindheim (2014) also focuses on participation as a democratic formation. Her focus is not primarily the relationship between adults and children, but on how the peer group provides conditions for democratic participation and experiences (Grindheim, 2014).

Other Norwegian studies have focused on participation for specific groups of children. With the increased number of children below three years attending kindergarten, there has been an increased focus in the participatory rights of the youngest children (Bae, 2009; Sandvik, 2013). Children's participation has also been analyzed from the perspectives of children with special needs or children in danger of being marginalized in kindergarten and, therefore, having no voice or influence (Franck, 2014).

There has been a considerable critical concern regarding the hegemonic position of the children's right to participation (Franck, 2014; Kjørholt, 2004, 2013; Kjørholt & Qvortrup,

2012; Kjørholt & Seland, 2012; Olsen, 2011; Seland, 2009; Østrem et al., 2009). Early analyses of children as participants in the 1990s show that children's participation is interpreted as the individual's right to decide and to be free of the control of adults (Kjørholt, 2004;Tullgren, 2003).

Østrem enquires into the implementation of the Framework Plan from 2006 onward. The teachers' practices indicate that the children's right to participate is perceived as the individual child's right to choose and decide things on his/her own (Østrem et al., 2009). Bae also discusses problems and dilemmas with how the discourse of participation can be interpreted and practiced in kindergarten and is critical to the interpretation of participation as the right to make free choices (Bae, 2010). Several Norwegian studies emphasize that in an individual focused reference—like the Norwegian one—individual self-management, self- presentation, and individuality is emphasized more than responsibility for others, solidarity, and community (Kjørholt, 2004; Østrem et al., 2009).

Concurrent to the legal rights of the participatory child, there has been considerable concern regarding the neoliberal influence in the Norwegian kindergarten. This is identified in the governing of the kindergartens (Seland, 2009) as well as in the new demands on mapping and standardization of goals (Franck, 2014; Østrem et al., 2009). *The Modern Child and the Flexible Kindergarten* is an ethnographic study of the everyday life in kindergarten in the light of the neoliberal discourse (Seland, 2009). The main concern in this study is what consequences new discourses on children and kindergarten can have in professional practice and children's possibilities for participation and learning in kindergarten when such understanding is materialized within a local context. The aim of the study is to identify connections among different levels, like political discourses, nationally and locally, and the everyday in kindergarten consisting of the practices and reflections of the teachers and the children's experiences and actions. Moreover, there is an increasing emphasis on the participatory child

at the same time as there are strong incidents to standardize the goals and expectations of children by improving the practices related to mapping children's abilities (Seland, 2009).

To sum up, the contemporary research on kindergartens in both China and Norway illustrate that there are conflicting ideals in the kindergartens, which are expressed as tensions and conflicts between contemporary and traditional ideals. There are also conflicting ideals between the policy and educational levels and between teachers and parents. In addition, there are tensions between expressed purposes and the conditions of the kindergartens. Most of these studies point to increased individualization of children. Discourses on freedom, individual rights, the citizen as an active entrepreneur, and transfer of risk from society to the individual are evident in the studies of kindergarten in China and Norway. This ideology is gaining popularity globally and influencing the life of kindergarten children with demands on responsibility, self-determination, and competition. There have been rather limited efforts in attempting to identify the purpose of individualization.

PART 2 THE DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The description of the design of the study is divided into two parts. Chapter 4 elaborates cultural historical activity theory as the overarching analytical framework for tracing and capturing cultural formation ideals. Chapter 5 provides an account of the data and discusses methodological and ethical challenges.

Chapter 3: Theoretical and conceptual framework

The design of the present study is highly influenced by Tobin, Wu, and Davidson's (1989), study of *Preschool in Three Cultures*. Their study has attracted considerable attention due to their insights into kindergartens in three cultures and their use of a unique methodology. The method that they employed was formally called "video-cued multivocal ethnography"; it is also referred to as "reflexive comparative ethnography." The method was further elaborated in a study of historical change entitled *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited* (Tobin et al., 2009). The method draws upon several sources. First, it is inspired by anthropologists' use of film as a starting point for interviews related to the meaning of sequences (Connor et al., 1986; Spindler, 1987; Fujita & Sano, 1988; Anderson-Levitt, 2002, all cited in Tobin et al., 1989, 2009). Second, the method is inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) and the concepts of multivocality, hybridity, and dialogism.

In their project (Tobin et al., 1989, 2009), kindergarten principals, teachers, and parents, as well as teacher educators all comment on the same videos. The steps in the method can be described in the following manner: First, one day in preschool in each culture is videotaped. Second, the videotape is edited down to a 20-minute stimulus tape. Then, the videotape is used in the interviews with different stakeholders as a projective device and as a field for non-verbal interview questions. The videotape was first showed to the teacher whose classroom was

filmed. Thereafter, it was shown to other staff at the same preschool and then to early childhood educators at other preschools around the country. Finally, the video was shown to early childhood educators in the other two countries (Tobin et al., 2009).

The main idea of developing this method was to answer questions like how do preschools in Japan, China, and the United States reflect and impart their culture's core beliefs? Since Tobin and his team were ethnographers, their primary interest was "meaning." They needed a research method that would enable them to capture what goes on in the kindergartens, but more importantly to access the meanings underlying the practices. When the kindergarten teachers commented on the videos, they revealed something about themselves and their own values and cultural beliefs. Tobin and his colleagues' objective was to expand the traditional ethnographic approach by giving power to the informants. They believed that the informants' interpretations, as well as those of the anthropologists, must have a voice (1989, 1999, 2009).

Their research project has had a formative influence on the present study. The purpose of Tobin and his team's studies was to capture values and cultural beliefs in the everyday practices of preschools in three countries. By tracing cultural formation ideals, this study is thematically related to Tobin and his colleagues' studies. However, while Tobin and his team adopt an open ethnographic methodological approach, the presents study utilizes cultural historical activity theory as an analytical approach to trace cultural formation ideals.

The theoretical perspectives of CHAT[26], originated in the Soviet psychology in the 1920s and was initially formulated as part of the collaborative investigative project by Lev Vygotsky (1978), Aleksei N. Leontiev (1978), Alexander Luria (1979), and several others in the early twentieth century (Stetsenko, 2005). CHAT was developed as a reaction to the psychological landscape of the time when the Soviet psychology was moving away from the individualistic

[26] This term has not yet acquired a conventional meaning (Stetsenko, 2005).

notions of human development towards viewing human development as interwoven with sociocultural contexts (Chaiklin, Hedegaard, & Juul Jensen, 1999). The framework of CHAT has aimed at transcending micro and macro dichotomies, mental and material, observation and intervention in analysis, and redesign of work. In particular, the Cartesian dichotomy "between human subjectivity and 'real life' that conceptualized mind as a largely solipsistic and individual phenomenon" was opposed (Stetsenko, 2005, p. 71).

> CHAT is premised on Marxian concepts and common interests in the relationships between culture, socially organized activity and human consciousness, and between value, commodities and labor. Marx's assertion that "consciousness does not determine life; life determines consciousness" (Marx and Engels 1845-1846/1964, p. 37) became the basis for Vygotsky's materialist psychology and in turn influenced CHAT's interest in the social organization of human activity and the changes in consciousness it might be possible to stimulate within activity systems through interventions. (Ellis & McNicholl, 2015, p. 11)

The contemporary theoretical approach of cultural historical activity is not a monolithic approach, but consists of a variety of approaches sharing a few basic principles (Fleer et al., 2009a; Kaptelinin, 2005). The conceptual framework of the present study is inspired by Leontiev's activity theory (1978), Stetsenko's Transformative Activist Stance (2005, 2008, 2013) and the works of Hedegaard and Fleer with their Cultural Historical Theoretical Wholeness Approach (Fleer, Hedegaard, Bang, & Hviid, 2008; Fleer et al., 2009a; Hedegaard, Edwards, & Fleer, 2012).

Two main ideas regarding social practices in the CHAT approach are crucial for this study: 1) activity[27] as motive-driven and object-oriented and 2) activity as culturally and historically developed with embedded contradictions as the driving forces for change. In the following account, I argue that these ideas from CHAT are powerful tools to trace cultural formation ideals in kindergarten.

Activity as intentional and object oriented

The object of activity[28] is one of the most basic concepts within activity theory (Kaptelinin, 2005). According to Leontiev (1978), all human activities are object-related. "The object of activity[29] plays a key role in research based on activity theory. The object carries an idea that 'something' is probable to transform and an idea about a result of this transformation. Kaptelinin describes the object as the 'ultimate reason' behind activity and as 'the sense-maker' which gives meaning to the activity. The object is developed historically and collectively and will give direction of the activity. The main thing which distinguishes one activity from another, however, is the differences of their objects. "It is exactly the object of an activity that gives it a determined direction (…) the object of an activity is its true motive" (Leont'ev, 1978, p. 51). Therefore, tracing the object of the activity is crucial within this theoretical framework. As an analytical tool, the concept provides an understanding of what people are attempting to achieve and why (Kaptelinin, 2005).

[27] The concept of activity is used somewhat differently by Leontiev, Stetsenko and Hedegaard. Whereas Leontiev uses the concept of activity on the collective institutional plane, Hedegaard uses the concept of practice. Hedegaard uses the concept of activity at the personal level (Hedegaard et al., 2008).
[28] In Norwegian, *virksomhet*; in German, *Tätigkeitstheorie*; in Russian, *dejatelnost.*
[29] Recently, there has been a fair amount of philosophical debate regarding the use of the word "object" due to translation problems. The Russian word "object" has multiple meanings when translated into English. It has been used interchangeably to refer to the goal of an activity, the motives for participating in an activity, and material products that participants attempt to gain through an activity (Kaptelinin, 2005). This has created confusion among CHAT scholars regarding what object-oriented activity means. What CHAT scholars do agree about is that the "object" is the reason why individuals and groups of individuals choose to participate in an activity (Kaptelinin, 2005).

Further, Leontiev (1978) states that there are societal needs that motivate an activity and give it direction and meaning. For example, kindergartens are established and developed as an answer to certain needs in the society. These needs motivate the activity in kindergarten and give the actions in kindergarten a direction. Simultaneously, there are embedded contradictions with contradictory motives. According to CHAT, there are contradictory motives and objects embedded within all complex institutions. Contradictions are historically accumulated inner contradictions within the things themselves and can be expressed on the surface as tensions, problems, conflicts, and breakdown (Ilyenkov, 2014).

Thus, a mixture of contradictory pedagogical and societal motives based on societal and cultural needs will necessary exist side by side in kindergarten practices. Examples of such motives can be to develop social equity, political citizenship, contribute to health improvement, provide work force, economic and competitive motives, improving general welfare and liberation, and political influence and adjustment. These motives do not follow or replace each other in history, but exist side-by-side and can imply contradictions as well as fruitful complementariness. One motive may be dominant in a specific period of history, as is discussed in chapter 2. Analyzing the contradictory motives and purposes of the Chinese and Norwegian kindergarten historically is important in order to understand cultural formation of the historically situated kindergartens today. Institutional practices mostly change slowly (Fleer et al., 2009a; Havnes, 2004).

According to Leontiev (1978), unmotivated activities do not exist. If the motive/s cannot be expressed, it is tacit and hidden, but still a motive. However, the dominant motive of the activity can never be directly observed and identified, but can be observed through concrete artefact-mediated actions, artifacts and architecture, norms and rules, and division of labor. In order to address the objects of the kindergarten, certain actions must be performed and artifacts used. The goal-oriented actions give the activity content and function—an activity system is sustained

by human actions directed towards conscious goals and intentions. Without these actions, there is no activity (Kaptelinin, 2005).

However, actions are not exclusively conditioned by the goals but also by operations that give constraints and affordances. Operations are associated with the material conditions under which actions take place but also automatic actions taking the shape of "traditions," routines, norms, and evaluations (Engeström, Punamäki-Gitai, & Miettinen, 1999). Hedegaard (2012) terms these conditions societal and institutional demands. This implies that teachers act according to traditions, knowledge and experiences. Further, they act according to what the society demands, permits, and makes possible in a certain kindergarten and as such to their conceived idea of what to accomplish.

Activity as culturally and historically developed

In the CHAT tradition, teaching is viewed as a social practice, which is culturally and historically developed and has different implications (Fleer et al., 2009b). First, this theoretical approach focuses primarily on the collectively developed activity system and not on individual differences of intentions among teachers. Every teacher who begins to work in kindergarten participates in these historical practices by deploying collaboratively developed artifacts and tools and through the institutionalized actions, they acquire the motive. The artifacts and the ways of using them mediate human knowledge generated through the generations. The collective experiences are reified by using cultural tools (Vygotsky, 1978). The continuity of an activity is sustained through mediating artifacts that afford certain ways of acting in a given situation and yield constraints to other ways of acting (Havnes, 2004). The material room in kindergarten can be artifacts affording certain actions and restraining others. For example, the kindergarten in China has small chairs and tables that are easy to move and rearrange, whereas

the furniture in the kindergarten Norway is rather heavy and static in the room. Moreover, the time schedule in kindergarten is based on historical routines.

Institutional demands are rooted in historical practices, institutional constraints, and affordances regardless of the individual's presence and absence (Fleer et al., 2009). In any local activity—for example, kindergarten—we can trace the history of the institution in physical framing, artifacts, rules, daily routines as well as in the external conditions and in the expressed ideas and ideals (Fleer et al., 2009b). This emphasizes the continuities in the deepest structures of society (Braudel, 1980). When using available artifacts, the individual teacher will immediately participate in cultural and collectively developed knowledge (Stetsenko, 2005, 2008).

Teachers transform and create their environment and, as such, they create and constantly transform their very life, consequently changing themselves in fundamental ways while, in and through this process, becoming human and gaining self-knowledge and knowledge about the world (Stetsenko, 2009, p. 137). According to Stetsenko, the human nature involves a process of overcoming and transcending its own limitations through continuous collaborative practices aimed at purposefully changing the world. Stetsenko concludes this argument in the following way: "In other words, it is a process of historical becoming by humans not as merely creatures of nature, but as agents of their own lives, agents whose nature is to purposefully transform their world" (Stetsenko, 2009, p. 138).

Following this argument, culture is not something surrounding the individual like concentric circles (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Elliott & Tudge, 2007). On the contrary, culture is manifested in concrete practices and artifacts, such as physical and mental tools, and thereby in concrete actions. By participating in social practices and deploying its cultural artifacts, both teachers and children *do* culture. In this manner, CHAT opposes and attempts to overcome the

dichotomy between the individual and culture. Generally, such dichotomies permeate our thinking in the western part of the world and challenge our ability to transcend them. According to this perspective, the human being can never fully be understood as isolated from the situated reality. The human being develops through historical and cultural practices. Simultaneously, the historical reality is shaped by human practices.

> In this transformative ontology culture is immanent to people's activities (and hence their development) rather than an outside force of influence or a pool of artifacts. Culture is neither inside nor outside human beings; moreover, it is neither something that people have nor is it just a milieu that they exist in or relate to an extraneous world out there to be discovered. (Stetsenko, 2009, p. 138)

A basic onto-epistemological (Stetsenko, 2013, 2015) assumption within CHAT is that the human being develops "through the social practice of human labor—the collaborative (and, therefore, sociocultural), transformative practice unfolding and expanding in history" (Stetsenko, 2009, p. 137). Activity represents the collectively developed patterns for actions with a clear historical base.

Stetsenko views culture as something people continuously *do and enact—collaboratively* engaging in their world through *collective* efforts. This indicates the need to identify cultural ideals as part of activity interaction, visible in relations, language, activities, artifacts, architecture, etc. This perspective gives rise to the methodological approach of the thesis.

Further, Stetsenko argues in favor of the need for positioning human agency since

> Positing society above the individual and seeing the latter as produced by, subordinate to and molded by reality, and especially society, at the expense of emphasizing

> individual agency—the ability to produce, create, and make a difference in social practices. (Stetsenko, 2005, p. 78)

She also problematizes the tacit dichotomy between individual and social dimensions of human life within Leontiev's thinking (Stetsenko, 2013, 2015). Stetsenko attempts to expand the materialist ontology of Leontiev by adding a focus on the manifold transitions among material tool production, inter-psychological processes and human subjectivity, and the agentive role of individual processes. This represents an important expansion of the CHAT theory, maintaining the dialectic perspective and still ascribing the human being an agentive role, which is in accordance with the perspectives in the present study.

Chapter 4: Methodological approach

In this chapter the nature and course of the research design is presented. In addition, the process of data generation and the analytical approach are elucidated. Finally, major methodological and ethical questions and dilemmas, which I have faced during the study, are discussed. Some of the methodological questions were illuminated and discussed in the article entitled *Research Dilemmas Associated with Photo Elicitation in Comparative Early Childhood Education Research* (Birkeland, 2013b). The focus of the article was to discuss dilemmas associated with the use of photo elicitation such as taking photos and selecting those to be used in the focus group interview. Furthermore, the article reflects upon dilemmas in relation to positioning of the researcher, the interpreter and the kindergarten teachers in the interviews. The article further argues for the importance of including insiders and outsider teachers as interpreters of the photos in a comparative study so that taken for granted assumptions of practices can be disturbed and challenged.

In order to trace cultural formation ideals in kindergartens in a specific historical time, a case study of two kindergartens situated in different cultural contexts was selected (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2014). The term 'case study' draws attention to the question of what specifically can be learned from a particular case. To choose to do a case study is not primarily a question of the inquiry used, but more a question of what to study (Stake, 2005) in order to yield insights into local practices (Flyvbjerg, 2011). The study has been conducted over time, an important characteristic of case studies (Stake, 2005). My involvement with these two kindergartens began as early as 2007. Another characteristic of the case study is that multiple sources of data generation have been applied. The main data generation has been photo and video elicitation (Birkeland, 2013b; Lapenta, 2011). In addition, observations in the kindergartens and collected information on material resources, history of the kindergartens, and background of the teachers have been used.

The intention of conducting a case study is to portray the case for others to see. Analyzing two cases nuances the portrayal of each case (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Yin, 2014). Parts of these portrayals have been depicted in the articles (see appendices 2, 3, and 4). A more holistic and detailed summary will be given in chapter 5. There are many features of a case. In order to trace cultural formation ideals in the kindergartens, it was necessary to select some thematic topics. These topics have been *natural science activities*, *artifacts displayed on the walls in the kindergartens* and *the time regulation.* There are several reasons for why these areas were chosen. First, the areas of study focus on crucial elements in any kindergarten globally. Second, each area of study can give a different angle of incidence to cultural formation within kindergarten. Finally, the three areas of study can contribute to a varied picture of how cultural formation takes form and thereby contributes to tracing cultural formation ideals.

Natural science activities are common features of everyday curriculum in the kindergartens in China and Norway. Introduction to animals, plants, seasons, and weather have a long tradition within kindergartens in Norway as well as China (Hammer & He, 2016). The content of these events and the working methods were chosen to uncover what the kindergarten teachers are attempting to achieve. Considerations of different aspects of individualization will necessarily take place within these events. Questions like how to meet the needs and interests of the children, how to balance between the collective and individual aspects of the tasks, and how to meet the initiatives from children was focused in such an event (Birkeland, 2013a).

The other area of study is *the display of artifacts on the walls* in the kindergartens. Displaying artifacts on the walls in the kindergartens is a common task in kindergartens worldwide and is often based on routinized and traditional practices that are taken for granted (Prochner, Cleghorn, & Green, 2008). The artifacts gave a picture of different kinds of everyday actions and different aspects of cultural formation can be exposed. Further, the artifacts reveal

something about ideal cultural formation processes. These ideals were traced in the artifacts themselves and in the teachers' talking about these displays.

The last area of study is *the regulation of time*. This is an important structural form in any kindergarten and, as such, yields conditions for cultural formation. The structuring of time is a condition that affects the collective group of children. As such, the regulation of time was an important condition to see how cultural formation can take different forms.

The three-part study was selected to represent different angles into cultural formation ideals and have the potential to give a more compound picture of social practices than if I limited the focus to structured learning situations or to free-play situations.

Choice of kindergartens and access to the kindergartens

The present study is limited to one field site in two countries, China and Norway, respectively. There are obviously pitfalls and strengths with such an approach. There is a danger of confirming established dichotomies and emphasizing the differences between kindergartens in the East and the West (Fleer et al., 2009a; Tobin et al., 2009; Tobin et al., 1989). I can see how I was tempted to do this again and again during the project, focusing on the exotic side of China in order to give a kind of "wow effect" (Birkeland, 2013b; Ryen, 2011b). On the other hand, the fact that I repeatedly visited the kindergartens for a period of 4–5 years doing different part studies made it easier to discover nuances in the patterns.

Two kindergartens are part of the study, *Lotus kindergarten* in China and *Glacier Buttercup* kindergarten in Norway. Both kindergartens were involved from the first start of the collaboration between East China Normal University (ECNU) and Bergen University College and both kindergartens are affiliated with the universities. This means that they are involved in student counselling and have continuous meetings and dialogues with the university staff.

There were some decisive premises for the choice of kindergartens. One of the premises was that the kindergarten teachers were motivated to get involved. Initially, they were asked to participate in the part study with a focus on natural science activities. Another premise was that the kindergartens must not be extraordinary in any ways. This implies that the quality of the kindergarten must not be very low and not extraordinarily high compared to other kindergartens in the respective countries. However, this is a difficult question. As previously mentioned, the differences in quality between kindergartens in urban and rural areas in China are rather severe (Hu, Zhou, & Li, 2014; Luo et al., 2012; Pan & Liu, 2008; Zhu & Zhang, 2008). The considerations regarding quality of the kindergartens in China had to be linked to the level of quality in the city and not to the country as a whole. However, in Norway, the level of quality in general is rather similar all over the country (Gulbrandsen & Eliassen, 2013). This does not imply that all kindergartens have high quality, but the gap between the extraordinary high and low quality kindergarten is not as big as that in China.

There were also other reasons to choose a kindergarten from the urban area in China. The kindergartens in the urban areas are subjected to a considerate pressure from the universities and teacher education related to curriculum reforms and "the new ideas" and discourses on early childhood education (Li, Wang, & Wong, 2011) . Staff members at the universities are eager to present new ideas and reforms to the kindergartens. I assumed that the tension between the new reforms, other traditions and the pressure from parents and grandparents were rather extensive in these kindergartens.

However, there is a question to be debated when comparing an urban kindergarten in China with an urban kindergarten in Norway. Being urban in China is something different from being urban in Norway. From a Chinese perspective, the Norwegian cities are almost considered as villages. However, this is not considered in the analysis and discussion of the results.

Obtaining permission to do research in Chinese kindergartens for a Norwegian researcher is not easy and had to be done in collaboration with a colleague at ECNU. To me, the Chinese colleague was the gatekeeper (Heimer & Thøgersen, 2006) and she has been a continuous door-opener throughout the project. She contacted *Lotus kindergarten*. After the positive response from the kindergarten with regard to participating in the study, we sent a formal invitation letter to the kindergarten with information about the project (appendice 5). Soon after, we had a meeting with the principal and the kindergarten teachers so that they could meet us in person and ask questions regarding the project. The staff accepted to join the project. After the initial invitation letter and meeting there were several letters and information meetings, as the research project developed. The purpose of the meetings was to inform and explain the intention of the project to the teachers and to the parents. I also had a meeting where I provided information regarding the method of photo and video elicitation, since this method was unfamiliar to the Chinese kindergarten teachers.

The access to *Glacier Buttercup kindergarten* was easier. The kindergarten was affiliated to Bergen University College, so we had contact in advance as a practice kindergarten. I had also been collaborating with the kindergarten in a pilot project. When they were contacted, they expressed their interest to participate. Most of their questions were related to the first-part study concerning natural science. They were eager to focus on this topic and wanted to learn more. After initial initiatives and written permission from parents, they decided to participate and to continue during the project.

