

# Kindergarten<sup>1</sup> as an arena for cultural formation

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This special issue attends to theorizing on and descriptions of conditions for human cultural formation, more precisely of conditions for children and kindergarten teachers in social and cultural activities and practices. The term 'cultural formation' embodies children's and teachers' activities, their use of artefacts, and their practice of meaning-making and process of cultural identity and learning. The aspect of children as agents, as cultural meaning-makers and how their activities, their use of artefacts, are shaped by conditions that are socio-historical in nature, is of special concern. The articles embrace descriptions and reflections, new understandings of emergent curricula, what practices actually are going on, and how the uses of artefacts form conditions that are circulating in practice.

We hope this issue makes it possible to see more clearly how kindergarten as a field is cultural-historically conditioned. The cultural perspectives follow an anthropological mindset, culture is constituted, produced and reproduced through human action and ways of thinking. Our main concern is thus: to explore what conditions and constitutes the content of kindergarten activity, what happens there? What kind of dynamics are operative, how do artefacts such as toys, materials, genres and thought-models create conditions for education in kindergarten? What kind of educational ideals are related to activities in the kindergarten and what the teachers want to obtain?

The idea of gathering a collection of articles related to these aspects of cultural-historical traditions is connected with ongoing discussions taking place in multi-disciplinary research such as Activity theory. Questions of methodological principles and descriptive research of practice are useful in different countries as well as in different professional areas, and enjoy a very stable interest over time.

For instance, the book "State of the Art Lectures" (editors Martin Hildebrand-Nilson and Georg Ruckriem) was published as early as 1988. It sums up the materials of International Congress on Activity Theory and contains analyses by leading researchers of the development of ideas concerning cultural activity theory in their home countries (USSR, GDR,

Scandinavia, Benelux, Italy, USA, Canada and FRG). It identifies the high priority areas of research most needed to satisfy theoretical and empirical investigations, conceptions and questions.

Some aspects of the development of the cultural historical approach have already been presented to readers of this journal (e.g. Habibollah G. Vygotsky in Iran: A Personal Account // Cultural-historical psychology. 2009. №4. — С. 7—9).

Therefore, the theme of this issue — namely to acquaint the Russian psychologist community with the ways in which the ideas of Vygotsky's approach are actualised in the reality of everyday life in a kindergarten, and not merely in theory — came naturally when a group of researchers from the Department of Developmental Psychology at Moscow State University of Psychology and Education met with colleagues from Bergen — Norway.

We hope that this introduction to the work of the scientific team and some of their co-operating associates will help to create new initiatives and tangible proposals for innovative future cross-cultural research.

The articles arise from a research group called "Kindergarten as an arena for cultural formation", currently supported by funding from The Research Council of Norway (RCN) (2009—2014). They are working internationally with researchers in China. For this special issue, researchers from Sweden and Australia were invited. All these researchers consider kindergarten as a room of many dimensions; socio-cultural, ideological and physical, where children play, learn and shape new meaning and identities. Kindergarten is further seen as structured by existing historical knowledge such as the fairy tales retold for generations, the songs that are sung, pictures presented, narratives performed, the uses of media, toys and other teaching equipment that are available. Kindergarten is also understood as structured by the knowledge that lies in the way things are done and in ways of thinking that create conditions for what a kindergarten teacher does, what children do and what kind of activity is possible in a kindergarten. Finally, artefacts are understood as playing a crucial role in all of these aspects.

This makes kindergarten an arena structured also by the learning environment, the thinking and practices of

<sup>1</sup> Kindergarten refers to early year's educational institutions 1—5 year olds. In Norway these institutions are called barnehage (Kindergarten), in Sweden they are called preschool (Forskolan).

the kindergarten teachers, as well as the ideology set out in policy documents of the early childhood sector and culture at large. Conditions for what is possible and not possible for children to do and learn are outlined. Teachers have aims for their practices, but children, viewed as agents, can still make meaning and learn outside these aims and frames that are pedagogically and ideologically determined. Children and teachers live in parallel contexts; thus cultural processes that take place in preschool carry with them meanings from other places and contexts.

Against this background, the concept of "cultural formation" is found to be well suited for exploring and developing new insights into and knowledge of the early childhood educational sector. The interest here lies mainly in children's meaning-making processes, in how children shape and are being shaped in a web of structural conditions. "Arena" as a concept has the etymological meaning; "place of combat", which relates to a place where people meet and contradictions arise. When people use artefacts that are made available in kindergarten, they engage in continuous processes of cultural formation and as a result kindergarten content is shaped.

Could the concept of "cultural formation" replace the word "education" in some settings? Formation is not the same as education, or upbringing. Close ties between the concept of formation and the concept of learning are however to be found in socio-cultural and historical epistemology. Some will argue that the concept of socialization accords with cultural formation; however, this group of authors will bring the relational and dynamic aspects of the subject's activities with artefacts to the forefront. Such socio-cultural epistemology is seen as spatial in the sense that it can be studied in practice. Narrative collaborative practice is for example an activity placed in both time and space as the Bakhtinian concept of "cronothop" indicates. The words used in

narrative are artefacts with historical roots and will carry meaning across time and space.

The group of authors study conditions for content that emerges through everyday practice. These articles bring together theoretical, anthropological and cooperative approaches. They reflect studies that analyze and understand kindergartens as a socio-cultural, ideological and physical space in which children are active and create new meanings. The aim has been to provide contemporary, descriptive and critical discursive research. New in all of these approaches has been to identify the ideological foundation on which existing knowledge rests and to provide new insights about conditions for kindergarten practice. The authors raise insights about the connections between different ways of doing things, between tradition and present, shifts, breaks, short stories that have to do with the institution's daily activities, where the term artefact is significant in the articles.

Such an understanding of what culture means and how "growing into" culture in ontogenesis happens, as well as cultural diversity research has always been pivotal in this journal.

These pages have included an in-depth and fruitful discussion of how interiorization and appropriation occur, under both a historical (e. g. "Archive" column and publications of L.I. Bogovich, L.V. Sacharov), and an analytic perspective (e.g. publications of V.P. Zinchenko, № 3, 2008, № 2, 2010; M.P. Tuosy, № 4, 2007; E.G. Judina, № 2, 2006 et al.).

We perceive this as an additional reason to assign such a high value to bringing the work of Norwegian early childhood researchers and their collaborators to the attention of their Russian colleagues.

The published articles are directly connected to the fundamental goal of the journal — the analysis and development of concepts of modern cultural-historical mindset.

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## Детский сад<sup>1</sup> как пространство культурного развития

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<sup>1</sup> «Детский сад» (kindergarten) в данном контексте обозначает образовательные учреждения для детей от 1—5 лет. В Норвегии эти учреждения называются «barnehage» («kindergarten»), а в Швеции — «föskolan» («preschool»).