

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 researchers¹ and is focusing upon children's outdoor activities and play in a huge outdoor area nearby the kindergarten². The other video was made by the kindergarten teachers and show different kinds of theme activities³. 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 activities⁴. The second video is made by the teachers in a special science kindergarten and is showing a model teaching within collective teaching⁵.

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 over 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 does 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 seem 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, Kjörholt, & 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.

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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.