Lotus kindergarten is situated in one of China's biggest cities, but still in a relatively calm neighborhood with four storage houses. The kindergarten has six age-segregated classes[30], two in each age group. There was 180 children in the age group of 3-6 years. Each class had 25-35

[30] In the thesis, the concept of "class" and "classroom" is used in connection with the Chinese kindergarten in accordance with how the kindergarten teachers use these concepts.

children. The general focus for the case study was the oldest children with the age 5-6 years and with 35 children in the class. The average teacher-child ratio was 1:15. All the kindergarten teachers were certified as kindergarten teachers, but their educational background was rather different from each other. Some had a bachelor's degree and some had a diploma from shorter in-service training. The kindergarten opened in 1983, is public, and supported financially by the local government. It is still ranked as a number 2 kindergarten, which means a rather average quality in accordance with the standard of the city, but a high standard compared with the average Chinese standard.

The Glacier Cup Kindergarten is situated in a Norwegian city in a calm suburban area with villas and close to the sea and rural areas. The kindergarten had four different age-segregated groups. Overall, there were 70 children in the age group of 1–6 years. The number of children in each group depended on the age of the children. The focus in the present study was on the oldest children in the age group of 5–6 years. There were 18 children in this group. There were 15 teachers and assistants in the kindergarten. The teacher-child ratio in the oldest age group was 1:6. The kindergarten teachers had a bachelor degree. The assistants had a variety of backgrounds. The leader had a master's degree in early childhood education. Further, the kindergarten opened 12 years ago and had a private owner.

Data generation

CHAT has as a premise that the empirical work is to be carried out within concrete activity systems, for example, in contrast to exclusively conducting interviews with kindergarten teachers or conducting document analysis (Berthen, 2007; Fleer et al., 2009a; Hedegaard et al., 2012). The intention is to make the everyday practice in the kindergarten visible. On the other hand, excluding interviews and merely observing the activities will make it difficult to understand what the teachers are attempting to achieve. The data's *what* and *why* is thus important in an activity theoretical study. This is why the present study is based upon

photo/video elicitation, which combines observation and focus group interviews (Birkeland, 2013b; Collier & Collier, 1986; Harper, 2012; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011; Lapenta, 2011; Rose, 2012; Stephens, 2009). In addition, the data generation is based upon observations in the field and the use of historical data. The empirical data production was done in a period of three years from 2009–2012.

Thematic focus: Natural science activities

The first study began as a joint study with two other co-researchers, one from ECNU, China and one colleague from the BUC, Norway. The focus was on natural science tasks and events. My Chinese and Norwegian colleague and I collaborated with the production of data and the transcription and translation of the empirical data in the period 2009–2010. However, in the analysis of the data material, we adopted different paths.

The teachers and the researchers videotaped four different events. The teachers in the Lotus kindergarten videotaped *collective teaching tasks* that they defined as natural science teaching, and the researcher videotaped *corner activities*[31] related to natural science. The teachers in the Glacier Buttercup kindergarten videotaped different kinds of *theme work*, which they defined as natural science events. The researchers videotaped *play events* related to natural science teaching situations.

The Chinese kindergarten teachers described *collective teaching* as a daily event that lasts approximately 30 minutes. There were 25–35 children of the same age in the group. The teacher introduced the topic, *turning*, and demonstrated certain points. Then, the teacher asked the children questions and let the children explore for themselves in 10 minutes. The children were

[31] "Corner activity" in the Chinese kindergarten context must not be mixed with the theoretical concept of activity within CHAT. It is to be considered as an "activity setting" (Fleer et al., 2008).

stimulated to find different solutions to the questions and were encouraged to demonstrate their findings to other children. Finally, there was a summing up by the teacher.

The Chinese kindergarten teachers described *corner activities* as a daily event activity that lasts for approximately 30–45 minutes. There were 10–15 different stations in the classroom related to natural science. The teachers prepared each station, and chose the tasks and artifacts in each "corner." The children were free to choose between the different corner activities. They explored and documented their findings; at the end of the event, there was a summing up in a plenary session.

The teachers in the Glacier Buttercup kindergarten described *theme activity* as a project that can last for a few hours and even for several days or weeks. The entire group of 18 children were involved. There was an introduction by the teacher and then the children were encouraged to explore in smaller groups or by themselves. The theme work involved numerous different methods and subject areas such as arts, music, drama, and literature, although natural science was the focus. There was no summing up of the experience.

The second event related to natural science in the Glacier Buttercup kindergarten was *play activities*. These situations had very little structure and were not specifically planned for. The children were staying outdoors in a natural environment for several hours. They were encouraged by the teachers to be curious, choose activities, explore, and ask questions. The teachers were not directly participating in the play activities, but they explained that they were available in case the children needed them (Birkeland, 2013a). The researcher videotaped one situation categorized as play activities.

Four video tapes related to natural science situations were produced and used as a starting point for the focus group interviews with the teachers. Four focus group interviews were conducted with a duration of 1.5–2.5 hours. The interviews were semi-structured focus group interviews,

with the kindergarten teachers in both kindergartens basing themselves on video-elicitation (Rose, 2012; Stockall & Davis, 2011). The videotapes were used as stimuli for meaning-making in the semi-structured focus group interviews. In order to establish a polyvocal approach, teachers from each kindergarten watched the videotapes from the Norwegian and the Chinese case studies before the focus group interview. When linked with interviews, photo and video elicitation was a means of extending the standard method of interviews (Birkeland, 2013b). The questions were related to teaching, learning, and the purpose of the activities. A few questions were prepared before the interviews, but others were developed during the interviews. The dialogues developed differently due to the videos that functioned as an interview guide.

All the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions have focused on spoken words. Focus group interviews can also provide information regarding the relation between the participants or details about how things were expressed (Wilkinson, 2011). This was not the focus in the transcription of the interviews. The interviews in the first study from the Norwegian kindergarten were tape recorded and transcribed by my Norwegian colleague and myself. The two of us transcribed and translated these interviews into English. My Chinese colleague transcribed and translated the interviews from the Chinese kindergarten (Figure 1).

Interviewer: *You are concerned about cultivating children's interest. How do you cultivate children's interest?*

Teacher: *In our kindergarten, we seldom have collective teaching on science content. Corner activities will be a better way to cultivate children's interest. We feel it is important to create a relaxed atmosphere where children are free to choose what they like to do. They will find something after interaction with the material. This will depend on their personality, their perception, and cognitive level. That is the most important. The children will find more things in corner activities than the teachers do. Now we think about how we can create a better environment in the classroom so that children can interact with the materials autonomously. It is difficult for us to do this. We have to balance.*

Figure 1: Transcription from the video-cued recall interview in Lotus kindergarten.

The interview was conducted after watching the video on collective teaching in their own kindergarten.

Thematic focus: Artifacts exhibited on the walls

The second study was conducted in 2011. The focus in this part study was on the artifacts displayed on the walls in the two kindergartens. The artifacts displayed on the walls play a central role in any kindergarten, but this is discussed only to a small extent (Prochner et al., 2008). I visited both kindergartens in the spring of 2011. I took photos of the artifacts displayed on the walls in the kindergartens, in the joint areas, as well as in the rooms of one specific class/unit. I made a PPT presentation of all the artifacts from each kindergarten and used this presentation as an interview guide in semi-structured interviews with the kindergarten teachers creating. I did not take a sample of the artifacts, but decided to show all of them.

I completed four interviews, two in each kindergarten. In one interview, I presented the artifacts from their own kindergarten and in the next interview; I presented the artifacts from the other kindergarten. The duration of the interviews lasted from 1.5–3 hours. The kindergarten teachers in both kindergartens participated in the interviews, with 5–6 teachers in each group (Birkeland, 2012). The interviews in this study were closely related to the photos. This implies that I showed one picture of the artifacts at the time and asked the teachers to comment what they saw and what they regarded as the meaning of the artefact. This was different from the first study where the teachers saw the video first and then were asked questions. I asked questions like “What is this?”, “What does it mean?”, “Why is this displayed on the wall?” “Who has made it?” “Who decide what is displayed on the walls?” At the end of the interview, I asked more general questions like “Is this a representative way of displaying artifacts on the walls in this kindergarten?” “Is there something you miss?” When they saw the photos from the other kindergarten, they were also asked questions about what they found different from their own way of doing it and what they found similar to their own kindergarten. They were also asked if

something surprised them. Since the questions were so closely related to the photos, it was easy for me to go back to the photos and see what they had commented. I did not use a readymade interview guide during these interviews.

The interviews from the second study were tape-recorded by me. A Chinese postgraduate student transcribed and translated the transcription into English. My Chinese colleague checked and changed some of the translation and discussed the changes with me. The following is an excerpt of a transcription from two different interviews in the kindergartens. The teachers commented on each other's displays.

Teacher in Glacier Buttercup kindergarten: *It seems like they want to sell their kindergarten. Why should they do it so perfect? For whom is it supposed to be so perfect?*

Teacher in Lotus kindergarten: *We do not think that everything is suitable to display on the walls. The parents would think we have low quality.*

Figure 2: Transcription from the video-cued recall interview in Glacier Buttercup kindergarten.

Thematic focus: The regulation of time

When analyzing the interviews in the two first-part studies, I discovered that the teachers discussed time rather often. It appeared to be a topic of great concern to the teachers. I became curious about this. This third study is based upon the videos and the interviews from the two previous studies. I analyzed the interviews and the photos and videos with new questions. This time, I analyzed them with the question of how time was regulated in the two kindergartens.

In addition to the previous interviews, I studied the daily schedule as displayed on the walls in both kindergartens and made observations of the daily routines in the two kindergartens. I also made minute-by-minute observations in order to describe the rhythm of the day. The everyday observations gave bodily experiences of tempo, rhythm, and shifts. This was information related to the procedure of the entire day and information about the tempo, rhythm and pulse within each task of the day. These observations made me more aware of the in-between-task

actions of the children and the transitions between tasks. The following is an example of a minute observation in the morning in Lotus kindergarten. I wrote it down immediately when I was sitting in a corner in the classroom to observe (Figure 3).

08.38	All 35 children have arrived in the classroom. The children are occupied in a corner activity with different tasks. There are 2–3 children in each group
08.40	The music comes on. Everybody tidies up their corner and places the materials back in place.
08.42	Each child takes his/her chair to the front of the classroom, opposite the teacher, in four rows.
08.45	The teacher begins to ask them about their tasks in the corner activities. Many children raise their hand to answer. The teacher says the name of one boy. He stands up and tells about his task. The teacher continues with this session for almost 10 minutes. She asks questions, some children answer, and other children comment on the answers.
08.55	The music comes on again. The children get up from their chairs. Some of them push the shelves toward the walls. The tables are carried out on the veranda and the children sit down on their chair along the walls.
08.57	The teacher comments the process and asks them to sit straight on their chair. They put their hands on their knees and sit straight up.
08.58	The teacher asks them to get up and they stand in four rows.
08.59	The music comes on and the gymnastics begins.

Figure 3: Transcription from observation in Lotus kindergarten.

This transcription demonstrates the numerous shifts within one event in Lotus kindergarten, the use of different time markers, and the collective movements of the group of children. The following (table 2) provides an overview of the data generation in the three thematic foci.

Table 2: Data generation in the three thematic foci

Thematic focus of the fieldwork	**Research approach**	**Lotus Kindergarten**	**Glacier Buttercup Kindergarten**
Natural Science activities	Photos and videos of natural science activities.	The photos were taken by the researchers. The videos were taken by the kindergarten teachers in 2008.	The photos and one video were produced by the researchers. One video was produced by the teachers in 2008.

	Focus group interviews	One focus group interview based on the videos from their own kindergarten. One focus group interview based on the video from Glacier Buttercup kindergarten in 2009	One focus group interview based on the videos from their own kindergarten. One focus group interview based on the video from Lotus kindergarten in 2009.
Artifacts on the wall	Photos of artifacts displayed on the walls. Focus group interviews based upon photo-elicitation	The researcher remained in the kindergarten, taking photos of the artifacts on the walls. One focus group interview based on photos of artifacts from their own kindergarten. One focus group interview based on photos from Glacier Buttercup kindergarten in 2011.	The researcher remained in the kindergarten taking photos of the artifacts on the walls. One focus group interview based on photos of artifacts from their own kindergarten. One focus group interview based on photos from Lotus kindergarten in 2011.
The regulation of time	Observation in kindergarten	25 days of observation Minute observation Field notes Interview 2012	10 days of observation Minute observation Field notes Interview 2012

Data analysis

In the following section, I address the issue of analytical approach, transforming data into meaningful stories and explanations (Nilsen, 2005; Stephens, 2009). No methods in themselves can unlock the data material in order to make it meaningful and to tell a trustworthy story (Stephens, 2009). Reading handbooks in method gives a picture of the analytical process as being systematic and orderly. However, the process in the present study has been slightly chaotic and overwhelming. At the best, the process has been "recursive and dynamic" (Merriam, 2009, p. 169), like a pendulum between parts and whole, past and future, China and Norway, literature and empirical findings.

Further, the analytical process has developed at different times and in different stages in an effort to identify patterns and meaningful stories. First, the analysis has been an analysis of the different thematic foci, such as displays on the walls in the kindergartens, the natural science activities, and time regulation, mainly presented in the three articles (appendix 2, 3 and 4). The analysis related to the three different thematic foci was conducted at different times in the process. However, the analytical approach in all three topics followed a process of 1) common sense analysis and 2) theoretical analysis (Hedegaard, 2008; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

The kindergarten teachers in both kindergartens contributed to the common sense analysis by commenting on and explaining the visual materials (photos and videos). This common sense analysis in the thematic studies was closely related to the teachers' own interpretations. Despite a multivocal common sense analysis, the teachers did not analyze the videos and photos in relation to specific perspectives and concepts. They revealed their immediate and common understanding without specific analytical concepts in mind (Hedegaard, 2008).

The further analytical approach was interpretations in light of theoretical concepts (Hedegaard, 2008). When using CHAT as an analytical approach, common sense analysis was interpreted from the perspectives of key concepts—such as motives and goals, objects societal, and

institutionalized expectations and demands—and contradictions (Hedegaard, 2008). In each part study, I worked to identify the aims and motivations of the teachers by asking this question to the data: What do the teachers attempt to achieve? Their motivations were traced in verbal explanations as well as in their concrete actions in the three thematic studies.

I also sought to identify societal and institutionalized expectations and demands, which yielded possibilities and limitations related to the aims of the teachers (Hedegaard et al., 2012). These expectations and demands could not exclusively be identified within the observations or in the interviews. Both contextual knowledge of the history and contemporary society in China and Norway and historical institutional knowledge regarding the Chinese and Norwegian kindergarten was required as well. The teachers explicitly addressed some of these expectations and demands in the interviews.

Hedegaard (2008) depicts crucial ideas related to conducting cultural historical research that is applicable for the analysis. First, she argues that the theoretical concepts based on the research traditions within the subject area studied must be formulated as relations. This implies that the methodology and the methods support the researcher in selecting a system of concepts that together provide a relational understanding of the data being studied. For example, the relations among the personal perspectives, the institutional practices, and the societal values by studying the demands that are made on institutions, which in turn make demands upon teachers, who then place demands upon children. However, children also have agency and they place demands upon the teachers.

In the last analytical approach, I conducted a crossover analysis of the three thematic foci. Based upon the findings in the articles, I made a more thorough analysis of the two cases. The individual differences between the teachers have not been in the foreground of the analysis. Rather, the analysis focused on identifying cultural patterns in the practices and in the teacher's

way of talking about these practices (Berthen, 2007; Fleer et al., 2009a; James, 2013). The *cultural* may be described as "traditional" and institutional practices with embedded values of what constitutes a good life and a good childhood (Fleer et al., 2009). Focus of the present study is the institutionalized practices in kindergarten and is not an attempt to grasp the wide specter of culture in society, "the large culture" (Fleer et al., 2009a). Further, the analytical approach is the *historical* and *cultural* aspects of the institutional practices and how current practices are colored by culturally and historically developed and competitive motives and goals (Daniels, Lauder, Porter, & Hartshorn, 2009; Hedegaard et al., 2012).

An additional element in this crossover analysis is the *comparative* perspective. As evident from the statements put forth in chapter 1, the intention of the comparison is not to evaluate best practices. Rather, the knowledge interest is epistemological, a means of understanding, and—as such—has consequences for the analytical approach (Bray, 2014). By comparing kindergarten practices in China and Norway, there is a supposition that the differences are sufficiently large in order to challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions in each country. The purpose of the comparison is to create an analytic distance to the phenomenon to be studied. In other words, the comparison has an epistemological interest, which demonstrates the relative through fundamental notions and ideas (Cheng, 1998; Gulløv & Højlund, 2003). The intention of the comparison is not to generalize the examples but to create trustworthy examples. Acknowledging this fact, has changed my project to be more a cross-cultural case study than a strict comparative study (Bray, 2014, 2015).

Validity

In this section, the questions of credibility and trustworthiness of the study are discussed. These questions are specifically relevant, since I am a Norwegian researcher conducting a cross-cultural study of the kindergarten in China and in Norway. The question of validity is highly relevant in a culturally oriented study. One of the most obvious questions within such a study

is whether it is possible to give the unfamiliar justice. Is it possible to understand "the other"? Is it possible to prevent a temptation to make "the other" more different and exotic than necessary? Moreover, is it possible to identify the familiar? Another important question is how to counteract ethnocentrism and colonialization within comparative cross-cultural studies (Cheng, 1998; Ryen, 2011b). These are epistemological as well as ethical questions.

According to Saukko (2011), cultural studies require different approaches to the question of validity. In order for arguments and conclusions to be persuasive and trustworthy in a cross-cultural study, there is a need for dialogical validity, contextual validity, and self-reflexive validity.

The present study gave voice to "the other" by including the kindergarten teachers' interpretations and by being sensitive to the teachers' comprehensions. This required a dialogical approach. The question is how thoroughly I attempt to understand what is unknown and unfamiliar. In order to increase the dialogical validity, I have not been the solitary interpreter but have focused on the kindergarten teachers' interpretations and stories regarding their own practices. The methodological approach using polyvocal photo and video elicitation is an effort to improve this dialogue.

It has also been of great importance to stimulate discussions with other researchers in China as well as in Norway, particularly when researchers and kindergarten teachers from both contexts have been together. The tensions between the known and the unknown and the similarities and differences have been crucial for my understanding. These dialogues have challenged the interpretations and arguments throughout the project. When I presented some of the analysis for graduate students at Beijing Normal University, they challenged me. The students were critical to the choice of kindergarten in Shanghai and taught me a lesson regarding the huge differences between kindergartens in China. Meeting Chinese students and scholars also

implies meeting a different culture in terms of providing feedback—starting very politely and continuing as being sharply analytical and critical.

According to Saukko (2011), the contextual validity is a question of how the research takes into account historical realities, social structures, and processes. A cultural historical analysis does not execute any thorough historical or social analysis. However, cross-cultural studies must be sensitive to the history of the activity. Although the present study was situated in a specific moment of time, it has been important to trace historical transformations of motives and objects of the kindergarten in China and Norway. The understanding of the situated actions in the kindergarten will be more complete by relating to the past in addition to the future in terms of what the teachers want to achieve.

The last perspective on validity, which Saukko mentions, is the self-reflexive validity. This aspect focuses on critical reflections that are dominant in the kindergarten field and, thereby, in power aspects. Whose discourses seem to be valid? This demands a high degree of reflection from the researcher (Ryen, 2011a). As researcher, I am not autonomous and neutral. Different paradigms, theoretical, and methodological perspectives lead to alternative possibilities of interpretations (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008). This is important to bring forth, although this "fact" cannot be eliminated. We can never bring forth all our biases and preconceptions (Gadamer, 2004). My meetings and confrontations with Chinese researchers and kindergarten teachers have continuously brought up such biases and preconceptions.

One of the great challenges within education in general is the tension between the norms globalization is based upon such as universal education and the normative perspectives that prioritize differences (Crossley & Watson, 2003). In dealing with Chinese kindergartens, I was conscious with regard to the immense pressure on implementing curriculum reform that the kindergarten teachers confront on a daily basis.

Researcher positions: outsider, insider, and in-betweener

The design of this study has been legitimized by a juxtaposition between insider and outsider perspectives. Within cross-cultural research, the insider-outsider question is concerned with individuals having experience of moving into and out of different cultural communities as well as the challenges they face when accommodating cultural perspectives and ways of thinking other than their own (McNess et al., 2016). The underlying concepts of insiderness and outsiderness focus on thought processes that enhance critical awareness and the creation of new knowledge and understanding and to defy simple juxtapositions of the either - or (Ryen, 2011b).

During the project, the position and the self-conception of being an insider and outsider changed. I began with an assumption of being an outsider to Chinese culture and the Chinese kindergarten. Concurrently, I considered my position as an insider in the Norwegian culture and the Norwegian kindergarten. However, according to Robinson-Pant (2016), the question that may arise is insider and outsider of what? Binary positions such as insider/outsider and western/non-western are complicated (Ryen, 2011b). The insider-outsider distinction pushes us to categorize and to polarize people's identities, roles, and knowledges. The dominant assumptions underpinning the outsider/insider dichotomy are unitary fixed identities, bounded communities and, above all, an essentialized notion of culture. As the project proceeded, I questioned whether there is any outside or inside to culture. I realized that I was always on the border, in the liminal space of in-between-ness.

> A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning […]. We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise itself: we see answers to our questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths […] such as a dialogic encounter of two cultures does not result in merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched. (Bachtin, 1986, p. 7)

Bachtin refers to this as “stranger knowledge” and this involves hearing what has not been said. This requires a curiosity and openness to new understandings and a dialogic form of communication which is “subjunctive and tentative rather than declarative” (McNess et al., 2016, p. 30). This attitude is difficult if you enter the field as the expert outsider, where opinions and values are developed elsewhere. Nevertheless, being in the field challenged this position continuously. The expectations from the field towards me as a researcher was that I was the expert.

Schuetz’s (1945) concept of *the home comer* gave meaning to the experiences. The Chinese nickname for the home comer is the sea turtle (hai-gui) who was born on the shore but has been across the sea and is now returning to the same shore (McNess et al., 2016, p. 25). The home-comer does not quite belong to either culture. This has been a characteristic of my position after the movements between the Chinese and Norwegian kindergartens. I am not as distanced to the Chinese nor as immersed in the Norwegian culture as when I began this journey.

Ethical issues

Another important aspect of credibility is the ethical standards of scientific practice. Ethics is a set of moral principles and rules of conduct and relates to the application of a system of moral principles to prevent harming or arranging others, to promote the good, be respectful and fair, and to assume moral responsibility for the conclusions (Ryen, 2011b).

We may ask in research ethics whether this is a question of universal rules and procedures or moral deeds. In particular, within a cross-national study, this question is highly relevant. Since the research is conducted in Norway, I needed to follow the ethical guidelines of the Norwegian Research Council. The national research ethical committee for social sciences and humaniora (NESH) has elaborated research ethical guidelines, which was important for me to follow

(NESH, 2006). However, I also had to relate to the Chinese standards as long as I did fieldwork in a Chinese kindergarten. Ethical questions in general and cross-cultural studies, specifically, must be discussed within a wider frame than the questions of informed consent and confidentiality (Heimer & Thøgersen, 2006). Ethics in ethnographic inspired research in the field is highly relational, emergent, and dynamic through the research process (Heimer & Thøgersen, 2006). It is a question of being trusted all the way as a researcher. In the following account, I illuminate a few key aspects of ethics, honesty and transparency, imposed participation, and emergent dilemmas.

Honesty and openness in the research process

The most obvious criterion of ethics is to promote honesty and openness in the research process. Generally, this is about not falsifying data and results. Another aspect of honesty is being transparent about "how I got there" by being open about sources and references. I have followed these guidelines to my best intent.

However, an additional concern in openness is the problem with being a foreigner who wants to conduct research in China. If deviations from methodological standards and ideals are under-communicated, it is indeed an ethical issue (Heimer & Thøgersen, 2006). Problems in conducting fieldwork in China may easily be glossing over problems in fear of the validity of the entire research (Heimer & Thøgersen, 2006). A lack of debate of the deviations from the methodological standards may undermine the transparency and academic standards of openness. Further, it blurs the picture of how research is conducted and leaves a gap between general research methodology and stories from the field (Agar, 1996). This is a collective problem and must not be turned into an individual problem (Heimer & Thøgersen, 2006).

Therefore, it is useful to examine coping strategies for how to deal with these problems and how to make acceptable compromises between methodological rules and reality. This omission

is both an ethical and a methodological problem and hides how dependent foreign scholars actually are on local assistance. Article 4 (Birkeland, 2013b) specifically discussed my dependency on a Chinese partner and assistant in obtaining access to kindergartens. Further, the article emphasized good contacts as a prerequisite for conducting research in China. Another aspect of this dependency is the ethical issues. I had to trust the co-researcher regarding the appropriate ethical procedures.

Individual freedom and imposed participation

The most common topic related to ethics is the question of informed consent and confidentiality. This question is addressed as a question of individual freedom or imposed participation. The design of the study was supposed to secure informed consent, anonymity, and to take account of the consequences of being part of the project. Although the kindergarten teachers in both kindergartens were informed about the study several times before the project began, during the research process and in connection with the part studies, the informed consent from the teachers can be questioned.

From the perspective of Chinese kindergarten teachers, the teachers have limited opportunity to choose freely to participate in such a project. In general, the principal makes the decisions in this regard. In this matter, the kindergarten teachers via the principal were asked to participate through a colleague at ECNU. The relationship between the University and the kindergartens can be strained due to pressure on educational reforms from the universities. Therefore, how free the kindergarten principal was to refuse this request is debatable. The Chinese kindergartens have high demands from the staff at the universities and their research. This research approach is rather instrumental and implicates evaluation and transformation of practice according to new ideas and curriculum reforms. This created ambivalence among the teachers. On one hand, they were expected to transform their practice according to curriculum reforms. On the other hand, they had expectations from parents that somehow contradict the

new reforms. In addition, many of the conditions in the kindergarten contradict the "new" ways of doing things.

However, I faced refusal from several kindergartens. When this particular kindergarten principal agreed to participate in the study, I understood this as a real wish to do so, at least from the principal. After collaboration over several years, I also experienced a positive attitude from the teachers. They appeared to be happy to see me every time I was there.

Relational trust and emergent dilemmas in the field

The intended position as a cross-cultural researcher was influenced by studying the history of different approaches to comparative education and research (Alexander et al., 1999; Cheng, 1998; Crossley, 2002; Stephens, 2009). I was concerned with the importance of cultural understanding and cultural contextualization. The intention was to clear evaluation and best practice approaches. I wanted to avoid Eurocentrism and colonialization of western perspectives within ECE (Cheng, 1998; Fleer et al., 2009a; Penn, 2002). I was looking for an approach that could give the voice to the kindergarten teachers themselves and found support in the polyvocal method of Tobin et al. in their study of preschool in three cultures (Tobin, 1999; Tobin et al., 2009; Tobin et al., 1989).

My intention of conducting cross-cultural research was clarified for the participants from the beginning. Although the intention was not to evaluate practices, the interviews appeared to awaken questions of evaluation. The teachers "defended" themselves when looking at the video from the other kindergarten with statements such as "We cannot do this", "We do not have the same conditions", "We really do not work properly with the topic of natural science." This implicates that showing videos and conducting interviews had implications on the informants and their self-esteem. These questions are certainly of importance and need even more

sensitivity in a study including two countries with different ethical codes and research traditions.

I was also surprised to find the Chinese kindergarten teachers so eager to hear my evaluations and definitions of best practices. The Norwegian kindergarten teachers were also questioning my concern with China. They asked whether the engagement with China implied that I considered the practices in China as being better than those in Norway. When I met these expectations, I emphasized that my concern was not to evaluate best practices. My ethical and political stance was my personal justification for going into the field of comparative cross-cultural research. However, this position was in fact troublesome and overlooked the complexity of relationships and positions in educational research. In this complexity of relationships, I asked who am I as a cross-cultural researcher?

Below is an episode that demonstrates the experienced difficulty in the research position in Lotus kindergarten. The children were supposed to have a health check-up and I was observing the procedure. All the children were in one room together with teachers, nurses, and doctors. There were different health procedures; one of them was to take a blood test.

> "Flette" is standing in line. Suddenly, I can see tears on her face. She is crying quietly. The children nearby are comforting her in different ways. One of the girls is wiping her tears off. Another is talking calmly to her, holding her hands. Suddenly "Flette" refuses to move forward in the queue. Two of the boys are approaching her and want to wipe her tears. She is screaming now, and the doctor looks angry. There seems to be no ways to solve this but to take the blood test. "Flette" looks like she wants to throw up. Suddenly one of the teachers comes to me and says, "Well, maybe you would have done this differently." It took a while before I answered. Then I said, "I think maybe we would have tried to solve the situation in another room and not in front of all the other

children." Immediately, I felt uneasy. I had a feeling of deserting the girl. At the same time, I was confronted with my own intentions of not evaluating best practices.

This example illustrates that the ethical codex is easier on paper than in actual research situations. There were also other examples when I experienced that my role as a researcher became problematic and differed from what I had stated.

PART 3 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this part, I will first present a short summary of the three thematic articles[32]. Then I will discuss the cultural formation ideals traced in the practices of the two kindergartens. Finally, I will point to some implications and further research.

Chapter 5: Summary of the thematic articles

The summary in this chapter will comprise the main structure of the articles with emphasis on the background, purpose, research questions and the main findings. Theoretical and methodological aspects have been elaborated in chapter 3 and 4.

The walls in the kindergartens as agents for cultural formation

The first article is entitled *Barnehagens vegger som danningsagenter: en komparativ analyse* (The walls in the kindergartens as agents for cultural formation: a comparative analysis) (Birkeland, 2012).

The article focuses on the social practice of displaying artefacts on the walls in two kindergartens, Lotus kindergarten in China and Glacier Buttercup kindergarten in Norway and the kindergarten teachers' interpretations of the aims of these displays. The purpose of this thematic focus was to illuminate how the material environment, in this case artefacts displayed on the walls, can be understood in children's cultural formation, and that traces of cultural formation ideals can be identified in the display itself and in the teachers' justification of the displays.

The displays and the teachers' justifications of the displays gave references to traditions, explicit goals, societal and institutional expectations and demands. The teachers in the Chinese

[32] The methodological article is commented in chapter 4

kindergartens were concerned with displaying instructions and procedures for everyday tasks as a way of cultivating children's habits. Furthermore, the use of models as good examples of improvement and perfection of the children's work was emphasized. Finally, the displays and teachers' justification emphasized the importance of belonging to the Chinese community and being a Chinese citizen. The display and the teachers' justifications gave traces of a cultural formation ideal related to becoming a Chinese citizen, a citizen that will survive in the Chinese society as well as a citizen the Chinese society need. The ideal of the Chinese citizen is also connected to competitiveness, continuous improvement and being in relationship to others.

The justifications of the displays by the Norwegian teachers had less explicit references to institutional and societal expectations. However, the displays had implicit references to traditions. Their justifications were more explicitly connected to the goals of giving children equal opportunities with no preferences for perfection and models. Justifications were also connected to having opportunities to recall important experiences in the kindergarten everyday life. The traces of the cultural formation ideals in Glacier Buttercup kindergarten are related to the autonomous and natural child with equal rights to participate in the displays.

Kindergarten teachers' educational ideals

The second article is entitled *Kindergarten teachers' educational ideals – tensions and contradictions* (Birkeland, 2013)**.**

The thematic focus in this article is educational ideals traced in natural science events in the kindergarten in China and Norway and the kindergarten teachers' interpretations of the events. Natural science events such as growing plants, watching seasonal changes in nature are occurring in most kindergartens globally, whether the tasks are indoors or outdoors. However, the natural science tasks are not the primary focus for the article. The article examines how the

kindergarten teachers practice and understand the phenomena of cultivating children's interests, rights and autonomy within natural science tasks.

In the article, I argue that the kindergarten teachers' practices can be interpreted as a complex and contradictory hybridity of cultural traditions, rules and regulations and curriculum reforms. There are clearly tensions and conflicts in contemporary expectations and demands and traditional taken for granted practices. In the Chinese kindergarten, the demands in the new reforms emphasizing individualized teaching and child initiatives are in conflict with societal demands of the outstanding child and the competitive child. In addition, there are conflicts between how the teachers are educated, their educational tools and the new discourses of child-centeredness and emphasise on play activities. The teachers acknowledge the expectations, but express uncertainty in how to do it. This uncertainty is also due to the institutional conditions, which limit possibilities for individualized approaches.

The teachers in the Norwegian kindergarten do not explicit approach the expectations and demands from the society, schools and parents to the same degree as the Chinese teachers. Implicitly, they acknowledge that the society will have demands and expectations for the children, but they argue that this belong to the future so the role of the kindergarten is to provide a good childhood here and now. On the other hand, the teachers approach the expectation from the UN and the declaration of the rights of the children as an important demand for their practice. Details in how children's rights are to be understood is not approached.

Temporal settings in kindergarten

The third article is entitled *Temporal settings in kindergarten: a lens to trace historical and current cultural formation ideals*? (Birkeland, 2019).

The thematic focus of the third article is time regulation in kindergarten as a lens to trace historical and current cultural formation ideals. Regulation of time is an important structuring

tool of everyday practices in kindergarten. The purpose of this article is to illuminate how ideas of childhood and children's cultural formation are embedded in the temporal order in everyday life of children in kindergarten and how children's cultural formation takes place while participating in the institutional order. The main research question is; what cultural formation ideals can be traced in the temporal order of kindergartens in different cultural contexts? Vital concepts and perspectives from cultural historical activity theory have been approached in the analysis; motives and objectives, societal and institutionalized expectations, tensions and contradictions.

The teachers' explanations and justification of the temporal settings in kindergarten had references to explicit goals, implicit traditions and institutional and societal expectations and demands. The Chinese teachers justified the time regulations with the need of efficiency and interdependency within the group of children and the institution. Furthermore, they argued with the need of balancing activity and rest, teacher-initiated activities and child-initiated activities, collective activities and individual activities.

The Norwegian teachers justified the time regulation with references to the good childhood. It should not be stressed, but take the time that is needed. Instead of arguing for a social pulse, the teachers emphasized the need for each child to have individual time and pulse.

They argued for balance between different considerations whereas the Norwegian teachers seemed to argue more for either-or. If you give room for child-initiated play, there is no room for learning activities. If you give room for collective activities this seem to be opposed to individual choices and autonomy. Balancing children's activities and harmony in the body.

In the article I argue that cultural formation of interdependence and the social self seems still to be an important ideal in the Chinese kindergarten (Gao & Huo, 2017). On the other hand, the efficiency of the activities and transformations in the Chinese kindergarten may also be an

expression of a pragmatic attitude to install competencies about how to live in a society with such a huge population mastering crowds and queues. In this perspective, we can see how the timetable mediates the importance of regularity in meals, routines for good hygiene and rest and as such developing good habits and health for the population as a whole.

Although the new curriculum plans imply child-centeredness and more individualized activities, this is difficult to trace in the temporal pattern. The self-discipline and interdependency is the major trait. However, this ideal of self-discipline as part of developing interdependency is met by a contradictory demand of each child to survive and to climb in the hierarchy: the individual who needs to be efficient, focused and competitive. The teachers expressed the efficiency not only as a mean of being interdependent, but to survive as an individual in the Chinese competitive society.

Chapter 6: Contradictory cultural formation ideals

In this chapter, I will first discuss cultural formation ideals that have been traced in the practices of the two kindergartens. Finally, I will indicate some impact of the study.

Traces of cultural formation ideals in the Chinese kindergarten

Cultural formation of children is a dominating motive in both kindergartens. Still, the perceived formation process and the perceived result of the formation processes indicate contradictory cultural formation ideals within both kindergartens.

The self-cultivating and interdependent child

Some of the cultural formation ideals expressed and traced in the Chinese kindergarten are closely related to the Chinese philosophical view of human formation processes expressed in the concept of *Xiushen*, implying self-cultivation (Yim, Lee, & Ebbeck, 2011), which is at the center of Daoism and Confucianism (Tu, 1979, 1985). A crucial aspect of *Xiushen* is the importance of personal effort, contribution to perfectionism and transformation. The Chinese teachers used the metaphor of the jade that need polishing for this cultivation process (see chapter 2).

According to Tu (1979, 1985), a leading figure in introducing Confucianism to a wider global community, self-transformation is the core in Confucian education and learning. Energetic practice is necessary both as physical and mental discipline in order to overcome personal limitations (F. Liu, 2013). This is implied in the word of *Xiushen*, where *Xiu* means formation and *shen* means body or the entire person. According to Tu (1985) learning to be human in the Confucian spirit is to engage oneself in a ceaseless, unending process of creative self-transformation. The human being is in this perspective not good or bad, but something that need to be improved and developed ceaselessly.

Xiushen is not a concept used in the regulations and guidelines of Chinese kindergarten. Still, the Regulation for Kindergarten from 1989 and 1996 strongly emphasized the cultivation of moral behavior as in former periods of the history of the Chinese kindergarten (see chapter 2). Nevertheless, self-cultivation is a concept widely used by kindergartens teachers as well as early childhood researchers in China (Yim et al., 2011). Historically, this obligation of transformation and improvement also coincide with the cultural revolution when the ceaseless self- criticism was an important part of professional development among kindergarten teachers (Hung, 2014). In contemporary early childhood education, this obligation of improvement is embedded in all aspects of kindergarten life. "Tell us how to improve" is repeatedly asked by Chinese teachers and is obviously a mandatory question to ask for the teachers as well as the children. This was also the case in this study. Although my purpose was to describe and understand the Chinese early childhood education practice, I was repeatedly asked to tell the Chinese kindergarten teachers how they could improve.

With this background, the emphasis in Lotus kindergarten on improvement, striving for perfection, use of models and choice of what they considered as best examples of drawings to be displayed on the walls give meaning in a cultural historical perspective. This is not something new, but has been an important value in the Chinese early childhood education system for decades. The teachers demonstrate the importance of education and that this will demand hard work and continuously improvement (Ren & Edwards, 2017). When the Norwegian teachers tried to understand this practice, they considered the practice rather as a kind of elitism than a mandatory human obligation of improvement.

In order to understand the self-cultivation in the Chinese context, it is also important to understand the concept of self as an interdependent social human being. In Confucian thinking, the human being is relational and irreducibly interpersonal, a center of relationships, and a dynamic open system rather than a closed static structure (Tu, 1979, 1985). Therefore, the

relation between the self and the world is intertwined and inseparable. Mutuality between self and community, and harmony between human species and nature are defining characteristics and supreme values in the human project (F. Liu, 2013; Zhao & Biesta, 2011). In order to become a human being, one must cultivate human relations.[33] The human person achieves *ren* and becomes a cultivated person through relationships and participation in society. Without others, the idea of personal identity is without meaning.

This understanding of self as an interdependent human being was illuminated in the practices in the Chinese kindergarten and in the teachers' comments to the practices. Hardly ever, the teachers used the concept of "the individual child" as was often used in the Norwegian kindergarten. The emphasis on interdependency and relations to others was illustrated for example in the timetable of the kindergarten and the transitions between different activity settings. The Chinese kindergarten teachers emphasized self-discipline by adjustment to the collective movements in-between-activity-settings as well as in the micro-transitions within the activity settings. This collective synchronic movement in-between tasks, give expectations about cultivation of being part of a group and expectations of how to behave in this group.

From the Chinese teachers' point of view, the synchronic collective movement was not considered as violating the interests of the child and they had limited focus on children's voluntary choices. The teachers demonstrated in their reflections that individual identity is defined in relation to a collective group. Individual freedom can only be secured by collective freedom and collective freedom is obtained through individual self-discipline. The individual must exert self-discipline in order to obtain his freedom and to exert the social duties as a citizen and a member of the Chinese nation (Yan 2009, 2010).

[33] The Chinese character for the human being is ren, put together of the signs for *human being* and *two.* There are two meanings of ren: 1) The quality, which makes a human being a human, and 2) becoming human must be through human relations.

In Lotus kindergarten, the teachers clearly emphasized that enculturation to the group went beyond the collective group in the kindergarten and was expanded to the community and the nation. National identity and pride in being a Chinese citizen was highlighted by use of national symbols and emphasizing cultural values. When the communists came into power in 1949, the ideology was influenced by the Soviet Union and focused on the education of the socialist worker (Gu, 2000; Tillman, 2013; Zhu & Zhang, 2008). To love the communist party and to shape the socialist citizen has later been removed from the curriculum guidelines. However, the kindergartens are still expected to contribute to shape the Chinese human being with love for the nation. This has become even more visible the last years with the stronger emphasis on president Xi's political ideology (Ministry of Education, 2019). Still, in the teachers' explanation, there were no discussions about what it means to be a Chinese citizen. Diversity of values or changes in values were not explicitly mentioned in spite of being a nation of 1, 4 billion people with 56 minority groups. Although the teachers represented different minority groups as well as the majority Han group, the teachers revealed a rather static and essential understanding of Chinese cultural values and being a Chinese citizen as if there is only one way of being Chinese.

This limited focus on diversity of values can be understood on the background of harmony and balance as characteristics of the ideal Chinese society (Tu, 1985). Harmony and balance can only be developed through self-cultivation of the human being. The daily practices in Lotus kindergarten clearly demonstrated the importance of balance in order to obtain harmony, balance between activity and rest, balance between routine activities and play/learning activities, between child-initiated and teacher-initiated activities and finally balance between big group and small group/individual activity settings. This emphasis on balance will most certain also include balance between diversity of values and opinions (C. Liu & Tobin, 2018).

The competitive individualized child

This cultivation of the child through ceaseless improvement and perfection, of self-discipline through the collective group and balance in all aspects of everyday-living in the kindergarten was evident in the practices and interpretations among the Chinese teachers and is a remnant from cultural historical ideals (as discussed in chapter 2). However, this ideal is clearly in tension with expectations of efficiency and competition in contemporary Chinese society.

Due to the one child policy between 1979 and 2016, the metaphor of the little emperor has frequently been used about Chinese children (Fong, 2016; Jun, 2000; Lyså, 2018). Numerous incidents highlight the child as the new leader of the family dynasty and the teachers expressed concern about the unique position of the child in the family and consequently the indications of Chinese parents' and grandparents' expectations of the kindergarten to follow up their only child (Ren & Edwards, 2017).

On the other hand, the Chinese teachers expressed concern about the societal and family pressure on the child to ensure social mobility of the families. The tough competition for social mobility in the Chinese society gives a distorted picture of the cultural formation ideals. The children need to work hard, not just for self-cultivation, but in order to manage the competition in the Chinese society. This create a contradiction to the traditional way of cultivation for interdependency as discussed above. In this way the children compete for themselves, not for the group, and forward what Yan names vulgar individuality, meaning a decontextualized individual ignoring the interconnectedness of human beings (2009). The teachers argue for children's hard work both by pointing to the Chinese history and tradition for emphasizing education as well as with the need of the contemporary society. The child needs to be competitive and outstanding in order to survive in the Chinese society with a huge population, high expectations of social mobility, a tough examination system and limited access to universities (Pan & Liu, 2008).

Although the Chinese kindergarten teachers seemed to adjust their work to this situation, they still expressed critical views of the school practices who expect the children to be outstanding in a limited sense. According to the kindergarten teachers, the so-called outstanding child in school is not supposed to have many ideas and to be critical. On the contrary, the child is supposed to be obedient, quiet and follow the instructions of the teachers.

The kindergarten teachers clearly wanted to develop the children's own ideas and thinking and wanted the children to be more relaxed and less pressured. However, they found this difficult when balancing contradictory expectations and demands such as supporting children's rights, child centered curriculum and constructivism on one hand and following Chinese cultural traditions voiced by parents and school teachers on the other (Ren & Edwards, 2017).

Cultural formation of interdependence and the social self, still seem to be important ideals in the Chinese kindergarten (Gao & Huo, 2017). However, the ideal of self-discipline as part of developing interdependency is met by a contradictory demand of each child to survive and to climb in the hierarchy: the individual who needs to be efficient, focused and competitive.

Traces of cultural formation ideals in the Norwegian kindergarten

As illustrated in chapter 2, early childhood education in Norway has historically been less affected by political and educational ruptures than early childhood education in China. Still, there are traces of contradictory cultural formation ideals identified in contemporary Norwegian early childhood education practices.

The analysis of the cultural formation ideals in the Norwegian kindergarten gives an overall impression of the importance of individualization. However, individualization seems to have different connotations in the practices and in the teachers' legitimizing of practices. One of the connotations of individualization seems to be connected to recognition of children's authentic

individuality. The children have different interests and motivation and thereby are in need of a variety of educational approaches adjusted to their interest (Vandenbroeck & Bie, 2006). Another connotation, seems to be the neoliberal individual where the meaning of individualization is framed by an idea of individual freedom to make choices in a society for the individual (Vandenbroeck & Bie, 2006). Still another image of individualization is the acknowledgement of children as citizens with democratic human rights. These different connotations of individualization give different cultural formation ideals as we can most clearly see in the Norwegian kindergarten. These ideals were not clearly separate, but coincided as contradictory objects in the institutional practices and in the reflections of the teachers.

The authentic and unique child

Montgomery (2003) demonstrates different constructions of childhood in her analysis of Western contemporary ideas about children and childhood. She identifies three main discourses with a specific ideological history, "living" simultaneously as a cultural scripts —the "Puritan discourse"[34] — childhood as a time of evil, sin and wildness; the "Tabula rasa discourse"[35]— childhood as a time of becoming; and the "Romantic discourse"[36] — childhood as a time of innocence.

From the analysis in this thesis, there were no clear traces of the Puritan or the Tabula rasa discourse, but we could clearly see traces of the "Romantic discourse". The practices of the Norwegian kindergarten, as illustrated in the articles 1-3, demonstrated that children should be

[34] In the Puritan discourse, the child is lacking in morality and must be civilized, restrained, controlled, and disciplined by the teacher. The philosophical roots of this discourse go back to Hobbes.
[35] With the influence of John Locke, the notion of children as Tabula Rasa and as "becoming" was denounced. With the appropriate guidance, the appropriate kind of environment, and the right sort of experience, the child can develop rationality, self-control, and responsibility.
[36] The most influential exponent of the romantic discourse is Rousseau. Children are naturally innocent and must be free to be who they are, to be authentic and natural. Happiness and play are the highest ideals of childhood. The innocent child needs protection from the adult world and must be treated according to his/her needs and development.

free to be who they *are*, to be authentic and natural and not so much about what they are supposed to become. The teachers argued that the children need protection from the adult world and should be treated according to his/her needs and development. This point of protection from the adult world is even more highlighted by emphasizing the importance of childhood here and now with happiness and play as the highest ideals of childhood.

This cultural formation ideal is giving a picture of the vulnerable child who needs protection from the outside world. The child is supposed to be protected from the hardships of the outside world and the demands of their future life in school and society. Kindergarten is still supposed to be "a garden", where the children need attention from and protection by the teachers.

Related to the image of the vulnerable child who needs protection, we can also see that the kindergarten is supposed to counteract pressure in society and to provide a protected space for play and childhood. In contradiction to the metaphor used by the Chinese teacher about polishing the jade, the teachers in the Norwegian kindergarten are skeptical to the demand of ceaseless improvement. The teachers are more concerned about telling the children that they are good enough as they *are* here and now, and that they are supposed to be their authentic selves, often expressed by the teachers as "the importance to see the individual child".

This cultural formation ideal was identified in the regulation of time where there were lots of time for child-initiated play and activities. Protection of time for play was given high priority by the teachers. Even in the displays on the walls, we could see this ideal by the teachers' acceptance of art products from the children as being good enough and in no need of polishing. There was limited corrections, instructions and pressure. Quite the contrary, the teachers emphasized the importance of being spontaneous and follow the interest of the child. The natural science activities had loose structure and were based upon children's questions, natural interest and free choices of taking part. The Norwegian teachers seemed to identify collective

activities as they saw them in the Chinese kindergarten as contradictory to seeing the individual, authentic child.

This is an ideal with a long history in the Norwegian early childhood education as illustrated in chapter 2. However, the ideal of the authentic and unique child coincides with the ideal of the autonomous and self-regulated child.

The autonomous and self-regulated child

The teachers in the Glacier Cup kindergarten expressed the ideal child as autonomous, curious and able to make choices by themselves. The individualization of educational activities was constructed in order to cultivate this ideal child. The teachers emphasized the importance of children's freedom and rights to choose. They seemed to think that this happened automatically and that all children had this competence of being active, finding their own meaningful educational activities and engage in play. *What* the children experienced did not seem to be so much of the teachers concern. In a way, they seemed to have done their job when letting the children out in nature and answer occasional questions from individual children. The teachers did not discuss any dilemmas connected to children choosing the things they already know and that the teachers in this way gave them less new experiences (Håberg, 2017; Tullgren, 2003).

The right to be autonomous and find your own way without too much interruption from the teacher seemed to be the ideal motivating the everyday activity (Clark, Kjorholt & Moss, 2005). The teachers discussed to a small extent how these abilities are needed in the society and as such can be considered as adjustments to the needs of the society. Rather they considered it as a strategy against the school culture. To have a good childhood here and now seems to be the most important goal.

Whereas the self-discipline in the Chinese kindergarten expected adjustments to the collective group and to the collective spirit, the self-regulation in the Norwegian kindergarten was related

to the right to self-determination and the freedom to choose. The arguments for the children's right of self-determination seems to be closely related to "the enterprise self" defined as active, autonomous, free, authentic, independent, self-regulated, responsible, competitive, competent with individual rights. This coincides with the neoliberal ideology. The so-called 'passive' citizen of the welfare state becomes the autonomous 'active' citizen with rights, duties, obligations and expectations—the citizen as active entrepreneur of the self; (J.-E. Johansson & Samuelsson, 2013). This is not simply a reactivation of liberal values of self-reliance, autonomy and independence as the necessary conditions for self-respect, self-esteem, self-worth and self-advancement but rather an emphasis on enterprise and the capitalization of existence itself through calculated acts and investments combined with the shrugging off of collective responsibility for the vulnerable and marginalized (J.-E. Johansson & Samuelsson, 2013, p. 252).

Work such as that of Nicholas Rose (1996) has been crucial in the process of beginning to theorize neoliberalism and show how it functions at the level of the subject, producing docile subjects who are tightly governed and who, at the same time, define themselves as free. Individual subjects have thus welcomed the increasing individualism as a sign of their freedom and, at the same time, institutions have increased competition, responsibility and the transfer of risk from the state to individuals at a heavy cost to many individuals, and indeed to many nations (J.-E. Johansson & Samuelsson, 2013). Helen Penn (2010) is arguing of how human capital theory has shifted to a neoliberal approach of enabling individual success and striving rather than any kind of vision of a welfare partnership between individuals and the state.

The democratic citizen with human rights

The teachers in the Norwegian kindergarten did not explicitly express much concern about children managing to live in the Norwegian society. However, they were concerned about the

UN convention of the rights of the children and the Norwegian Act of kindergarten emphasizing children's rights to participate and to have a voice. On the other hand, in the teachers' reflections there were few traces of this ideal of a citizen with democratic rights to participate, to have a voice and to influence the daily life in kindergarten. The teachers argued more for the right to choose rather than developing the democratic citizen.

The principle of children's rights is expressed in the Chinese Guidelines for Early Learning and Development from 2012. "The Guidelines are formulated to support and strengthen the implementation of the National Outline for Medium and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development (2010–2020)[37] and the State Council's Commentary on the Development of Contemporary Preschool Education (GUO FA (2010) No. 41). The Guidelines provide guidance to kindergarten teachers and families of young children based on scientific research and educational practices that promote development of the whole child" (Ministry of Education, 2012)[38]. The most evident changes in these guidelines are the recommendations "to ask children for their opinions", "listen carefully", "accept reasonable requests", "support children to carry out personal ideas", help them to fulfill their wishes and to allow children to do things on their own. Expressions from the UN convention of the Rights of the Children are quite visible in these recommendations of "listening to the children" and to accept "reasonable" requests. Among the Chinese kindergarten teachers in this study, there was little attention to these aspects of individualization.

Still, the discourse of children's rights is not emphasized to the same extent in the Chinese curriculum guidelines and in the teachers' reflections as in the Norwegian Act of Kindergarten and the Norwegian teachers' reflections. The Act of Kindergarten in Norway states the rights

[37] The National Outline for medium and long-term educational reform and development is considered as a big step forward in giving priority to early childhood education in China. By teacher educators and ECE researchers, it is named as "the new spring in ECEC".
[38] These guidelines were just introduced when I did my last field-work in China. When I mention it here, it is to show the development within the curriculum reforms regarding individualization.

of the children to participate and having influence. The Framework plan elaborates this principle by pointing to the fact that children's right to participate is ordained in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which emphasizes the fact that children are entitled to express their views on everything that affects them, and that their views should always be taken into consideration (Ministry of Education and Research, 2006, 2017).

The current guidelines in both countries underline the autonomous child, participation of the child, individualized teaching and lifelong learning (Einarsdottir & Wagner, 2006; Hu & Ødegaard, 2019; Ministry of Education, 2012; Ministry of Education and Research, 2006, 2017 ; Zhu & Zhang, 2008). These ideals are explicit ideals in the political documents.

The recent educational reforms of kindergartens in Norway and in China, as reflected in policy documents, indicate increased emphasize on individualization in teaching approaches and on children's rights to participate and to have influence in the daily life in kindergarten (Gao & Huo, 2017; L. Li, Pan, & Wang, 2018; Ministry of Education, 2012; Ministry of Education and Research, 2006, 2017; Pan et al., 2018).

Implications and final remarks

This study has made an inquiry of cultural formation ideals in social practices in early childhood education in a cultural and historical perspective. By comparing practices in different cultural settings, the study has illustrated the complexity of social practices (Foot, 2014), and has respectively demonstrated the importance of studying everyday practices by doing small-scale cross-cultural studies (Bray, 2014; Cheng, 1998).

The study has contributed to the field of cross-cultural studies in early childhood education and the methodological approach in such studies. There is a high potential in doing small-scale cross-cultural research within early childhood education by using a poly-vocal approach to the reflections on social practices (J. Tobin, 1999; J. J. Tobin et al., 2009; J. J. Tobin et al., 1989).

The common and taken for granted assumptions were destabilized and problematized. Different aspects of social practices could benefit from this approach and using other groups as interpreters as well. Any country approaches education that is taken for granted, tacit and implicit and what Tobin et al. describe as ”implicit cultural logic” or ”folk pedagogy” as Bruner (1996) mention. Tobin et al. (2009) claim that the most characteristic traits in Chinese early childhood education are not based on conscious choices through curriculum plans, but are more a result of informal and taken for granted “traditions”. This is not the case exclusively for China. Implicit practices are found everywhere.

The motivation for this study was, among others, to contest and oppose the increasing focus on learning in early childhood education globally (Moss, 2007, 2014). There is a need to broaden the perspective of the object of the kindergarten practices and ask what kind of human beings do the social practices in kindergarten promote (Fleer et al., 2009a)? The study illustrates the importance to see how different practices give conditions for cultural formation as human beings. The study points to the importance of paying attention to formation processes beyond learning and enhances the perspectives of cultural formation beyond the communicative relationship between teacher and child.

The purpose of this thesis has been to trace cultural formation ideals in a time of increased emphasis on individualization. The idea of individualization is clearly multifaceted in curriculum guidelines, in practices and in the reflections among the kindergarten teachers. Some of the ideas of individualization are more connected to cultural formation than others. I have identified individualization as an educational tool and motivation for learning. I have also found traces of neo-liberal discourses of individualization, such as the importance for children to have the opportunity and right to choose freely among activities and to be self-regulated. Still, another individualization approach is related to psychological individuality and identity, being unique and different from the collective group. A human rights discourse paying attention to

children's rights to have a voice and to be heard as a citizen is even another approach to individualization. The need of clarification of individualization - the romantic discourse of authenticity and being "yourself", the neo-liberal liberty to choose for yourself and becoming of a citizen needs to be high-lighted.

As illustrated in chapter 1 and 2, there are many similarities in the views of the individual and individualization in contemporary regulations and guidelines of the kindergarten in China and Norway. The importance of paying attention to individual differences between children, the importance of children's own initiatives and the urge to prevent uniformity are also emphasized among the teachers in both kindergartens in this study. The argument is on one hand related to children's motivation and ability to learn. Paying attention to individual differences will supposedly give motivation for learning. This is most clearly demonstrated in the teaching of natural science in the Chinese kindergarten. The teachers in the Norwegian kindergarten seemed to be less concerned about motivation for learning and more concerned about supporting individuality and not treating children as a "uniform" group.

The part studies have elucidated some knowledge fields, which have had limited attention in research so far. Firstly, the knowledge of how artefacts displayed on the walls give traces of ideals and norms in early childhood education (Birkeland, 2012). Secondly, the study has opened up to see how different time regulations put different demands on children and is an important condition for cultural formation, giving affordances and constraints (Birkeland, 2019). These fields of knowledge need further research.

The theoretical perspectives from cultural historical activity theory has opened up to see the complexity of teachers' actions and their routines (Leont'ev, 1978; Stetsenko, 2005; Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004). CHAT perspectives open for understanding of what teachers try to achieve and how they interpret what is going on. Contradictions within educational practices will always

be apparent. Having the cross-cultural look gives opportunity to better understand what teachers are struggling with and the contradictory expectations, needs, motives and ideals. What do the teachers do with an explicit purpose and what do they do because traditions tell them to do so or the practical institutional conditions demands them to do so. In the midst of these demands the teachers' and children's agency are unfolding.

The rapid development of the Chinese society has few counterparts globally, and this rapid development influences the development of early childhood education. My fieldwork was carried out in a period where the influence of foreign early childhood education still was strong. We can now see a stronger commitment to Chinese cultural traditions and desire to find their own way. This development will be interesting to follow in the future.

I have studied two kindergartens in different cultural contexts in a specific historic time characterized with political concern, curriculum reforms and transformations within early childhood education (Berge, 2015; Pan et al., 2018). However, the intention has not been to analyze transformation processes. In a time where the Chinese kindergartens experience reforms pushing more individualized approaches and the Norwegian kindergartens experience demands of more universal learning standards and preparation of children for school, further transformation processes could be of importance to study. In a time where education for sustainability is becoming even more important globally, the question of cultural formation of children have become even more important. We need to focus on the value-based purpose of the kindergarten more than random and detailed learning goals (Johansson, 2018).

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PART 4 THE ARTICLES

Article 1: Birkeland, Å. (2012). Barnehagens vegger som danningsagenter - en komparativ analyse. (The walls in the kindergarten as agents of cultural formation – a comparative analysis) I: Elin Eriksen Ødegaard & Torolf Kruger: *Barnehagen som danningsarena (Kindergarten as an arena for cultural formation)*. Bergen: Fagbokforlaget, 157-180.

Article 2: Birkeland, Å. (2013). Kindergarten Teachers' educational ideals — tensions and contradictions. *Cultural Historical Psychology 8*(2), 45-53.

Article 3: Birkeland, Å. (2019). Temporal settings in Kindergarten: a lens to trace historical and current cultural formation ideals? In *Journal of European Early Childhood Education and Care Research*, *27*(1), 53-67.

Article 4: Birkeland, Å. (2013). Research dilemmas associated with photo elicitation in comparative early childhood education research. *Research in comparative and international education 8*(4), 455-467.

Attachment

Åsta Birkeland
Associate professor
Bergen University College
Landåssvingen 15
5096 Bergen
Norway

To parents in x kindergarten

A letter of consent

My name is Åsta Birkeland, and I am an associate professor in early childhood teacher education at The University College of Bergen, Norway. For several years, I have been collaborating with researchers at East China Normal University.

At the moment, I am doing a comparative research project involving one kindergarten in China and one in Norway. The topic of my research project is cultural values and ideals in early childhood education. My focus is primarily on the teachers` values and goals. I want to take pictures and video clips of different activities during the day. These pictures will be used as photo elicitation when I have focus group interview with the teachers about their practices, values and ideals and what they want to attain. The photos will be used in the interviews with both the Chinese preschool teachers and the Norwegian preschool teachers. I will stay in x kindergarten for four weeks and return later to the kindergarten for three more weeks.

The pictures and video clips will during my research project be stored safely in a work computer until the interview with the teachers have been carried out. They will not be used on the internet in any way. Nor will any photos and videos of children be distributed in any other way. Some photos and videos without exposing children may be used in lectures with students at the university.

Ethical standards will be followed when I take photos. This means that the privacy of children is to be respected. I am not taking pictures of children crying, going to the bathroom, in conflict situations or in other sensitive situations. The focus of my interest is not the individual child but the everyday activities and daily routines. If you agree to this, I would like you to sign this letter of consent and give it to the teacher of the class before …….

I can be contacted at the following e-mail address: abi@hib.no

I agree to let Åsta Birkeland use video clips and photos of the activities in the classroom on the conditions stated above.

_____

Name of parent

Chapter 7 Kindergarten walls as formative agents – a comparative study

I arrived at the Lotus kindergarten following a morning walking through the teeming street life of Shanghai. The grandparents who had brought their grandchildren to the kindergarten stood outside a gate several metres in height, watching as they left. The kindergarten, a three-storey, pale blue brick building, was partially concealed by high walls, closely patrolled by two guards. Beyond the gate, in the grounds, was a wall with washbasins and mirrors at different heights, and hanging above the basins were words and pictures to explain the detailed sequential order of hand washing. While the children washed their hands, an eager and enthusiastic principal explained to me that the instructions had resulted in the children washing their hands both thoroughly and swiftly, indeed, in less than 20 seconds.

My initial impression of Lotus kindergarten tells me that the principal has well-defined ideas about what should be presented on the wall above the washbasins, and how it should be presented. The intention is also defined; for the illustrations to promote thorough and speedy hand washing. In other words, the principal communicates a strong conviction that instruction given in words and images will elicit a particular action in children.

This example challenges my habituated notion that artefacts on kindergarten walls serve primarily as mementos of completed actions, for example, as records of excursions, themed projects and children's forms of self-expression. The notion that artefacts can also produce actions means that the artefacts on the kindergarten's walls are not inanimate objects, but may be regarded as formative agents in that they enable children to interpret, comprehend and act in certain ways (Ødegaard, Ch. 4) (Tilley, 2006). An artefact such as a mirror, for example, could invite comparisons and self-scrutiny. Models of drawings, houses and symbols could encourage imitation. Images of children from other countries could form the basis for conversations. Alphabet letters and characters mounted on the wall could encourage children to experiment with interpreting written characters. Drawings can be compared with other drawings. Interactive artefacts can spur engagement. Wall-mounted monthly activity schedules could serve as reminders and guidelines for preschool teachers in the day-to-day programme of a kindergarten.

The narrative in the introduction may be read as the principal's personal conviction, but may also be understood as mediating cultural practices and time-honoured tradition. In this light, the kindergarten becomes a mirror reflecting the values and norms of society at large; in this case, of China (Prochner, Cleghorn, & Green, 2008). The artefacts on the kindergarten's walls thereby serve to reflect the formative ideals of the prevailing culture. The purpose of this article is to analyse the nature of the formative ideals discernible from wall artefacts and not least to nuance, question and indicate any contradictions and paradoxes in those ideals. The questions may be phrased as follows: What do the artefacts on the kindergarten's walls seek to elicit? What formative ideals are revealed? What contradictions and paradoxes are discernible in the formative ideals? How can these indirectly offer an understanding of the kindergarten's objective and orientation?

The article is based on an ethnographical comparative case study of the nature of artefacts presented on the walls of two kindergartens, one in Norway and one in China. In the following, I start by providing a background for comparing artefacts on the walls of the kindergartens in the two countries. I then account for why activity theory serves as a useful tool for this study, before giving an account of data production and methodology. Based on an analysis of the artefacts, I then discuss what the preschool teachers regard as being their remit and what may be discerned as the objective of the activity system at the two kindergartens.

Historical traces

Wollons (2000) describes uptake of the kindergarten as a global concept in the 19th and 20th centuries. The kindergarten concept spread initially from Germany to the Nordic Region and the USA and from there to Japan. The inspiration for the Chinese kindergarten came primarily from Japan. This is attributable not least to the relatedness of the languages and philosophies of the two nations (Bai i Wollons, 2000). Across the globe, each country had to make cultural adaptations in terms of both the objective of the kindergarten in building national identity and with a view to instilling parental confidence in the suitability of kindergartens for their offspring. Although the kindergarten concept was ostensibly similar in different countries, it nonetheless resulted in highly differentiated local paradigms. The kindergarten pedagogy in each respective country could thus be read as a hybrid of cultural borrowings and local

adaptations (Wollons, 2000). Norway and China were not exceptions in this respect. The objective for the activity also varied between and within countries.

The Norwegian kindergarten of the 20th century emerged out of two institutional traditions. Firstly, the crèche-style institution (Norwegian: *daghjem*) in which the motive for the activity was to provide a protective setting for the children of working, blue-collar parents. The objective was child-minding and safe-keeping, but also to procure labour for industry (Korsvold, 1998). Secondly, in parallel with the crèche-style institution, the Norwegian kindergarten can be traced back to the original Fröbel kindergartens, in which the motive for the activity was personal, cultural formation of the children of the middle classes (Korsvold, 1998). In 1975, these differing institutional types merged as a unified national kindergarten provision governed by harmonised legislation. The activity's contradictory motives of child-minding, labour procurement, cultural formation, and social levelling have since then co-existed in the Norwegian kindergarten. However, from the early 21st century, new objectives for the kindergarten as an institution may also be discerned. Now, the ideal of the kindergarten as the first stage in compulsory education and as an element in every citizen's lifelong learning process becomes increasingly evident in discourse on state kindergartens (See Ch. 1).

The kindergarten concept came to China from Japan in the early 20th century at a time when Chinese education was largely influenced by Confucianism (Kinney, 1995, 2004; Wollons, 2000). In this era, kindergarten intake was low and the objective of the activity was formation of the child to embody the moral virtues, to become a good person and build harmonious communities. This objective changed significantly in the wake of the Communist takeover in 1949 and not least during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s. Political and ideological education was now to be given priority and its objective was to eliminate class differences[1]. The objective for the socialist kindergarten was to prepare children for school and subsequently to embrace working life with a socialist ethos, as heirs of the socialist cause (Gu, 2000; Sidel, 1974).

[1] During the Cultural Revolution , social class structures were governed by the "blood theory". Pupils were assigned to two different categories depending on parental social status: the Five Red Categories, made up of workers, poor farmers, and revolutionary soldiers, cadres and martyrs, or the Five Black Categories for the children of estate owners, wealthy farmers, counter-revolutionaries, "bad elements" and rightists.

After Mao's death in 1976, the focus was on the Four Modernisations of agriculture, industry, national defence and science & technology. These changes led to a number of reforms in the kindergarten sector. One was set out in *Kindergarten work regulations and procedures* in 1989. Another in *Guidance for Kindergarten Education* in 2001. The latter signals a change in the motive for the activity, in that the wording about fostering love of the Communist Party and creating the socialist citizen has been removed. However, the guidance still states that kindergartens are to continue to form the Chinese citizen with love of the Motherland.

On the assumption that Wollons is correct that the kindergarten pedagogy of each nation may be read as a hybrid of cultural borrowings and local adaptations, it is interesting to examine examples of formative ideals in two such apparently differing social and cultural contexts as Norway and China. What do they have in common, and in what ways do they differ? A comparison of cultural formative ideals will also serve to highlight what is taken for granted, or implicit, in one's own culture. As insiders and as outsiders, we see different perspectives of the culture studied. A third perspective underpinning the value of comparing China and Norway is the risk of transferring and transplanting pedagogical ideas and modes of practice from one context to another. Cheng Kai-Ming (1998) asserts, for example, that traditional cultural values are threatened by increased globalisation of educational values. Accordingly, he calls for a greater focus on culturally oriented comparative studies. Since comparative research has been largely influenced by the Minority World[2], the risk of advancing a universal framework characterised by Western discourse is accordingly high (Crossley & Watson, 2003). Consequently, comparative research should not be conducted primarily in the West, but should be increasingly oriented North-South, South-South and East-West. A similar perspective within the kindergarten sector is presented by Fleer et al.(2009) and Penn (2011).

Wall artefacts and cultural traditions

In this article, the object of comparative study consists of the artefacts on the walls**.** The walls of any kindergarten display cultural products such as drawings, photographs, texts, illustrations, characters and symbols. Historically, Norwegian kindergartens, originating from Fröbel (2005), have had a tradition for attaching importance to the physical setting generally, not least the kindergarten's interior, design, layout and arrangement of facilities. For a great

[2] In this context, the term 'Minority World' is used according to colonisation theory to refer to the Western World. See Penn (2011).

many years, the physical setting in kindergartens was modelled on a domestic ideal(Korsvold, 1998). Their walls were given a homely look with romantic images of children and nature. This ideal has gradually evolved, as evidenced, not least, in recent changes in the architectural style of kindergartens. Increasingly larger in size, purpose-built Norwegian kindergartens have more open-plan 'bases' for wider age-groups rather than separate units for age-segregated groups and activity-specific rooms, which has had the effect of distancing them from the homely and intimate ideal (Kjørholt & Seland, 2012; Seland, 2009).

Chinese kindergartens have also had changing norms for the appearance of their institutions, how the rooms should be fitted out, what should be exhibited on the walls, and how. Photographs of Chinese kindergartens from the 1950s and 60s reveal almost featureless rooms, virtually stripped of images, except for political slogans and portraits of Mao. The kindergartens today are more diversified, their décor varying largely according to the standard of the kindergarten. External evaluations[3] of the kindergartens operate with critical rating criteria such as colourfulness, variation, current relevance and creative use of materials in ranking each institution (Zhu & Zhang, 2008). One common feature of kindergartens in Norway and in China stems from the cultural expectations of what a kindergarten should look like, what should be presented on kindergarten walls and how.

A number of studies point to different objectives in presenting cultural products on kindergarten walls. Studies inspired by the Reggio Emilia Approach focus on the walls as a third educator, in the sense that the child's learning and formative process arises in an interaction between the child, the educator and the educational room (Ceppi & Zini, 1998). The walls are investigated as pedagogical records, and as an arena for democratic and aesthetic cultural formation. In other, related studies, kindergarten walls are considered a form of covert curriculum, signalling different values, and perspectives on children and childhood (Prochner et al., 2008; Tarr, 2004; A. Taylor & Enggass, 2009). Andersen (2002) investigated the material culture of Norwegian kindergartens, including their walls. She finds that the material culture essentially reflects the white, ethnic Norwegian, and questions which children are able to find identity markers in the Norwegian kindergarten. In the study, *The Kindergarten Room: A Multimodal Pedagogical Text*, Eva Maagerø (2010) examines the potential held by kindergartens rooms for language acquisition. She finds that texts displayed

[3] Kindergartens in China are ranked according to a rating system of 1 to 3 according to the standards of their fixtures and fittings and pedagogical competence.

on kindergarten walls to a varying extent invite linguistic activities**.** A study by Lindgren & Sparrmann (2003) addresses the problem of the power balance perspective in that children's daily activities are increasingly mediated to staff, parents and visitors. Observing versus being observed raises the question of positions of power. These studies share a common assumption that the walls have an effect on the children and have the power to influence identity construction, language acquisition, and democratic and aesthetic formation (Tilley, 2006).

Like these studies, the present study operates with the assumption that artefacts on kindergarten walls influence children and more specifically that they serve as formative agents. Based on this premise, I conducted a comparative cultural study of which formative agents are reflected by the artefacts on the walls. My study also identifies, in keeping with activity theory, the artefacts as instruments in the target-oriented actions of the kindergarten teachers. I consequently apply the cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) in addressing the questions (Engeström, Punamäki-Gitai, & Miettinen, 1999; Leont'ev, 2002; Lurija, 1984; Stetsenko, 2005; Vygotskij, Bielenberg, & Roster, 2001).

Activity theory and artefacts as agents

I have chosen to apply activity theory as an instrument in interpreting the artefacts on kindergarten walls as formative agents (Engeström et al., 1999; Leont'ev, 2002; Lurija, 1984; Vygotskij et al., 2001). This has significance for me in that I seek to understand those artefacts as mediating cultural and historical traditions, routines, norms and opinions in the kindergarten (Fleer, Hedegaard, Bang, & Hviid, 2008; Fleer et al., 2009; Gulløv & Højlund, 2003).

Key concepts in activity theory are activity, action and operation. These represent three levels in the activity system. Activity refers to collectively developed patterns of action with a distinct historical foundation. In any local activity, such as that pursued by an individual kindergarten, the wider institution's history is reflected in the physical setting, artefacts, rules, routines and principles, but also in external conditions and in ideas and precepts. The direction of an activity system is created by means of a collective motive or object. This motive is mediated by the object of the activity. The object, as a mental image, is constructed out of culturally modelled notions and ideals held by the individuals as to what is to be achieved. This means that the artefacts on kindergarten walls offer pointers to what the kindergarten teachers are seeking to achieve and to the nature of the objective of the

kindergarten. As such, the object is more than the raw material to be transformed and the process by which the transformation is effected (Stetsenko, 2005).

In order to realise the object, certain actions must be carried out. The actions are not, however, determined solely by the object, but also by the conditions and the circumstances under which the actions are performed. This means, for example, that kindergarten teachers act based on competences and experiences and what they consciously or unconsciously perceive their surroundings as requiring, permitting or facilitating in a given activity. Operations allude to the material preconditions prevailing on the actions carried out by the actors, but also to the automated actions or petrified practices that arise out of traditions, routines, norms and opinions (Engeström et al., 1999). The preschool teachers' presentations of artefacts on kindergarten walls may thus represent conscious aims, but also more implicit and automated actions in the shape of traditions; "that's just how we do it".

In activity theory, the artefacts are focal, and the actions cannot be considered in isolation from mediating artefacts. (Engeström et al., 1999; Vygotskij et al., 2001). Artefacts are man-made and comprise both linguistic and physical artefacts. As humans, we do not have direct access to the world, but our artefacts mediate modes of thinking, identities, opinions, norms and practices (Wertsch, 1991). The artefacts are thus significant both in terms of what they mediate and in terms of the actions on which they are based. Consequently, the activity theory perspective on artefacts may be said to be dialectic: we create artefacts, but are also created by them. Translated to the kindergarten, this means that the artefacts on their walls provide a dual perspective. The artefacts hold traces of previous actions and they intend to influence the children's future actions. Both perspectives highlight the formative potential of the artefacts and that they enable children to interpret, understand and act in certain ways (Wertsch, 1991).

Data production and methodological approach

My source data consist of artefacts on the walls of two kindergartens and of the kindergarten teachers' discussions and interpretations concerning the artefacts in these kindergartens. I photographed all the items presented on the walls of both kindergartens, whether pictures, symbols, characters, text or other artefacts. The photographs were used as the basis for two semi-structured interviews (Stephens, 2009) with a group of 5 teachers in the respective kindergartens.

The questions in the first interview concerned the artefacts in the teachers' own kindergarten. In the second interview, the photos from the other kindergarten were shown. The questions were open in order to elicit the teachers' thoughts about the artefacts rather than restrict the responses by requiring the interviewees to see the artefacts *as something*, and instead to challenge them to *see more* (Bresler, 2011). This method of producing data is inspired by that of Tobin et al. in *Preschool in Three Cultures* (Tobin, 1999; Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009; Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989). Still images and/or videos are used as cues for conversation/open interviews to elicit opinions(Harper, 2012; Pink, 2007). Interviews of both "insiders" and "outsiders" have the effect of challenging what is perceived as normal or taken for granted. Multivocal interpretations of the same material may thus highlight potential contradictions and paradoxes in the material.

Activity theory is applied as the basis for the analysis, meaning that I look for the motive informing the activity. According to activity theory, it is not possible for me to observe or capture the purpose of the activity directly; this can only be discerned from the actions (Engeström et al., 1999). Accordingly, the tradition is generally for activity theory studies to employ observation of actions in combination with interviews. I seek to trace actions in the artefacts on the kindergarten walls and in the interviews with the kindergarten teachers. In the analysis, I moved between the artefacts, the activities' history and interviews with the kindergarten teachers in order to identify the objective and formative ideal of the activity.

The purpose of comparing two kindergartens is to achieve an analytical distance to the phenomena studied such that the comparison holds an epistemological interest demonstrating relative values by means of fundamental conceptions (Cheng, 1998; Gulløv & Højlund, 2003). In other words, progressions along the proximity-distance continuum entail creating distance from what is known, but also proximity to the unknown (Tobin, 2005; Tobin et al., 2009; Tobin et al., 1989).

Choosing to compare a kindergarten from China and a kindergarten from Norway produces a number of investigative dilemmas. One being the implicit assumption that the differences are so marked that this will in itself challenge what is taken for granted. However, the risk posed by comparison of two cases is that the differences will be amplified and hence exaggerate a form of dualism. This challenge thus lies in bringing out shades of difference and similarity by means of dense descriptions.

Encounters with otherness also challenge me as a researcher in terms of the tendency to alienate or romanticise what is different or to be Eurocentric, in other words, to take the Western kindergarten, in this case the Norwegian one, as the norm(Said, 2003). I cannot discount the fact that I am a Norwegian researcher with a background in Norwegian kindergartens and preschool educator training, but transparent disclosure of my personal reactions and opinions will be significant along the way in the study. My contact with both kindergartens did not originate with this study, but evolved over time, and the trust between us was gained through repeated visits and interviews.[4] My questions have therefore also accumulated over an extended period.

The Lotus kindergarten

The Lotus kindergarten is located in one of China's largest cities, Shanghai, but in a quiet neighbourhood of four-storey apartment blocks. The kindergarten is a brick building on three floors with six age-segregated classes[5], two for each year-group. The youngest children are on the first floor, the oldest on the top floor. One hundred and eighty children, aged 3-6, attend the kindergarten. Each class has 25-35 children. The teacher to child ratio is 1:15. All of the teachers hold kindergarten/preschool teacher certification, but their educational background is

[4] My general knowledge of Chinese kindergartens likewise extends well beyond contact with the kindergarten in the study and dates back to 2003 and a teacher exchange programme with Beijing and Shanghai. Since then I have had 9 stays of varying lengths in China both with students from the cross-cultural comparative education programme, Bergen University College, and alone. Within the same period, I held senior responsibility for receiving various delegations of teacher trainers and kindergarten teachers/principals from China.

At the Lotus kindergarten, I was reliant on the services of an interpreter for the interviews. The interpreter I used had personally done a year of research in Norway and was therefore familiar with Norwegian conditions. We collaborated closely during that year. She served more as a co-interviewer than an interpreter and was able to ask clarifying questions. This gave the translation process validity. She asked the questions in Chinese and the kindergarten teachers answered in Chinese. I was thus completely reliant on the English translation in my analysis work.

[5] I use the terms "class" and "classroom" in reference to the units in Chinese kindergartens as they do themselves.

very varied with some holding a Bachelor's degree and others holding a diploma from shorter in-service training. The kindergarten opened in 1983, was state-owned and therefore guaranteed a certain amount of local government funding. It is ranked as a "Grade 2 kindergarten", meaning that it conforms to the average standard according to the Shanghai criteria, but an excellent standard according to the prevailing Chinese standard.

The kindergarten's artefacts

The kindergarten has a common entrance for all children. In the hallway, there are photographs of the children, the kindergarten teachers and the parents. The photos are elaborately framed in pink card and hung high up on the wall and are clearly aimed at parents and visitors. The kindergarten's mission statement is also displayed very visibly: *It is our goal to make you satisfied. It is our pursuit to meet your need. It is our motivation to own your trust.* Above the stairs, text at several points reminds the children that they need to go up and down the stairs with care.

Each class generally has one room; the youngest classes have two. In addition, there are separate rooms for construction play, reading, music and arts & crafts for communal use by all the classes. Most of the wall space in all rooms is covered with artefacts. The walls are colourful and the artefacts are displayed at child height. The artefacts consist, among other things, of pictorial series giving direct instructions on how to perform certain tasks such as cutting paper, folding paper, hand-washing, going the toilet, standing in line, the sequential actions to be performed by children on entering the library, for stacking building blocks, tidying up etc. Models and examples of what may be crafted from different materials are also prominent on the walls. The building blocks room displays pictures of Chinese houses, historical buildings and modern high-rises. There are also photographs of objects built from blocks. In the arts & crafts room, the walls display Chinese opera masks, pictures of traditional Chinese artefacts such as costumes, design objects etc. The music room walls display artefacts from diverse Chinese minorities, garments, musical instruments and photographs of dancers. The signs of classical musical notation are wall-mounted everywhere in the music room. The walls also bear a number of artefacts to invite activity, not by way of instruction or imitation, but more interactively in that the child is invited to perform an action involving the artefacts such as recording the weather by logging temperature and precipitation, weighing and height-measurement of children, gathering news items for the bulletin board and illustrating thematic walls.

Tracing targeted actions

What is clearly apparent from the walls in the Lotus kindergarten is that every inch of wall space must be put to use. The general principle appears to be that presentation of the artefacts must have a clear intention, or, as one of the teachers put it: "Environment is education. We will make full use of the value hidden in the environment"[6]. One reason given for this was the high ratio of children to adults. Given these preconditions, it is seen as vital for the artefacts to underpin the pedagogical remit in order thereby to serve as an extension of the teacher's targeted actions. "Therefore, we have to turn to the environment to search for as much educational potential as possible. The teachers will ask themselves: What is the purpose to arrange the wall like this? How can children benefit from it? What else should I add in order to make it better?" Careful consideration of how wall space is used in relation to intention is of the essence. The Chinese preschool teachers regard presentation at the Norwegian kindergarten as scarcely considered or planned. They believe, for example, that the teachers at the Issoleien kindergarten in Norway devote too much space to purely photographic presentation of the children. "We would not use all this space to introduce the children". This was perceived as inefficient use of space. The staff at the Issoleien kindergarten for their part regarded the walls of the Lotus kindergarten as overfilled and thus chaotic. "They're trying to do so much all in one go".

Instilling good habits

What would appear to be the educational potential of the artefacts? Firstly, the preschool teachers at Lotus kindergarten point to the example of all the instructions on the walls as an aid to instilling good habits. "The rules, such as to wait for your turn, to save water, to keep good manners are presented with diverse methods like pictures and words which enables children to get better instructed. By this the children get implicit knowledge unconsciously".

Instilling habits is also regarded as being time-efficient: "Although there are so many children in our kindergarten, it only takes 20 seconds to finish washing hands if they follow the instructions on the walls". Presenting the necessary sequence of activities also makes the child aware that he or she has limited time for each activity. If a child spends a long time finishing a meal, that child will have less time to play and engage in individual projects. The staff at the Issoleien kindergarten did not however regard this as instilling good habits, but more as stressing the children. "The idea seems to be to speed up and get all children to spend the

[6] The cited statements from the Lotus kindergarten are the translations by the Chinese interpreter/collaborator and are retained verbatim for authenticity.

same amount of time. The impression is that this sets a standard which all children must comply with."

Perfecting the child

The artefacts in the Lotus kindergarten were made thoughtfully and elaborately. The teachers at the Lotus kindergarten stressed the importance of this in the interviews. The presentations had to be harmonious and appealing in order to bring out the very best. "We do not think that everything is suitable to hang on the walls." Exemplary exhibits are stressed as important in relation to external evaluation commissions, in fulfilling parental expectations and out of respect for the children's efforts. "We show who we are and that we want quality and perfection." The prevailing practice of external evaluation appeared to influence the practices surrounding wall artefacts greatly. The teachers stated that they devoted a great deal of time to the wall décor because this is one of the quality criteria in the external evaluations. The aesthetic merits of objects displayed could potentially boost the kindergarten's ranking and result in an increase in resources from the authorities. Vis-à-vis parents it was also important for the walls to present the kindergarten to best advantage. "Parents and visitors will have a sense of beauty when they are here and it improves the landscaping."

This was presumably, why staff at the Lotus kindergarten questioned practices at the Issoleien kindergarten. In their view, the Issoleien kindergarten placed little emphasis on exemplary décor. Individual children's drawings for example seemed to them to be randomly selected for display and were scarcely appealing. "Parents will scold the child as well as our activities. Your painting is so bad. They will consider the painting as a mess and the qualities of our activities as so low that we fail to improve children's abilities. So we choose better and more delicate paintings to present on the walls and then the parents will be satisfied." This then accounts for why the majority of the artefacts on the walls in the classroom at the Lotus kindergarten were the products of collective thematic projects undertaken collaboratively between children and adults. This was to ensure that the artefacts would be more distinctive and the presentations more appealing. An example of this was a large picture depicting the seasons and cycle of life. The teacher had penned the outline picture and the text. The children had drawn examples of the cyclical aspects of life.

The teachers at the Issoleien kindergarten for their part perceived the Lotus teachers' emphasis on perfecting artefacts as an indication that they were focused on "selling" the kindergarten to the parents and the external evaluation commissions. Perfecting the exhibits

seemed almost suspect to the Issoleien kindergarten teachers and not a virtue in itself. As one of them put it: “Everything has to be so nice. For whose benefit?”
On the other hand, the teachers at the Issoleien kindergarten also proposed that one might get the impression that staff at the Lotus kindergarten wanted to harden the children through the emphasis on perfectionism. This conclusion was drawn from the fact that only a few children had their products displayed on the wall. “It’s as if the children there are required to learn to cope with criticism. At our kindergarten, we want all children to be equal and we tend to handle the children with kid gloves. But that obviously means that we have children who get very upset by the least setback.”

Cultivating responsibility towards the community

A number of the artefacts encourage responsibility. The teachers at the Lotus kindergarten made special mention of their bulletin board as an artefact from which children learn responsibility to themselves and others in the local community. Children are invited to bring in recent news cuttings to have put up on the bulletin board. Examples of news stories during my visit to the kindergarten ranged from features about local sports icons to the arrest of the artist and anti-government activist Ai Weiwei. It was interesting to note that certain news items were removed the next day, such as the story about Ai Weiwei, while features on sports icons and other national heroes were left on display. Presumably this ties in with the fact that the teachers at the Lotus kindergarten keenly reiterated ”We are all Chinese, and the goal is that the children will love their country”. Photographs of focal locations in the local community and in China, images of historical buildings, of diverse ethnic groups in China, the Chinese flag, traditional costumes and musical instruments, the animals in the Chinese calendar and Chinese masks from the Beijing Opera were all explained by “We are Chinese”. The Chinese kindergarten teachers referred to their national pre-school curriculum as emphasising the importance of fostering love of the Motherland. The teachers were also taken up with the size of the nation and that it was important to develop a shared identity as Chinese. The wording in the national curriculum requiring children to cultivate love of the Communist Party was removed in the 1990s.

In addition to the general policy that artefacts are to embody a clear intention, three other aspects emerge as key remits for the teachers at the Lotus kindergarten: instilling good habits, perfecting the child and inculcating responsibility towards the community.

The Issoleien kindergarten

The Issoleien kindergarten is located in a Norwegian city in a quiet residential neighbourhood, close to the sea and rural areas. The kindergarten consists of two wooden buildings with four age-segregated units housing 70 children aged 1-6. The number of children assigned to each unit varies according to the age of the children. The kindergarten has 15 members of staff. The teacher to child ratio is 1:6. All teachers with a supervisory role are qualified preschool teachers (holding the equivalent of a Bachelor degree), and the kindergarten principal has a Master's degree. The individual units have only a few communal rooms. The cloakroom is communal for three of the units. There is also a group room available for use by all the units. The kindergarten was established in 2004 and is privately owned. Photographs of the artefacts stem from the unit for the oldest children.

The kindergarten's artefacts

The kindergarten has two separate buildings that were formerly private residences. The kindergarten's logo is very visibly displayed on the external wall. The front door displays the logo for the unit. Both of the logos evoke the sea and pleasure boating. At each cloakroom place for the children, there is a photograph of the individual child. A noticeboard with information for the parents is displayed in the corridor. A mirror at child height is placed in the middle of the cloakroom.

Each unit has four part-partitioned rooms. The artefacts on the walls consist of many children's drawings, bead crafts and painted pictures. These are displayed in different places in the rooms and appeared to be individual and spontaneous artefacts. Other exhibits in the rooms consist of pictures produced jointly by adults and children; one picture shows the seasons and another depicts different kinds of weather. Other collaborative pieces are themed displays devoted to the seasons. This is a large painted image. There is also a collaborative work by children and adults devoted to a character in a work of children's fiction. Another themed work is a collage on China with photographs of people, places and pandas. By the window with a view of trees and birdlife, is a poster of different birds. By the same window, the wall also displays several sheets of paper with records of seeds sown, watering times etc. There are many different photographs on the walls, including a collage of photographs of each individual child affixed to the unit's logo. There is also a photo collage of all the children and adults in the unit captured in different situations. In several places, there are noticeboards on

the walls displaying photographs of children and adults on excursions outside the kindergarten and experiences within the kindergarten. The alphabet takes up dominant space in the rooms and in two places is displayed in the form of a long ceiling banner. All the alphabet letters are large in size. The letters are shown in both upper and lower case and are linked to images of objects of which the name starts with the associated letter. The main room has a large noticeboard. This contains various documents including detailed schedules, primarily aimed at the employees.

Tracing targeted actions

The artefacts on the walls at the Issoleien kindergarten provide a clear impression that they are largely child-produced and reflect the children's abilities, activities and experiences. This is also emphasised in the interviews with the kindergarten's teachers.

Equality and equity

A great many of the artefacts were explained as a means of allowing the children to see themselves, find their own place and see their own creations: "All the children, not just those who are good at drawing, get to have their projects put up on the walls." The policy of displaying children's individual work is virtually equated to a right. The principles of both equality (equal access) and equity (non-discrimination) are clearly apparent as values in the convictions expressed by the teachers. All of the children have the right to express themselves, to be heard and seen. Another aim held by the teachers is for all of the children to be allowed to express themselves regardless of adult quality criteria. The teachers assert that this is a question of respect. They show respect for children in that all of the children are allowed to display what they want on the walls without the exhibits being "polished" or "censored". "It is not us as adults who should be showing how skilled we are, but the children who are allowed to see their own efforts without any retouching or perfecting." A number of the teachers at the Issoleien kindergarten were critical of the practice at the Lotus kindergarten of only displaying the best of the children's efforts: "Very neat and decorative, but what counts for most regarding the children?"

The teachers at the Lotus kindergarten for their part were critical of the practice at the Issoleien kindergarten, asserting that they did not show respect for the children's efforts. Different arguments were put forward in defining what constitutes respect for children. Here, cultural norms become clearly apparent. In Chinese society it is important not to lose face and not to give a bad impression (Hansen & Svarverud, 2010). In the light of this, it is logical that

'poor' efforts or efforts that give a 'poor' impression are not on display. The diversity of achievement and expression is thus less in evidence. This is the impression gained by many visitors to kindergartens and schools in China: that all Chinese children excel at singing, speaking English, drawing etc. Values in Norwegian society are more intently concerned with equality and for no individual to stand out to any extent (Clark, Kjørholt, & Moss, 2005; Gullestad, 1997; Kjørholt & Seland, 2012). The idea that all children are to be able to find themselves in the artefacts is a logical consequence of this. To elaborate on this, one might say that the Norwegian ethos is to be yourself but not to stand out. Intrinsically, this imposes constraints on self-realisation. For this reason, the kindergarten's walls are not as polished and "perfected", since the emphasis is more on the unpolished, natural and authentic effort (Gullestad, 1997; Kjørholt, 2010).

Like at the Lotus kindergarten, the Issoleien kindergarten had collaborative artefacts produced by children and adults jointly. However, the intention was not to make the pictures more accomplished, but for the adults and children to share a process of negotiating what should be depicted. "What do we need to include if we do a picture on spring?" "What might twigs look like"? "Who's going to do what on the picture?" Here, the emphasis is on the conversation and negotiating process, rather than the decorative value of the result. When the teachers at the Lotus kindergarten saw this picture, they thought it was about nature conservation because natural materials had been used in the project. Authentic, unpolished natural materials were not seen as appealing from the Chinese perspective.

Cultivating the child's identity

"Seeing oneself" is a theme conveyed by many of the artefacts at the Issoleien kindergarten. Photographs of the children, the children's own art & crafts and mirrors are examples of this. The mirror, for example, was explained as a means of self-exploration. "The mirror allows the child to experiment with different emotional expressions, "How do I look?" "I am happy." "I am angry." "I am sad." At the Lotus kindergarten, however, the mirrors in the toilets and the music room were explained as being there to enable the children to check that they were doing things correctly, whether it was practising handwriting or dancing. A mirror features as an artefact in both kindergartens, but with very different purposes. The photographs of the children also have an identity-creating function according to the teachers. There was a photograph of each child at the child's cloakroom place and on the wall of the unit. The photographs expressed "This is me". "This is my place", "This is what I used to look like",

and “This is what I look like now”. The children can compare themselves with each other and see how they have changed over time.

The collaborative collage portraying everyone in the unit in different situations also conveys a form of identity: here at the kindergarten, we are happy and all belong. “We want to present the unit as a happy and informal crowd who have a great time with each other.” A sense of collective unity and of belonging at the kindergarten are emphasised, as is a spirit of being part of the local community. “After all, the symbols we use refer to our proximity to the sea, but also to the parents’ maritime workplaces.” “We belong by the sea, and this is our symbol and characteristic.” The teachers at the Lotus kindergarten duly remarked the Issoleien kindergarten appeared to have a strong identity linked to the sea. They found few artefacts conveying national identity on the walls.

Many of the children’s projects were individual ones. The teachers stated that these were spontaneous pieces, which the individual children wanted to have displayed on the wall. The pictures had not been retouched, and were mounted on the wall at the child’s request. The optionality for the child was emphasised here, it being not the teacher who rejects pictures for display, but rather the children themselves who decide if they want their pictures displayed. The emphasis on optionality is also seen in the example of the kindergarten logo: a boat on the sea. The teachers explained that the logo was chosen for the kindergarten’s local community affinity and identity linked to the sea. However, the kindergarten logo was also to be understood symbolically as a “sea of opportunities”. Here we may discern the national Norwegian kindergarten ethos that emphasises experiences and choices. The Lotus kindergarten counterpart logo was a whale symbol, which was explained as “the exploration of children in the ocean of knowledge”. Here, the teachers were clearly pointing to the kindergarten’s identity being linked to knowledge and knowledge building. The ocean was for both kindergartens linked to opportunities, but different ones, opportunities at the Issoleien kindergarten and knowledge-building potentials at the Lotus kindergarten.

The communicative child

Superficially, it was difficult to see how the artefacts at the Issoleien kindergarten invited interactivity and actions, but the teachers were taken up with this aspect. It was asserted that the artefacts served as a starting point for conversations. Images of birthday children were

highlighted as a basis for conversations at home and photographs from excursions were held to be opportunities for recalling experiences and a form of collective memory. “Whenever we’ve been out on an exciting trip, it’s important to post pictures or objects as reminders of the trip. This is a way of recreating the sense of community, but also of retaining and recalling the knowledge gained.” Themes could likewise be recalled if there were artefacts from thematic projects on the walls. The teachers also pointed out that the children asked questions and commented on the artefacts spontaneously. They maintained that the artefacts in themselves encouraged the children to initiate conversations. “The children can talk about experiences or different topics whenever they want to.” However, the adults could also contribute to conversation, exploration and experimentation based on the artefacts. “They give us an opportunity for addressing topics ad hoc”. The alphabet especially was highlighted as an example of this. The teachers believed that by having the alphabet displayed so visibly, the children would be curious and be able to use it actively and talk about it. Clearly, conversation is emphasised as a key remit for the kindergarten teachers at the Issoleien kindergarten. The teachers at the Lotus kindergarten did not recognise the interactive potential unaided. On the contrary, they were critical of the fact that a number of the artefacts at the Issoleien kindergarten were mounted so high on the wall as to prevent interactivity. They had believed the Norwegian kindergartens to be more child-centred, and the example of the ceiling-hung alphabet conflicted with this impression.

Objective of the activity

The documented artefacts on the walls and the teachers’ justifications for them offer indications as to the objective of the activity. Both of the teacher groups have clear mental pictures of what they wish to achieve from presentation of different artefacts, and consequently what they regard as their remit. One of the most striking aspects of the materials is that both teacher groups regard cultural formation of the child as the objective for the activity. However, there are both similarities and differences in their perspectives on what a child should be *formed* into and how.

The Lotus kindergarten - cultural formation to produce Chinese children

The teachers at the Lotus kindergarten particularly emphasise the importance of responsibility towards the community, of excelling as an individual and instilling good habits. The

Confucian origins are evident in what the teachers convey. Confucius, however, has often been credited with the Chinese kindergartens' scholasticism (Hsueh & Barton, 2005; Liu, Pan, & Sun, 2005; Spodek & Saracho, 2005; Yuejuan & Yan; Zhu & Zhang, 2008; Zhu & Zhou, 2005), yet the data materials show little evidence of this scholasticism. The moral tenets and view of the self, on the other hand, derive from Confucianism, and provide a backdrop for understanding the objective of the activity at the Lotus kindergarten. A focal ideology in Confucianism is its moral code. The principal virtues translate approximately as benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom/knowledge and honesty. Wisdom/knowledge are not innate, but are the result of stamina and persistent effort. They are not acquired of their own accord. A Chinese proverb conveys these tenets: *Unpolished jade does not a utensil make. Man must be educated before he can know righteousness.*

Confucius upholds *Ren* as the education required for benevolence or humanness (Zhao & Biesta, 2011). This is essentially a form of self-cultivation in which the self is assessed in relation to itself and to others to achieve improvement of character. According to Confucius, a natural element in self-cultivation is to seek out learning opportunities in order to achieve self-improvement. Comparing oneself with others is thus an important reference point in this personal improvement process. In relation to other people, Confucius emphasises responsibility. This was also clearly conveyed by the teachers at the Lotus kindergarten. All of these points in the direction of the Confucian view of self, which is to be understood relationally; in relation to one self, to the natural world and to other people. The Confucian doctrine sees knowledge as contributing to benevolence, rather than, primarily, making the individual more competent (Zhao & Biesta, 2011). At the Lotus kindergarten, the purpose of the activity appears to be to cultivate the child's self through adaptation to the community by instilling habits, hardening, and perfecting the individual and cultivating responsibility towards the community.

The prevailing objective at the Lotus kindergarten appears to be formative education in what it is to be Chinese. "We are busy and must make the most of our time". "We are good and must improve", "We must take responsibility for ourselves, for others and for our surroundings" and "We must stick together". However, there are more than just Confucian traditional values and norms at stake. The goals of continual improvement, polishing and hardening chime well with Chinese society today where each child has to fulfil the aspirations of two parents and four grandparents, and where competition is rife for the best schools and

jobs. It could be claimed that this is the formative ideal for survival in contemporary Chinese society, but also for the survival and progress of Chinese society as a whole. I believe that my findings demonstrate that this is what is borne out in the explicit, targeted actions by the kindergarten teachers. These findings are somewhat contradictory to Tobin et al.,(2009) who f asserted that Chinese kindergarten policies with their emphasis on excellent accomplishment, criticism as a means of self-improvement, models and exemplars and a faith in collective activities are a result of informal and implicit, unquestionable traditions.

The teachers at Issoleien kindergarten object, questioning whether Chinese kindergartens actually seek only to improve the gifted. Looking more closely at Confucian values and those conveyed by the kindergarten teachers, we find that it is perhaps not the gifted child in itself that is the ideal, but more the obligation of each Chinese citizen to improve continually, regardless of level. Talent and individual achievements no longer have negative connotations in Chinese kindergartens (Gu, 2000). On the contrary, individual talents are regarded as prosocial rather than antisocial. The teachers do not ban competition, as long as it follows socially accepted channels serving the collective good. Self-obsession is the real threat to collective interests; not competition (Gu, 2000). Competition boosts everyone's enthusiasm. The proverb *a soldier who is not willing to be a marshal is not a good soldier* is symptomatic of this way of thinking.

The Issoleien kindergarten – cultural formation of the autonomous and natural child

The teachers at Issoleien kindergarten stress that the artefacts on the walls of the kindergarten promote self-realisation, identity and belonging. The child's initiative, questioning and wonderment has to be given time. Through the child's spontaneous questions about the artefacts and the artefacts' reflection of the individual child, the formation of the self-reflexive child is the ideal most in evidence. The roots of the child-centred tradition of the Norwegian kindergarten may be obvious, (OECD, 2006; Strand, 2007; Wagner & Einarsdottir, 2006); but we can also find traces of Giddens' description of the late modern self (1996). In the late-modern society, powerful voices assert that because traditions and truths are being eroded, there is a need for the individual to not just acquire skills and knowledge in order to adapt to the changes, but also reflexively to reconstruct a self, described by Giddens as "The reflexive project of the self" (1996). The self-reflexive project regards identity as formed and created personally by the individual with little reference to intersubjective relationships or to a moral,

cultural or historical framework. Self-realisation is linked to authenticity and the norms for development of self-reside within the individual himself or herself.

The impression obtained from the study materials is, however, not unequivocal. There is also evidence in the data materials that the teachers at Issoleien kindergarten attach importance to self-development in relation to factors external to the child, such as in responsibility towards the natural world and in international solidarity. According to Charles Taylor (1989), self-knowledge requires a moral framework in which things take on meaning and in which questions arise about what is good and bad, what is valuable to do and not, and what is meaningful and what is trivial. This, argues Taylor, is still an expression of what he calls strong evaluations. According to the teachers at Issoleien kindergarten, the artefacts on the walls reflect choices as to what is important, and may therefore be regarded as conveying strong evaluations. These choices express both traditions and the priorities of the local activity. These are choices, which, according to the teachers, will influence the children.

If we look at the objective of the activity as conveyed by the Norwegian data, we find a quite different calm in relation to time than at the Lotus kindergarten, and the walls are not covered in artefacts as they are at the Lotus Kindergarten. Utilisation of space and time is less intensive. The process of being a person has to be given time. This is not a new phenomenon in Norwegian kindergartens, but the calm may also be seen as reflecting Norwegian society generally. In a highly developed welfare society and with relatively little competition for education and jobs, there is presumably no rush to develop a sense of community. The teachers at the Lotus kindergarten in fact also pointed this out. “There are not so many of you [in Norway], so you don’t have to work as hard to unite.” The artefacts and the preschool teachers’ explanations in the two kindergartens are both indicative of the activity’s cultural formation of the child. At the Lotus kindergarten, enculturation of the child as a Chinese citizen, that is, its formation as part of the community/the-collective ideal is what predominates. At the Issoleien kindergarten, however, what dominates appears to be formation of individuality in the child through the collective ideal.

The extent, to which the objectives discussed here are undergoing transition, was not the focus of this article. But according to Engeström, contradictions in an activity system will potentially create tensions that alter the objective of the activity (Engeström et al., 1999). We can only speculate as to whether the keen competition to gain a place in the best schools in China and the existing kindergarten evaluation system will ultimately create such high

tensions in the activity that the objective that emerged from this study is likely to change. Similarly, Norwegian kindergartens are now subject to a tension between the kindergarten's emphasis on self-development and the increasing pressure on the institutions to provide linguistic qualification and a foundation for schooling.

Looking ahead

This article indicates that teachers in both the Lotus and Issoleien kindergartens regard cultural formation as the purpose of their activity. However, we may discern the outlines of slightly different formative ideals. The child that emerges at the Issoleien kindergarten shows outlines of the natural and authentic child who is autonomous with rights and freedom of choice. At the Lotus kindergarten, the picture is of exemplary Chinese children with good habits, who continually better themselves and show responsibility for the greater good. Yet there appear to be contradictions in these ideals. Outsiders perceive what among insiders at the Issoleien kindergarten are described as natural, authentic and autonomous as random, unpolished and laissez-faire. What among insiders at the Lotus kindergarten is regarded as exemplary, is regarded by outsiders as elitism and singling out of the gifted. This has implications for research going forward. Formative ideals are equivocal, being intrinsically beset by contradictions and paradoxes. In comparative research especially, it will thus be imperative to employ a method that elicits multivocal interpretations. Moreover, studies of daily life in kindergartens will offer a more nuanced and complex picture of the formative ideals of kindergarten teachers than a study of national policy documents, which tend to convey common, transnational ideals.

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Kindergarten Teachers' educational ideals — tensions and contradictions

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This article is based upon a comparative study of one kindergarten in Norway and one in China. The aim of the article is to describe and discuss the kindergarten teachers' educational ideals in a cultural historical perspective. More specifically the article examines how the kindergarten teachers practice and understand the phenomena of cultivating children's interests, rights and autonomy. Through an analysis based upon video-elicited interviews with the two groups of kindergarten teachers, the article argues that the kindergarten teachers' practices and ideals can be interpreted as a complex hybridity of cultural traditions, rules and regulations and curriculum reforms. Implicit in the kindergarten teachers' practices there are cultural ideals of the individual child and what it is supposed to be and to become. Educational ideals are closely related to the objects of the activities in the kindergarten and what the teachers want to achieve. The discussion is based upon perspectives from the social study of childhood and cultural historical activity theory.

Keywords: Educational ideals, individualization, comparative study, video elicitation, Chinese kindergarten, Norwegian kindergarten, cultural historical activity theory.

Introduction

A professor in Early Childhood Education from China visited Norway. After several visits to different kindergartens and discussions with kindergarten teachers the professor was eager to comment her experiences and said: "I see that you are very concerned about seeing the individual child. When I have visited your kindergartens my reflections are that you see the emotional and social child. What about the cognitive dimensions of the child? Do you see them?"

This comment from the Chinese professor made me think about what it actually means to see the individual child in the Norwegian kindergarten, and can it have different meanings in the Chinese kindergarten?

Globally, children spend more and more time in institutions, and kindergartens are regarded as a "proper place" for childhood and children's everyday lives (Kjørholt, 2012, p. 1), so also in Norway and in China (Birkeland, 2012). Kindergartens are constituted as a space for cultural formation through cultural and political understandings of the child and the childhood (Birkeland, 2012; Kjørholt, 2012; Ødegaard, 2012).

The kindergarten teachers' practices and meaning making are related to cultural values and how these values influence cultural formation in kindergarten. Educational ideals are expressed in the everyday activities of the kindergarten teachers, but also through what they say and how they explain their own practice. "Cultural ideas/conceptions are shaped and take place in the everyday interactions. However, they refer to values and meanings far beyond the institutional space/room. Practices take place in between these levels; the everyday actions and routines and the social values and structures" (Gulløv & Højlund, 2003, p. 142).

Traditionally, comparative research and international studies describe big differences in educational practices and childhood paradigms between the east and the west (Alexander, Broadfoot, & Phillips, 1999; Pramling Samuelsson & Fleer, 2009; Rogoff, 2003; Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009; Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989). In spite of global diffusion of ideas within Early Childhood Education (Wollons, 2000), there seems to be an understanding that educational practices in western countries pay more attention to the individual child, individualized teaching and individualization whereas the eastern countries give more value to adjustment of the individual child to the collective group and collective teaching. This established dichotomy raises some important questions. Are we that different? What do we find when we look closer at the educational practices?

Children in any educational setting are supposed to learn something for a specific reason (Biesta, 2006). A cultural perspective on education starts with: What is it the kindergarten teachers want to achieve with the activities? This involves values and evaluations. However, educational practice seldom has only one objective. These objectives are expressed through practices and are closely related to what the child is and what it is supposed to become (Biesta, 2006).

Educational ideals are in other words closely related to constructions of childhood. Within the Social Studies of Childhood, childhood is problematized as a universal phenomenon (Jenks, 1982; Montgomery & Woodhead, 2003; Rogers & Rogers, 1992). Quite the contrary, childhood and the norms following childhood will differ in time and in space. Childhood is construct-

ed historically and culturally, and the ideas of childhood reflect cultural core values both historically and present (Nilsen, 2008, 2012).

This article is based upon a comparative qualitative study of one kindergarten in Norway (Glacier Buttercup Kindergarten) and one in China (Lotus Kindergarten). The empirical approach to daily practices makes an inquiry into how childhood is constituted by everyday practices in the kindergartens. More specifically the article will focus on how individualization is perceived and practiced in educational activities related to natural science. How do the kindergarten teachers practice and understand the phenomena of cultivating children's interests, rights and autonomy? The aim of the article is to describe and understand the kindergarten teachers' practices and educational ideals in a cultural historical perspective and as an expression of cultural similarities as well as differences.

Methodology

This article is based on a research project that aims at producing empirical knowledge about individualization in two kindergartens in a comparative perspective. The Lotus kindergarten in China and Glacier Buttercup Kindergarten in Norway were chosen as being not atypical kindergartens of urban Norway and urban China. Both kindergartens are considered as ordinary in quality, professional competence and size compared to their local standard. The Glacier Buttercup Kindergarten is situated in a Norwegian city and has four different age segregated groups. Totally there are 70 children in the age of 1—6 years. The teacher- child ratio in the oldest age group is 1:6. Lotus kindergarten is situated in one of China`s biggest cities. The kindergarten has 6 age segregated classes, two in each age group. There are 180 children in the age of 3—6 years. Each class has 25—35 children. The average teacher-child ratio is 1:15.

The data are produced by using video elicitation. 4 different videos from natural science activities in the two kindergartens were used as stimuli for meaning making in 6 semi-structured focus group interviews with the kindergarten teachers. Video elicitation is a variation on open-ended interviewing (Harper, 2012, p. 410), a non-directive method that favor collaboration between researcher and respondent. This way of producing data is inspired by polyvocal ethnography (Tobin et al., 2009; Tobin et al., 1989). The interviews opened up for giving the interviewee greater space for interpretation (Birkeland 2012 in print). All the videos were presented to both groups of kindergarten teachers. Each interview lasted from 1, 5 to 2, 5 hours. There were 4—8 teachers from each kindergarten attending the interviews. The situations that were videotaped involved some of the teachers, but not all.

The video material in the Glacier Buttercup Kindergarten consists of two videos. One video was made by Norwegian researchers[1] and is focusing upon children's outdoor activities and play in a huge outdoor area nearby the kindergarten[2]. The other video was made by the kindergarten teachers and show different kinds of theme activities[3]. The video material from Lotus kindergarten consists of two videotapes as well. One video is made by the researchers and consists of activities called corner activities[4]. The second video is made by the teachers in a special science kindergarten and is showing a model teaching within collective teaching[5].

Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) is used as an analytical approach in order to interpret the practices of the teachers (Kaptelinin, 2005; Leont'ev, 2002). Important concepts within CHAT are activity, action and operation. These concepts represent three different levels in the activity system. Activity refers to collective developed patterns of actions that are rooted historically (Stetsenko, 2005). In the local kindergarten the great institution's history can be recalled in the physical frames, artifacts, rules, routines and principals, but also in external conditions and ideas.

An activity is historically shaped in order to solve a collectively or societally developed problem of a kind that cannot be solved by an individual action (Leont'ev, 2002). Furthermore Leont'ev states that every activity is object-oriented and driven by its motive; consequently there is no such thing as an unmotivated activity (Eriksson, Orlander, & Jedemark, 2004). Individual

[1] The video was made in cooperation with Anne Hammer at Bergen University College.

[2] This situation is dominated by children`s free play and have a low structure. The teachers have not focused on a specific theme in advance. The children are staying outdoors in the natural environment for several hours and are encouraged by the teachers to be curious, choose activities, explore and ask questions.

[3] They were asked to videotape activities they consider as natural science activities. They did this filming in a period of five months. The videotape was edited by the teachers to a 30 minutes videotape consisting of 14 different episodes or learning situations. Examples of episodes are "the frog", "the water", "the fish" and "the volcano". The teachers in the Glacier Buttercup kindergarten describe theme activity as an activity that can last for some hours and even for several days or weeks. The whole group of 10—18 children at different ages will usually be involved. There will be an introduction by the teacher, before the children are encouraged to explore in smaller groups or by themselves. The theme work will involve many different methods like arts, music, drama and literature. The summing up is not documented in the video and seem not to be as relevant.

[4] Corner learning is defined as a daily activity that lasts for approximately 30—45 minutes. There are 10—15 different activities in the classroom related to natural science. Many of the activities are based on doing experiments of different kinds. The artefacts are chosen and made by the teachers. The children are free to choose the activity themselves. They explore and document their findings. In the end there will be a sharing and summing up in the plenary.

[5] Collective teaching is described by the kindergarten teachers as a daily activity that will last for approximately 30 minutes. There are 25—35 children of the same age in the group. The teacher introduces the topic "turning" and demonstrates certain points. Then the teacher asks questions and let the children explore for themselves in 10 minutes. The children are stimulated to find different solutions and also to demonstrate their findings to other children. In the end there is a discussion of hypothesis and a summing up by the teacher. This video is now published in China and is evaluated as an excellent example of collective teaching.

teachers act in collective practices, communities, and institutions (Engeström, Punamäki-Gitai, & Miettinen, 1999). This means that teachers' actions can be interpreted as expressions of cultural and historical traditions, routines, norms and evaluations in the kindergarten (Fleer, Hedegaard, Bang, & Hviid, 2008; Fleer, Hedegaard, & Tudge, 2009; Gulløv & Højlund, 2003).

The activity is according to Leont'ev an abstraction (Leont'ev, 2002), and cannot be observed directly. The activity is manifested through goal-directed actions. These actions have to be identified in the analysis by asking the question of what is going on. Operations are the material conditions for the actions, as for instance architecture, the teacher-child ratio and educational equipment. However, operations are also automatic actions taking form as traditions, routinized actions, norms and evaluations (Engeström et al., 1999). The kindergarten teachers' actions are expressions of conscious choices as well as more unconscious, routinized actions. By this we can say that the kindergarten teachers act consciously and unconsciously in accordance with expectations, permissions and what is made possible in a special activity system. The teachers try to achieve what they see as their task and to realize the motive of the kindergarten (Eriksson et al., 2004). Therefore, the question of why something is going has to be addressed in the analysis. What do the teachers see as their task? What kind of child and childhood is constructed through the teachers' explanations?

Cultivating the interest of the child

The article is based on findings in the video materials and the interviews. In the selection of data for this article I have specifically concentrated on identifying the goals of the activity and the rules and regulations of these goals. A major finding in both kindergartens has been the goal of cultivating the interest of the child. What this means to the teachers and how it is done as well as the regulations of this goal will be elaborated in the following.

Lotus Kindergarten

Following the interest of the child

The goal of the different activities related to natural science in Lotus kindergarten is expressed in many ways by the teachers as cultivating the interest of the children. They underline that corner activities are the most important activity in that respect. The corners, that's the time when the children are free. They want to do such things. We do not need to give them much precise knowledge. At least they get an interest in the topic and the activity. When the children enter into primary school they cannot learn science if they have no interest.

Another teacher problematizes this concept of following children's interest: we try to awaken the interest of the children, but then we go back to what we planned to do. The interviewer: Why? The teacher: We have a cognition preference. It is not enough to arouse the children's interest and let them experience pure happiness. We arouse their interest and then we return to what we want them to know or develop. This teacher clearly states that raising the interest of the child is just a starting point before the teacher will continue with the topic as planned. There is a clear goal for the activity and the goal is set by the teacher.

The teachers in Lotus Kindergarten are also questioning the degree of freedom in the corner activities: I feel they (the teachers in Glacier Buttercup Kindergarten) cultivate children's interest. The children know what they want to do and they follow their own will to do it. That is important. We seldom care about that. Children in corner activities can be free, but all the materials and settings are created and prepared by the teachers. So it is not so free. The teachers are very clear about the limitations of children`s freedom. Artefacts and activities are all structured by the teachers. When the children arrive in the morning the content of the corner activities is decided by the teachers.

The importance of learning specific things is related to the future of the children and the importance of being outstanding in the Chinese society: We have a large population and many children. If your child wants to be outstanding you must add a lot of things she has to learn. There are different ways of being outstanding. In China, the way of being outstanding is to get high score in examination. To be good in climbing trees have no value. The teacher here refers to the long tradition with state examination that is still a living tradition in China. At the same time she points to the future where every child has to compete in order to get a high position in society. Situated in this cultural and historical context climbing trees have no value.

The teachers are also very concerned about the near future when the child starts school. Primary teachers don't approve of children who have many ideas. They will let those who sit silently be the group leader. The children will feel that to sit silent is the good student, not to do so is bad. Teachers will give opportunities to those whom they think are good children or group leaders or high score children. We all know the self-fulfilling prophecy. Children will be more competent if the teacher thinks they are competent. That's a virtuous circle. If a child wants to enter into such a circle, then he must learn more.

The reflections among the kindergarten teachers in Lotus kindergarten clearly reveal the pressure on children as well as on kindergarten teachers in China today. The guidelines tell them to be child- centred. On the other hand the teachers and parent know the demands in school as well as in the overall society.

How to follow the interest of the children

When the teachers in Lotus kindergarten compare their own practice with the Norwegian teachers they

conclude: The two ways of cultivating the children's interest is both similar and different. The difference is that they care about the individual child, taking them outside in nature to find something to be interested in. They are individualized and do not give the children the opportunity to share. The Chinese way of exploration activity is to give everyone the opportunity to explore in the corners, to find something of interest and finally to share the experiences with the other children through communication. That's the Chinese way; we like to learn from others while they encourage every child to have their own idea. We Chinese tend to learn from others' inventions or experiences and call this for "standing on the giant's shoulder". The teachers express great pride in this traditional way of learning. They support individual exploration and individual ways of trying out their ideas. However, they do not stop here. They continue to try out these ideas in joint activity and construction of knowledge.

This idea of sharing ideas and trying out hypothesis was very clear when observing the videos. Every corner activity ended with a joint discussion where the children analysed their experiences and hypothesis. When the teachers in Lotus kindergarten commented the videos from Glacier Buttercup kindergarten they supported the idea of exploration, but the conditions prevented them from doing this. We do not really give our children the opportunity to explore by themselves. We have to reach our goal in 30 minutes so the children have little time for exploration. Afterwards the children are supposed to share their experiences from the exploration. We are informed by the head teacher all the time that we should spend more time to discuss the children's experiences.

The matter of time is also reasoned as a way of being efficient so that the children can learn as much as possible. They comment the Norwegian videos by saying that the Norwegian working method will be time consuming: The Norwegian way of working use a lot of time. Here, we will not give the children so long time to explore..... Then the time use is shortened, efficient and we can reach the same result. The teachers are concerned about the importance of being efficient here and now in order to learn as much as possible, and they question the practice in Glacier Buttercup Kindergarten. They find that the children use a lot of time to explore on their own and to wonder about things in nature, but there seems to be very little time to reflect and analyse. All the corner activities in Lotus kindergarten ended up with a plenary sharing experience, analysing and a joint summing up.

Although the teachers in the Lotus kindergarten say that it is difficult to follow the interests of the individual child, they express great sincerity and care for every child. We have this kind of training that we care about how each child obtains an idea. We have this responsibility. In this they express a great concern about cultivating learning habits and the teachers' obligations to see that the curriculum plans are achieved.

Rules and regulations

The teachers express great ambivalence to the changing ideals in the Chinese kindergarten: Now we think of how to create better environment in the classroom in order to make the children interact autonomously so that they can explore. This will arouse their interest. The rise of interest is strongly connected to autonomy and freedom to choose. At the same time they underline the difficulties in this change of curriculum, ideology and practice. We agree with the Norwegian teachers, but it is difficult for us to do this. We try to balance. We cannot always follow children's interest. What the teacher choose is most important. In corner activities the children can choose according to interest... But for us teachers, it's difficult to follow children`s interests.

One of the traditions the teachers point to is the organizing of time in learning lessons: Cultivating children's interest is popular to say, but that is difficult within 30 minutes lessons. The tension here seems to be the organizing of time with 30 minutes lessons. Within this interval the children have to choose activity, explore, document their findings, get reorganized in a plenary, share their findings and conclude. The teachers, however, do not question this way of organizing, but seem to take it for granted. This is the way they traditionally organize time, and neither the teachers, nor the children disturb this way of organizing time.

Another practical condition the teachers point to is the teacher- child ratio. When watching the video from Glacier Buttercup Kindergarten one of the teachers in Lotus Kindergarten says: Their goals of the activities out in nature seem to be awakening of the children's interest and to value the individual child. That is impossible for us who have so many children in one class. Another teacher point to the fact that although she has only one child at home she still will have difficulty with following the interest of the child: I have one child in my home. Still I find it difficult to do this. When she is asked why, she points to the future of being a Chinese. For I have to cultivate him to adapt to the Chinese way of education. He will stay in China. If he will go to Norway, I would like to cultivate him the Norwegian way.

This quote reveals many of the contradictions these teachers face. The educational reforms as a top-down reform ask for a change in the teachers' attitude, and the teachers are ambivalent about this idea. The ambivalence is not only due to practical conditions, but also to tradition and cultural values.

Following the interest of children is an issue of concern for the Lotus kindergarten teachers. This is mainly connected to free choices among activities the teacher has organized for them. Also they express great concern about children trying out their hypothesis and arguments and analysis. The teachers do not seem to be concerned about individual children having agency and influence on the organizing of time, space and artefacts in use. Difficulties in following children`s interests are explained with traditions, parents` expectations and practical conditions.

Glacier Buttercup Kindergarten

Following the interests of the child

The teachers in Glacier Buttercup Kindergarten express over and again that the child is a curious and wondering human being. At the same time this is expressed as an ideal. We want the children to explore nature and wonder about it. We think the child do this automatically. According to the teachers this should structure their working methods by giving the children great opportunities to discover nature by themselves. By being in nature, the child will discover and wonder about all things. Still, they are open to the fact that not all children are curious and wonder about nature. The teachers have to be good models for the children by being curious and wondering. Then the children will develop this ability according to the teachers. We want to use some activities structured by the teachers so that the teachers have to wonder about nature together with the children. Then we hope the teachers later can see the emergent questions and curiosity of the children and join in. The teachers in Glacier Buttercup kindergarten seems to emphasize the importance of cultivating children`s curiosity in general.

One of the teachers in Lotus kindergarten is critical to the practice in the Norwegian kindergarten where the children seem to follow their own interest with little interference from the teacher. The children seem to have a long time to explore, but short time in sharing the experiences and communicating their knowledge. The children seem to investigate on their own and spend little time with the teacher and other children. This teacher is pointing to the difference between exploring and to verbalize the exploration. At the same time she is critical to the practice in her own kindergarten where the children have little time to explore. The teachers in Glacier Buttercup Kindergarten are concerned about developing children's curiosity and ability to ask questions and less on analyzing and having joint construction of knowledge. Being autonomous individuals outdoors in nature is related to the traditional Norwegian way of living and with the national heroes as lonesome men exploring nature on their own (Gullestad, 1997).

How to follow the interest of the children

The teachers in Glacier Buttercup Kindergarten emphasize the importance for children to have plenty of time in order to make individual choices and to follow their own interest. This is in accordance with the Framework Plan (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2011) stating that the children`s wondering ought to be strengthened. The teachers emphasize the importance of children asking questions more than finding answers to their questions. This is quite different from the teachers in the Lotus kindergarten. They are concerned about how the children can verbalize their experiences and develop hypothesis and concepts. In other words, the answers to children`s questions are highly relevant. The teachers in the Glacier Buttercup kindergarten seem to put this responsibility to a greater extent on the child. It is most important to give experiences so that the children can find out for themselves.

The teachers in the Glacier Buttercup Kindergarten express in many different ways that the children should follow their individual interest, explore on their own and have a freedom to choose activities. The teachers in the Lotus kindergarten comment this: the children seem to do what they want to do and the working method seems to be very individualistic. They ask: Where is the teacher? They also seem to assess the teachers as failures when the children show a lack of interest. If the children don't feel this is interesting, the teachers seem to give up. They just let them go. On the other hand, when the teachers in the Glacier Buttercup Kindergarten comment the corner activities in Lotus Kindergarten they emphasize that the teachers in the Lotus kindergarten seem to have an individualistic attitude. It is sad that there is very little communication and dialog between the children. Both groups of teachers seem to evaluate the others as working individualistic, and this does not seem to be highly evaluated by either group.

The teachers in Glacier Buttercup Kindergarten are reluctant to use the terminology of teaching and teacher. When the children show interest, we can tell them things and they can learn from it. I think it is most important that the children wonder about nature by themselves. This teacher does not question the teacher's responsibility to awake the interest of children. It is more a question of following up when the children show interest. The obligation of this teacher to let children choose activity according to interest is very strong and corresponds with the ideas and regulations in the Framework Plan.

The kindergarten teachers in the Glacier Buttercup kindergarten say that we also introduce the topic and follow different steps in the educational activities. We decide what is going to be focused when we go outdoors. The teachers in the Lotus kindergarten, however, point to a huge difference in the teachers approach to the educational activity. I don't think they will prepare every sentence like us. What I will say is designed before the situation and I think their activities should be more designed. Their work is more organic and not so organized. The element of time and effectiveness is obvious in their reflection about the Norwegian teachers. It seems to be some waste of time. They also search for the teacher and teaching by asking: Why cannot the teachers teach? Whereas the Norwegian teachers hesitate to use the words teacher and teaching, the Chinese teachers seem to have other connotations to these words and use them without hesitating.

Rules and regulations

The teachers in Glacier Buttercup kindergarten emphasize the Framework Plan as an important guideline. However, they do not problematize this to any

degree. Rather, they point to the Framework Plan as a support in their everyday practice.

The teachers are fully aware of the tradition of the Norwegian kindergarten. The teachers seem to be proud of this tradition and do not question it.

The teachers in Glacier Buttercup Kindergarten are not so concerned about the future of the children and how to make them fit into the demands of society. To see that children's free choices and democratic rights fit to the Norwegian society is not a topic among the Norwegian teachers.

Discussion

Traces of motives of activity

In the analysis we can see that the teachers have clear opinions of the goals of the action. Both groups of teachers argue for the importance of following the interests of the child. However, the arguments differ. How is this related to the idea of individualization (Vandenbroeck, 2006)? Individualization may be considered as a question of how to educate each individual for the society. Furthermore individualization can be a question of individually constructed knowledge in the education of citizens participating in society. Finally individualization can be expressed as a kind of neo-liberal individuality where the meaning of individualization is framed by an idea of individual competition and choices in a society for the individual (Vandenbroeck & Bie, 2006).

We can find traces of all these aspects of individualization in the practices and thinking of the kindergarten teachers. The Chinese teachers are concerned about preparing the individual for the society. The pressure on individuals in contemporary China gives the teachers a duty to prepare every child as much as possible in order to manage the demands of the society and to adjust to these demands. We can also trace the neo-liberal idea about the importance for the individual child in China to compete in order to survive in a society where the welfare system has been dissolved and become more and more individualized (Hansen & Svarverud, 2010).The teachers are also concerned about the importance of individually constructed knowledge. The children are supposed to develop their own ability to think, analyse and to make hypothesis. This is important in order to improve children's learning abilities.

The childhood ideals related to these goals are ideals of the outstanding child, the competitive child and the performative child. The teachers in Lotus Kindergarten also construct the child as the cognitive child with analytic abilities and problem solving through the scientific method. The teachers argue with history and traditions as well as with the need of the society in the future. The outstanding and competitive child is important in order to survive in the Chinese society with a large population, hard competition and a tough examination system(Yuejuan & Yan, 2008). The child needs to be outstanding. Still, there is a critique among the kindergarten teachers towards the child constructed among school teachers as being outstanding in a limited sense. This child is not supposed to be critical and have many ideas. On the contrary it is obedient, quiet and follows the directions of the teachers. The kindergarten teachers are critical to this ideal of a child. They clearly want to develop the children's own ideas and thinking. However, they find this difficult. Also contemporary research within the early childhood education field in China point to the dilemma many kindergarten teachers are facing today with curriculum reforms influenced by western discourses about children`s rights, child centered curriculum and constructivism on one hand and Chinese cultural traditions voiced by parents and teachers on the other (Jingbo & Elicker, 2005; Rao & Li, 2008; Tobin et al., 2009; Tobin et al., 1989; Yuejuan & Yan, 2008).

The teachers in Glacier Buttercup kindergarten do not express the same concern about educating the individual for the society. However, they emphasize their duty to follow the UN convention of the rights of children and the Norwegian Act of kindergarten both emphasizing children's rights to participate and to be heard. The ideas of the neo-liberal society in order to follow the rights of the individuals in the society for the individual are dominant, so indirectly they are preparing the children to manage the liberal society. The Norwegian teachers argue more from an ideological point of view saying that the children have a right to be heard due to the UN children's convention, and also in a view of the ideal/normal child being curious and explorative wanting to learn. The Chinese teachers do not argue with such a view of children. If the children are not curious, it is more due to bad teaching and as a consequence the teacher has to improve her teaching.

The teachers in the Glacier Cup kindergarten express the ideal child as autonomous, curious and able to make choices. The individualization of educational activities is constructed in order to cultivate this ideal child. The teachers emphasize the importance of children's freedom and rights to choose. They seem to think that this happens automatically. What the children experience is not so much of the teachers concern. In a way they seem to have done their job when letting the children out in nature and answer occasional questions from individual children. The right to be autonomous and find your own way without too much interruption from the teacher seems to be the ideal (Clark, Kjørholt, & Moss, 2005). The teachers discuss to a very small extent how these abilities are needed in the society and as such can be considered as adjustments to the needs of the society. Rather they consider it as a strategy against the school culture. To have a good childhood here and now seems to be the most important goal.

Contradictions and tensions — new motives of activity

Major curriculum reforms in Early Childhood Education in Norway (Kunnskapsdepartementet,

2006, 2011) as well as in China (MOE 2001), reveal similarities in childhood paradigm based on the individualized child with agency and rights. The Curriculum Guidelines for Kindergarten Education Practice (2001) in China emphasizes children's rights, child-centered pedagogy and constructivism. The curriculum reforms are heavily influenced by Western ideas and mark a shift in the educational philosophy and the object of the institutions (Yuejuan & Yan, 2008). When the communists came into power in 1949, the ideology was influenced by the Soviet Union and focused on the education of the socialist worker (Gu, 2000; Zhu & Zhang, 2008). To love the communist party and to shape the socialist citizen is now removed from the curriculum guidelines. The kindergarten shall still contribute to shape the Chinese human being with love for the nation.

The Framework Plans in Norway from 2006 and 2011 emphasize the rights of the individual child, the right to express her/his opinion and to have influence. The Norwegian kindergarten (barnehage)[6] has developed from two different institutional traditions; the day care institutions and the kindergartens. The object of the day care institutions was first and foremost to give care and protection against danger to children of the working class parents (Korsvold, 1998). Parallel to this institution, was the development of Frobel kindergartens where the object was cultural formation of the children of middle class parents through the educational milieu .These two institutions merged in 1975 with a joint law and a joint name, kindergarten. The activity system was thus constituted by juxtaposed objects like care, providing a work force, cultural formation, social prevention and compensation.

To claim that the goals in the curriculum plans and white papers are reflected in the goals in the everyday practices in kindergarten is, however, too simple and is documented in the findings. When looking isolated at white papers the similarities can be stretched. Confronted with the teachers' practices we find a more complex picture with tensions and contradictions. Most clearly we can see this in the Chinese kindergarten. The teachers express a clear discrepancy between the intentions in the top-down curriculum reform and the expectations from parents, school and society. Also they find the ideas in the curriculum reform contradictory to their own competence as teachers. Finally, the teachers are concerned about the western ideology of individualized teaching combined with the teacher- child ratio in the Chinese kindergarten. All these discrepancies give the teachers a hard struggle and create tensions in the everyday practice.

Also the Norwegian teachers struggle with the tension between their traditional way of practice and the new curriculum reforms telling them to have a greater focus on learning and focusing on kindergarten as the first step in lifelong learning. This is specifically articulated in the teachers' strong arguments of not being teachers and not wanting to teach.

The motives of the kindergarten are changing and we can see tensions in the teachers' practices. In the Chinese kindergarten we can see a tension between formal teaching and more emphasize on listening to children and follow their interest. In the Norwegian kindergarten we can see tensions between the tradition of being child centred to now having more focus on learning and education. How do the teachers solve these tensions? The teachers in Glacier Buttercup Kindergarten seem to object to the new motive and want to be a counter culture to the demands of society. Also the teachers in Lotus Kindergarten problematize the new expectations in the top-down reforms telling the teachers to do less formal teaching, listening to children and follow the interests of the child. They express an ambivalence towards the new goals since tradition, expectations from parents and future school make it difficult to follow these goals.

In spite of curriculum reforms in both countries the cultural values and traditions are still prevailing. The kindergarten teachers' practices and ideals can be interpreted as a complex hybridity of personal life histories, material conditions, cultural traditions and curriculum reforms. Implicit in the kindergarten teachers' practices there are cultural assumptions of the individual child, what it is supposed to be and what it is to become.

The motive of an activity system will be changing over time, mostly due to tensions and contradictions within the activity system (Engeström et al., 1999). This article is discussing the teachers' educational ideals bound in time and place. However, the results also give traces of history and cultural traditions and point to tensions that may have consequences for the future.

Acknowledgement

This study is carried through thanks to the work and support from colleagues at East China Normal University, specifically Dr. He Min at the department of preschool teacher education.

The analysis is carried out based on data produced by Dr. He Min at East China Normal University, Assistant professor Anne Hammer at Bergen University College and Associate Professor Asta Birkeland at Bergen University College.

[6] Kindergarten (*Barnehage* in Norwegian and *You er Yuan* in Chinese).

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Образовательные идеалы воспитателей детского сада: конфликты и противоречия

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В настоящей статье, сопоставляющей один норвежский и один китайский детский сад, описываются и обсуждаются в культурно-исторической перспективе образовательные идеалы воспитателей детского сада. Иными словами, целью исследования было выявить, как воспитатели понимают и реализуют на практике идеи, касающиеся взращивания детских интересов, детских прав и самостоятельности. Опираясь на интервью с двумя группами воспитателей детских садов, проводившихся с привлечением видеозаписей (video elicited interviews), автор выдвигает предположение о том, что практики и идеалы воспитателей, работающих в дошкольных учреждениях, можно представить в виде сложного сплава культурных традиций, правил, нормативов и образовательных реформ. Также сквозь эти практики просматриваются культурно сформированные идеалы ребенка, каким он должен быть и каким должен вырасти. Образовательные идеалы тесно связаны с предметами деятельности в детском саду и с тем, чего воспитатели хотят добиться. Обсуждение проводится с опорой на социальные исследования детства, культурно-историческую концепцию и теорию деятельности.

Ключевые слова: образовательные идеалы, индивидуализация, сравнительные исследования, метод видео-наблюдения (video elicitation), китайский детский сад, норвежский детский сад, культурно-историческая концепция, теория деятельности.

Paper 3: Birkeland, Å. (2019). Temporal settings in Kindergarten: a lens to trace historical and current cultural formation ideals? In J*ournal of European Early Childhood Education and Care Research*, 27(1), 53-67.

Research in Comparative and International Education
Volume 8 Number 4 2013
www.wwwords.co.uk/RCIE

RESEARCH IN
Comparative & International
Education

Research Dilemmas Associated with Photo Elicitation in Comparative Early Childhood Education Research

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ABSTRACT Photo elicitation has become an important method to produce data in qualitative research. There is quite an extensive literature indicating the benefits of photo elicitation in order to facilitate collaboration in meaning making between researcher and the interviewee. This article addresses dilemmas associated with using photo elicitation in a comparative research project focusing on kindergartens in Norway and in China. The article discusses dilemmas associated with the process of taking photos and selecting those to be used in the interview. Furthermore, the article reflects upon dilemmas in relation to positioning of the researcher, the interpreter and the kindergarten teachers in the interviews. Finally the dilemma of the agency of the pictures is discussed. The article argues for the importance of discussing these dilemmas specifically in cross-cultural research with presumably large cultural differences as China and Norway. Furthermore the article emphasises the importance of using both insider teachers and outsider teachers in interpretation of the photos in comparative research in order to disturb the taken for granted interpretations.

The real voyage of discovery consists of not seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.
(Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*)

Introduction

John Dewey lived in China for two years from 1919 until 1921, studying Chinese culture and education. During his stay he was not simply collecting exotic stories and pictures that might impress his grandchildren (Wang, 2007, p. 74). He was interested in learning how to understand China on its own terms. China's impact on Dewey is clear in his reflections upon his experiences there: 'It is a good thing we can't visit the rest of the universe in space. Our own habits and beliefs would shrink too much' (p. 75).

This story about Dewey in China reveals some important points related to doing cross-cultural educational research. Firstly, it raises the issue of focusing too heavily on the exotic and different aspects of another culture. It may be very tempting to capture the exotic with the camera lens in order to impress the home audience. Secondly, it highlights the importance of understanding another culture on its own terms and not viewing it through 'Eurocentric' lenses (as far as possible). Finally, it emphasises the fact that, in trying to understand the unfamiliar, our own traditional habits and beliefs are questioned rather than simply taken for granted; or in Dewey's words, our habits will shrink (Wang, 2007, p. 75). These points, among others, have to be kept in mind when using photo elicitation as a methodological approach in a comparative cultural analysis; in addition, they can serve as arguments for the poly-vocal interpretation of photos. In this article, these arguments will be further elaborated upon.

 http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/rcie.2013.8.4.455

The point of departure of this article is the research project 'Individualization as Educational Ideals – a comparative study of kindergarten teachers' practices'. The focal points of this study are two kindergartens, one in China and one in Norway. In connection with my work in early childhood teacher education in Norway, I have collaborated with Chinese universities and kindergartens for many years. I have visited China several times on short-term teacher exchanges and also longer visits with my students. From my introduction to Chinese kindergartens in 2004 to the present, I have visited more than 40 different Chinese kindergartens and my camera has never been far away. This has not been the case when, as a teacher trainer, I have visited 8 to 12 different Norwegian kindergartens each year.

My reasons for taking photos in the Chinese kindergartens have changed over the years. At first, I was mostly interested in documenting 'having been there' by taking exotic photos for the family album and for my colleagues. The differences between China and Norway were certainly highlighted in my choices of motifs. Gradually, I began to focus on the narratives in the photos and I became convinced that the photos could tell me something important and something different from what people were telling me. My attitude was still rather casual, however, as I tended to 'Let the pictures talk for themselves'. Recently, I have become more reluctant to believe that the photos speak for themselves; and if they do, they speak with many voices. Photos from everyday practices in kindergartens are not realistic and objective representations as such, but need interpretations (Pink, 2007). This was my point of departure when I started to use photo elicitation in my PhD work.

This article addresses the issue of using photo elicitation in comparative research in the field of early childhood education. There is quite an extensive literature indicating the benefits of photo elicitation to facilitate collaboration in meaning making between researcher and the interviewee (Pink, 2007; Margolis, 2011; Harper, 2012). These benefits are well documented. However, the dilemmas associated with using this method in a comparative research project focusing on kindergartens in Norway and in China are numerous. So what are the dilemmas related to the process of taking photos and selecting those to be used in interviews with kindergarten teachers? What kind of dilemmas can be identified in relation to the positions of the researcher, the interpreter and the kindergarten teachers in the interviews? These questions will be addressed in this article.

Following a short description of photo elicitation as a method, I will describe the use of photo elicitation in comparative research. I will then identify and discuss some of the dilemmas encountered in using this method in my own comparative research project.

Photo Elicitation as Methodological Approach

Photo elicitation, the use of photographs during the interview process, was first described as a research method, 'photo-interviewing', by John Collier (Collier & Collier, 1986, pp. 99-125). The term 'photo elicitation' has become current in the last decade. It has been described as a variation on open-ended interviewing (Harper, 2012, p. 410); a non-directive method that favoured collaboration between researcher and respondent. In open-ended methods, an interview becomes an exchange that, although initiated and guided by the researcher, is intended to grant an interviewee greater space for personal interpretation and responses (Lapenta, 2011, pp. 201-213). In photo elicitation, this exchange is stimulated and guided by images.

The method has been included among other established research methods and methodologies in anthropology (Pink, 2007; Rose, 2012), sociology (Harper, 2012), education (Tobin et al, 1989, 2009), and cultural studies. The general consensus in this literature is that the use of images and video clips in the interview process elicits deep and interesting talk (Harper, 2012, p. 23) about subjects otherwise too complex to explore (Pink, 2007; Rose, 2012). According to Harper (2012), the use of photo elicitation in such dissimilar fields of research as anthropology, communication, education, sociology, cultural studies, ethnic studies, and industrial management indicates 'a common desire to understand the world as defined by the subject' (p. 23).

In the new anthropology in the late 1980s, ethnography was conceived of as fiction and the centrality of subjectivity in the production of knowledge was emphasised. Visual images have become an increasingly accepted approach in ethnography as it has been recognised that

ethnographic film or photography was neither more nor less subjective or objective than written texts. The visual was considered a reflexive approach to ethnographic fieldwork methodology (Pink, 2007).

According to Banks (2007), visual methodology allows us to be more exploratory, which is in accordance with the inquiring spirit of ethnographic investigation. When linked with interviews, photo elicitation is a way of extending the standard method. Photos have an open-ended nature and, by resisting single interpretations, they can give rise to a range of alternative paths of inquiry. They are never intended to serve as documentation in the sense of 'the real representation'. Instead, photo elicitation leaves the participants free to object to the way they are represented.

The nature of the method is also described as intrinsically collaborative (Banks, 2007; Pink, 2007). In the conversation between the researcher and the interviewee, the meaning of the images can be explored and different interpretations elaborated upon. Such discussions are not intended primarily as a path to the fusion of horizons (Gadamer, 2004), but are rather a means of opening up the interview to opportunities for subjective and negotiated interpretations, descriptions and meanings (Lapenta, 2011, pp. 210-211). Lapenta stresses the heuristic and collaborative potential of photo elicitation. Since the photographs have communicative properties, looking at the images during the interview constitutes a joint interpretative event. The use of photo, according to Lapenta (2011), causes a breakdown in the traditional interview by adding an additional communicative element. The aim is to stimulate a rich exchange of information.

Photo Elicitation in Comparative Research

In the course of the history of comparative educational research, it is possible to identify different motives for doing comparative studies. The most obvious motive has been to borrow ideas and practices from one educational system for use in another. This borrowing of educational ideas is problematic because it often ignores the cultural and structural differences between educational systems. With the increasing influence of supranational organisations like the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), UNESCO and the World Bank, there is a growing interest in identifying ways in which comparative studies can help to predict the forms of early childhood education that can be efficient and sustainable. The purpose of these studies has mainly been to trace best practices and to establish benchmarks (Wollons, 2000; Winther-Jensen, 2004; Spodek & Saracho, 2005). The former aim, to identify best practices, is definitely questionable. We must ask: on the basis of what criteria are such evaluations done? And when educational systems in different parts of the world are involved, we may also ask: whose criteria for best practices are used?

Globalisation does not only create pressure towards the same educational practices globally, but does also create new pressures towards local autonomy (Crossley & Watson, 2003). This leads to an increased focus on the local effects of globalisation and contributes to the renewed legitimacy of qualitative modes of research that emphasise grassroots fieldwork, ethnography and interpretive or hermeneutic paradigms. As a consequence, there is a new call for micro-level studies of education in context within comparative research (Cheng, 1998; Crossley & Watson, 2003; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Moss, 2007). In the field of comparative education, we can now see glimpses of a new approach involving a more small-scale, ethnographic and poly-vocal focus (Tobin et al, 1989, 2009; Alexander et al, 1999; Crossley & Watson, 2003; Tobin, 2005). The method, as well as the purpose, of this research is different from the large-scale studies.

One of the most widely recognised studies which takes this approach is *Preschool in Three Cultures: Japan, China and the United States* (Tobin et al, 1989). The study attracted considerable attention due to both the insights into the three cultures provided and the unique methodology. The method was formally called 'video-cued multivocal ethnography', but is also referred to as 'reflexive comparative ethnography'. The method was further elaborated upon in a study of historical change entitled *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited* (Tobin et al, 2009).

The method draws upon several sources. Firstly, it is inspired by anthropologist's use of film as a starting point for interviews concerning the meaning of sequences (Connor et al, 1986; Spindler, 1987; Fujita & Sano, 1988; Anderson-Levitt, 2002, all cited in Tobin et al, 1989, 2009). The method is also inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) and the concepts of multivocality, hybridity and

dialogism. In their project (Tobin et al, 1989, 2009), the kindergarten principals, teachers, and parents, as well as the teacher educators, all comment on the same videos.

The steps in the method used by Tobin et al (1989, 2009) can be described as follows:

1. Videotape a day in preschool in each culture.
2. Edit the videotape down to a 20 minute stimulus tape. The videotape was used in the interviews as a projective device and as a field of non-verbal interview questions.
3. Show this edited tape to different stakeholders: first to the teacher whose classroom was filmed.
4. Show it to other staff at the preschool.
5. Show it to early childhood educators at other preschools around the country.
6. Finally show it to early childhood educators in the other two countries (Tobin et al, 2009).

The main idea of developing this method was to answer questions like: How do preschools in Japan, China and the United States of America (USA) reflect and impart their culture's core beliefs? Since Tobin et al were ethnographers, their primary interest was in meaning. They needed a research method that would enable them to capture what goes on in the kindergartens, but more importantly to access the meanings behind the practices. When the kindergarten teachers commented on the videos, they also revealed something about themselves and their values and cultural beliefs. Tobin et al wanted to expand the traditional ethnographic approach by giving power to the informants. They believed that the informants' interpretations, as well as the anthropologists, should be given a voice. Their research project has had a formative influence on my project.

Individualisation as an Educational Ideal – a comparative study

In this research project I have taken a small-scale ethnographic approach to comparative research. Using a comparative approach, I explore how the ideals of individualisation are constituted in preschool teachers' practices in kindergartens in Norway and China. The questions that are raised are: What do the kindergarten teachers want to achieve?; What do the kindergarten teachers consider to be an ideal child?; and What is a child supposed to be and to become? I have sought to identify different expressions of these questions in the kindergarten teacher's practices and discussions, and in the artefacts displayed in the kindergarten.

The exploration of these questions will help to expand our knowledge about the complexity of educational practice, and about how preschool teachers in their everyday practices negotiate their way between curriculum guidelines, cultural traditions, educational traditions, and practical conditions. The intention of the project is also to expand our knowledge about how comparative research, and more specifically poly-vocal photo elicitation as a method, can contribute to the study of children's cultural formation in kindergarten.

The research project is based upon case studies of two kindergartens: the Lotus Kindergarten in China, and the Glacier Buttercup Kindergarten in Norway. The kindergartens were chosen as being typical of kindergartens in urban Norway and urban China. Both kindergartens are considered average with regard to quality, professional competence and size compared to their local standard.

My research questions are elaborated upon and explored in three different empirical studies that focus on the teaching of natural science, artefacts displayed on the walls in the kindergartens, and regulation of time in everyday practices. The data in all three studies have been produced in the same manner using photo elicitation in semi-structured interviews. Apart from the first study of teaching natural science, I took all of the photos and videos that were used as cues in eliciting reflections and meaning making in the open-ended interviews. In order to establish a poly-vocal approach, teachers from both kindergartens looked at the photos or watched the videotapes from both Norwegian and Chinese case studies before the focus group interview. A total of 12 focus group interviews of varying size were carried out. Each interview lasted between 1.5 to 2.5 hours.

In addition to the photos and videos, I observed the activities in the two kindergartens for several weeks, making field notes and talking with the teachers. I also drew upon other sources of information, especially in China. Curriculum guidelines and discussions in seminars with both

Norwegian and Chinese researchers and kindergarten teachers have contributed to an increased understanding of what was observed.

China and Norway as Focal Points

There were many reasons for choosing China and Norway as focal points for this research project. First and foremost is the fact that, as a teacher educator in early childhood education at Bergen University College, I could take advantage of the faculty's long-standing collaboration with Chinese universities and kindergartens. The second reason is related to the fact that the history and development of early childhood education in both countries has been influenced by globalised discourses of children and childhood. The last reason is related to epistemology and requires further elaboration.

I am interested in describing and understanding kindergarten teachers' interpretations of everyday practices from a cultural perspective, and thus as an expression of cultural similarities and differences. Using the voices of the Norwegian and Chinese preschool teachers, both as insiders viewing their own practices, and as outsiders viewing one another's practices, will provide the study with a reciprocal gaze (Tobin et al, 1989, 2009). Thus the taken-for-granted understandings and opinions, or the *doxa*, can be questioned. The stranger sees something the insider does not see:

> After all, a person cannot actually see or make sense of even his own exterior appearance as a whole, nor mirrors or photographs will help him, only others can see and understand his authentic exterior, thanks to their spatial outsidedness and thanks to the fact that they are **others ...** In the realm of culture, outsidedness is the most powerful level of understanding. (Bakhtin et al, 1981)

Approaching this from a slightly different angle, Dewey claims that 'seeing as recognition is perception arrested before it has the chance to develop freely' (1934, p. 52). Recognition, a shortcut enabling a quick assessment, is often based on ready-made judgments, and can be a major hindrance to understanding an individual case in all its complexity and richness. Thus in 'seeing as', we fail to 'see more'. 'Seeing as' is instant and reductionist according to Bresler (2013). In contrast, 'seeing more' is expansive and time consuming. While we may protest that as human beings we will always interpret and 'see as', it seems that when kindergarten teachers from countries with such different conditions, histories and traditions are confronted with images of their own and others' practices, the recognition and 'seeing as' is disrupted, allowing them to 'see more'.

The purpose of the comparison is to create an analytic distance to the phenomenon to be studied. This analytic distance can contribute to the questioning of fundamental notions and ideas. In other words, the comparison has an epistemological interest (Cheng, 1998; Gulløv & Højlund, 2003). This means that a focus on China and Norway can contribute to creating, on the one hand, a distance to the familiar, and, on the other hand, a closeness to the unknown, making it more familiar (Tobin et al, 1989, 2009). In this perspective, the kindergartens in China and Norway will help pave the way for new knowledge. The countries in themselves are not of critical importance; had it been India and Norway or Vietnam and Norway it would have been equally as effective in opening up new perspectives.

Dilemmas in Photo Elicitation

Photo elicitation dilemmas can be associated with the processes of producing and selecting the images to be used in the interviews. Questions here are related to who is taking the photos, who selects the motifs, and how the photos for the interview are selected. Questions related to the interview situation are closely related to the positions of the researcher, the interpreter, and the teachers in the interview situation. Finally it is a question of how the photos take on agency as mediating artefacts in the interview situation. I will first discuss the dilemmas related to the photos.

Who is Taking the Photos?

The classical approach in photo elicitation with regard to photos taken for a specific research purpose is that the researcher takes photos of the subjects' world that in some way are meaningful to the interviewee (Hurworth, 2008). This approach focuses on the respondents' attention to the researcher-selected themes and subjects. This has been my main approach in most of the data production, largely for pragmatic reasons. It would have been difficult to administer the project if the preschool teachers themselves had taken the photos. Being familiar with the working conditions of the kindergarten teachers, especially in China, the extra work involved would have been asking too much of the teachers. In addition, it might have been difficult to explain the idea underlying the approach due to cultural differences in research paradigms. These differences represented a challenge when presenting the aim of the research project in China, and when I presented the design of the project to the kindergarten teachers, they looked a bit puzzled. The principal tried to explain, saying 'You see they do research in another way in the West'.

To allow greater participation, the pictures may be taken by the researchers while accompanied by one of the informants who could suggest what to photograph or how. This approach has also been used in this study, indirectly, especially in the Chinese kindergarten where my interpreter followed me when I took photos of artefacts exhibited on the walls and explained the texts that accompanied many of the artefacts. This close follow-up by the interpreter made me focus on the artefacts in other ways. For example, she showed me a picture that had been made by the teacher and children together making a point about circular time. The interpreter made me aware of the representations of circular time in the children's drawings, the shift of day and night, the movement of the moon, the circular movements of activities in the kindergarten, and so on (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Circular time.

The images can also be taken by the interviewees themselves. The photos may be taken or selected for the specific purpose of the interview in an approach that has been referred to as 'reflexive photography' or 'autodriven photo elicitation' (Harper, 2012). This is a kind of co-production between the researcher and the research participants. This includes asking respondents to photograph places and subjects that show the respondents' world from their own point of view. This approach was partly used in the first empirical study of natural science activities. One of the videos from Glacier Buttercup Kindergarten was produced by the teachers, partly in response to the first video made by the researcher. The teachers considered the presentation of their work in the original video to be one-sided and incomplete, so they wanted to make a video themselves that would show a wider range of activities in natural science.

Who Selects the Motifs?

Taking photos and videos is a very visible activity and is different from writing field notes. Although the children and teachers may notice me sitting there with my small notebook and pen, I feel differently when I pick up my camera or video camera. Even on my way to the kindergarten, I

feel the difference when I pick up my camera. A critical voice is immediately there to ask me: Why are you picking up the camera at this moment? How will the people feel about being photographed in this situation? Should I ask them? Why did I put it down and close it? How will the participants interpret this? These critical and reflexive questions make me stop and think about why I choose to take a picture.

In this research project, the focal points are limited to two countries. Tobin et al (1989, 2009) warn against limiting the focal points to two countries. They consider it important to involve three countries in order to avoid dichotomies between two cases. Choosing one kindergarten from the East and one from the West implies an assumption that they are very different. There is a danger of enhancing the differences and enforcing a kind of dualism. I see how I have been tempted to do this again and again in order to achieve a kind of 'wow effect'. When showing the kindergartens' approach to physical training, it is thrilling to show a picture of children playing and climbing in trees in Norway, while showing the collective physical exercising in the Chinese kindergarten (see Figures 2 and 3). Such dichotomies have to be challenged by looking for the broken patterns, the ambiguous and odd elements, as well as for the similarities. The photos can be a help to visualise similarities, as well as broken patterns.

Figure 2. Physical training in Glacier Buttercup kindergarten.

Figure 3. Physical training in Lotus kindergarten.

Case studies may contain a bias toward verification; a tendency to confirm the researcher's preconceived notions by looking for what is expected. An interesting quote from Darwin has helped me in this respect. He says that 'When you find opposing results you should make a number of it and at once. Otherwise it will slip the mind. These thoughts are more apt to escape the memory than the favourable ones'. This helped me to record things that I did not expect to find. Examples of such features in the Lotus Kindergarten were numerous: the free play, the running and pretend fighting, the talking with individual children, and the shouting by all the children. In the Glacier Buttercup Kindergarten, I have tried to record collective teaching, rules and teacher instructions. I see I have to fight myself in this matter. Looking through my visual material, I see an overrepresentation of collective gymnastics in the Lotus Kindergarten material and of free outdoor play in the Glacier Buttercup kindergarten.

As a researcher, I have to reflect on questions like: What are my reasons for taking certain pictures?; Why?; What do I exclude?; What are my perspectives? This is particularly important since my focal point is kindergartens in Norway and China. My position as a Norwegian researcher makes it easier to exclude the taken-for-granted features of the Norwegian kindergarten. On the other hand, it is tempting to make the Chinese kindergarten more exotic and strange. Showing the photos to both groups of kindergarten teachers can help to avoid these biases, and to stimulate discussions and elicit topics that word-based interviews do not.

How Are the Photos Selected?

I took photos of all the artefacts in the respective classrooms in both kindergartens. The only selections I made were based on what I considered technical issues: light, sharpness and focus. I decided to show the pictures of all the artefacts in the interview and not just a few selected artefacts. The benefit of this procedure was that it was not up to me to decide what artefacts had cultural significance. Presented with the photos, the kindergarten teachers came with their interpretations and reflections. It was like walking around the classroom and letting the teachers tell me about what they saw in the artefacts. Another way would have been to let the teachers select a sample of artefacts that they considered to have a specific value for them. The problem with this selection method is that features the teachers consider natural could be left out. For instance, when I showed the teachers in the Lotus Kindergarten the pictures of posters on the wall by the entrance, they did not understand when I asked what this represented. They said it had no significance: 'It is just something we do'. The problem with the chosen method of using all of the photos was that there were so many.

I will now turn to dilemmas related to the interview situation.

The Position of the Researcher

My position was different in the interviews with the two groups of teachers. My position as a Norwegian and foreign researcher in the Chinese kindergarten was challenging and revealed different power relations. I do not know the Chinese language and had to rely on an interpreter. Our research traditions are different, so I had to explain the aim and purpose of the research in a more thorough way than in the Norwegian kindergarten. I felt inferior, yet the teachers perceived of my position as one of power. Traditionally, the Chinese kindergartens have been used to having external visitors observing their practices, both other kindergarten teachers and evaluation committees. As a consequence, the teachers immediately positioned me as an evaluator and they wanted feedback on their practice: 'We want to learn' they said repeatedly. To mediate my research position was difficult and I found that the teachers wanted to defend their practice: 'We know that we should pay more attention to play, but we have 35 children in class, so it is impossible'. Expressions like this were numerous throughout the interviews. This is linked to the fact that the curriculum reforms are drawing heavily on western discourses of children and childhood. The Chinese teachers seemed to position me as a representative of this western thinking. My position in relation to Chinese early childhood education is primarily as an outsider, but I have gradually become an outsider with some knowledge about China and Chinese

kindergartens. This dichotomy between insider and outsider, however, is problematic (Heimer & Thøgersen, 2006).

As a researcher, I am also considered an outsider in the Norwegian kindergarten; I am a representative of the University College and the teachers feel they are being assessed. During the interviews, the teachers repeatedly positioned me as an evaluator of their practice and took up a defensive position: 'We do more natural science than what this video shows' and 'You would have found different artefacts on the walls if you had come another time'.

I also felt differently when showing the Norwegian photos to the Chinese kindergarten teachers. In a way, I felt I had to defend and explain the Norwegian photos since I was looked upon as a Norwegian. I felt uncomfortable when I knew that they were judging the presentations. I also felt uncomfortable when the Norwegian kindergarten teachers criticised the practices in Lotus Kindergarten. I was eager to explain and support the Chinese way. The various positions I occupied during the interviews were an emotional, cognitive and embodied experience.

The Position of the Interpreter

When doing field research in China, it is impossible to escape the language problem (Heimer & Thøgersen, 2006). I have been dependent on having an interpreter both to translate during the interviews and to do the transcriptions. This person has also been the most important gatekeeper, enabling me to gain access to kindergartens in Shanghai. Without her, I do not think this research project would have been possible. Kindergartens in China are reluctant to receive foreign researchers. They are well aware that foreign researchers tend to be critical about Chinese kindergartens because of the number of children and the educational traditions. My interpreter has not only been the gatekeeper, but also a co-researcher with whom I have been collaborating for many years. Having spent a year as a research fellow in Norway, she also knows the Norwegian system quite well. Thus, discussions with this co-researcher have provided valuable information that has helped me to understand Chinese early childhood education.

Nevertheless, such dependence on an interpreter is not ideal in fieldwork. I have not had control over the interpretations and her position. I have often been surprised at how one short sentence from me can change into a five minutes talk from her. These discussions were taped and I discussed this matter with the interpreter several times: why did she spend so much time translating, I asked her. Her reply was that Norwegian early childhood education is unfamiliar to the Chinese teachers, so she felt obliged to tell them that the Nordic model of early childhood education is quite different from other Western early childhood education. In spite of this, she has contributed to extended discussions and reflections, as well as providing information that has opened up new facets of the field. In addition, her involvement has influenced reflections on the Norwegian material.

As well as serving as a gatekeeper into the kindergartens, she has had the same function in teacher education, making possible discussions with many of her colleagues. I felt a need to discuss broader educational issues with other kindergarten teacher educators in China, as well as with my interpreter, in order not to be too dependent on her perspectives.

The Position of the Kindergarten Teachers

The two groups of kindergarten teachers are in the position of insiders and outsiders in relation to the photos. When I interviewed them concerning the photos from their own kindergarten, they were insiders. There is most at stake for insiders because their everyday practice is revealed to themselves, other teachers, and the researcher. How do they want to be presented as kindergarten teachers? The teachers' responses are self-critical, defensive, humorous and explanatory.

In contrast, when they look at the photos and videos from the other kindergarten, they are positioned as outsiders. When the teachers discuss the everyday practice in the other kindergarten, they take different positions. One response is to be critical. When the teachers in Lotus Kindergarten were asked about the artefacts on the walls of their classroom, they stressed the importance of fostering perfection and improvement. When the Glacier Buttercup Kindergarten teachers observed the same images, they commented that they considered this to be a form of

elitism, promoting the clever child (see Picture 4). The same images gave rise to different interpretations, revealing the Janus face that cultural ideals seem to have. From one perspective the ideals can look like one thing; from another perspective they look quite different (Birkeland, 2012).

Figure 4. Children's art work in Lotus kindergarten.

This was equally true when the Glacier Buttercup Kindergarten teachers were asked about the exhibition of children's art work in their own kindergarten. They said that it was important that the children can choose to have their art work on the wall, since this fosters the children's right to be seen (see Picture 5). From the Chinese teachers' point of view, this way of presenting children's art work was not acceptable and was interpreted as a way to tell the children, the parents, and the outside world that quality and performance are not being fostered.

Figure 5. Children's art work in Glacier Buttercup kindergarten.

The Agency of the Photos in the Interviews

The issue of using photos as cues in the interviews is also a question of agency. When selecting the photos to be used in the interviews, I am fully aware that the way the kindergarten teachers are presented in the photos is important. The images, as artefacts, exert agency by making the

spectators interpret, understand and act in specific ways (Tilley, 2006; Birkeland, 2012; Ødegaard, 2012a, 2012b). This became clear to me in different ways. Firstly, I was afraid that I was not presenting the kindergarten in an accurate way. Secondly, did I understand the situation? Was I missing something? And finally, what motivated my selection of photos? These questions may be productive, but they can also limit my choices. For fear of not showing so-called best practice, I may have been too empathetic to the teachers.

I have, however, in the interviews, elicited the reactions of both groups of kindergarten teachers to the overall representation of their classroom. How do they feel about this? Do they think anything is missing? Has anything been exaggerated? The following are examples of responses to these questions that were given in the interviews:

> We should maybe have cleaned the walls a bit before you came. On the other hand, this is quite representative of the everyday.

> You do not show the multitude of artefacts we have throughout the year. We change the artefacts every month. This is just a small sample.

In other words, they are well aware of how they are being represented. As Berger (1972, p. 9) states: 'We never look just at one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves'. The way the artefacts in kindergartens are presented is relevant to the kindergarten teachers. To take the photos seriously, it is also necessary to consider how this positions the kindergarten teachers as viewers in relation to the photos. What is important with images is not simply the photo in itself, but how it is seen by particular spectators who view them in different ways (Rose, 2012).

Conclusion

As argued earlier in the article, the use of photo elicitation gives rise to a multitude of dilemmas in comparative research. Some of these dilemmas are related to the photos, for instance who the photographer should be, what should be photographed, and how the photos should be selected for the interview. Other dilemmas are related to the position of the researcher, the interpreter, and the interviewee. Some of these dilemmas would be the same whether the study was cross-cultural or not; for instance, the question of who should be the photographer, what should be photographed, and how the photos should be selected. However, in a cross-cultural study, the importance of reflecting on these questions increases. The temptation to expand the differences and to create 'wow-effects' is more immediate when the cultures are traditionally considered to be quite different. A design that includes both insiders and outsiders as interviewees is therefore crucial. This is a way of validating the selection of images, as well as their interpretation.

The dilemmas related to the position of the researcher and the interviewee is crucial whenever photo elicitation is used. However, the position of the researcher in the design discussed in this article is subject to some additional dilemmas due to the fact that the researcher is Norwegian, and as such, a native in relation to the Norwegian material and a stranger to the Chinese. Furthermore, the interpreter has her own agenda in the project and influences the interview situation through her formulation and elaboration of questions and answers.

Due to the focus of the research, the photos may be helpful in the interview, providing additional ideas for discussions about practices. Having concrete situations as a starting point, may lead the participants to a deeper understanding of their own values and cultural preferences. When photos from another cultural setting are included in the photo elicitation, the insiders' values are highlighted even more strongly. In my material it became quite visible that the same artefact could be interpreted in many different ways.

Based upon my experience of using photo elicitation, I would claim that the photos helped the teachers and researcher to elaborate on their ideas and enabled them to see more (Bresler, 2013). Using photo elicitation in the interview created a collaboration of interpretations through a dialogue about the subject in focus. Educational ideals are most often abstract and difficult to put into words. The use of photo cues in the interview stimulated the teachers' curiosity about what is going on, thereby reducing their concern about answering 'correctly'. The images enabled the teachers to distance themselves, which opened up for laughter, irony, comments and questions. In

this way, the photos set off chain reactions and thereby exercised agency causing the teachers to see things in a new way.

In the process of developing a collaboration of interpretations in each kindergarten, the importance of telling and retelling stories about the educational ideals in kindergartens is highlighted. In the process of confronting each other with the different stories, a deeper level of reflexivity is encouraged. The intention has not been hermeneutic in the sense of achieving an agreement on interpretations. Instead, the aim has been to produce different interpretations in order to denaturalise the natural. This may shed light on the taken-for-granted assumptions within the specific kindergarten context.

Acknowledgements

This PhD research is part of the Norwegian Research Council (NRF) financed project 'Kindergarten as an Arena for Cultural Formation [Barnehagen som Danningsarena]' at Bergen University College, Centre for Educational Research.

This particular study started as a pre-project to my PhD, together with Assistant Professor Anne Hammer at Bergen University College and Dr He Min from East China Normal University. All three took part in the first data collection concerning natural science. The data consisted of videos produced both by the three researchers and by the kindergarten teachers themselves.

This project would have been impossible to carry out without the help of colleagues at East China Normal University, especially Dr He Min from the Department of Preschool Teacher Education. They have been crucial gatekeepers to the Chinese kindergarten.

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ISBN 978-82-326-5035-7 (printed ver.)
ISBN 978-82-326-5035-4 (electronic ver.)
ISSN 1503-8181

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Science and Technology