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## **(Wanting to do) Ethical research in a shifting context**

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*This paper describes the features of ethical research and how we attempted to undertake this kind of research. Our contention is that the aim of ethical research should be to produce action for change. Our understandings of ethical research led us to pause our negotiations for setting up two new projects, in kindergartens in Norway. By taking seriously our potential collaborators' concerns, we were alerted to how kindergartens were simultaneously seen as both the cause and the salvation for several issues. In media discussions, which often originated with the Minister for Education, there was a perception that there was a need for more learning, particularly of mathematics and language, to overcome difficulties that children, especially immigrant children, may have when they begin school. These discussions were often contradictory with kindergartens being placed in an invidious position of navigating these discussions for their work with children.*

**Keywords:** *Ethical research, multilingual children, ICT, play, learning.*

### **Ethical research**

In August 2016, we were in the early stages of setting up two projects involving dialogue between ourselves, as mathematics education researchers, and the parents and teachers of multilingual children in kindergartens in Norway. As described in the next section, our initial discussions with an organisation about one project made us stop and reconsider what we wanted to do and why. To do this, we clarified our ideas about the kind of research, ethical research, which we wanted to undertake. In this paper, we discuss how implementing its principles resulted in us investigating the shifting landscape of priorities in Norwegian kindergarten policies.

Our definition of ethical research includes a number of aspects, some of which are inspired by critical research. Critical research has a social justice aim and as such requires researchers to be comfortable with the ambiguity connected to working against oppression. Proposing bricolage as way of conceiving the range of research methodologies needed for conducting critical research, Kincheloe, McLaren, and Steinberg (2011) stated that “comfortable with the ambiguity, bricoleurs as critical researchers work to alleviate human suffering and injustice even though they possess no final blueprint alerting them as to how oppression takes place” (p. 173). We consider that ethical research involves more than evoking sympathy for participants. Like Harris (2013), we want to work with participants to produce “action for change” (p. 87). Nevertheless, we are aware that concerns about misinterpreting interactions and situations have led some researchers to withdraw from “action for change” research in case it produces undesirable outcomes, due to a lack of knowledge about the context in which they worked (Sultana, 2007).

Thus, we consider that to design research that would produce action for change, academic researchers need to negotiate the research process with participants (Potts & Brown, 2005). In accepting this requirement, we recognise that this may make us uncomfortable. Operationalising social justice as action for change means we must live with ambiguity associated with how data should be collected and analysed. Our uncomfortableness with this ambiguity is likely due to preconceptions that research

should provide definitive responses to issues; a reflection of the discourses that surround us as academics. It is also due to how we operate within the power relationships connected to being researchers, who tell the stories of participants (Etherington, 2007; Harris, 2013). Ethical research requires us to interrogate these power relationships and not assume we know the truth.

Therefore, reflecting on our decision-making in the research, both with and without our participants, is an important component in ethical research. Reflexivity has been promoted as important in that it makes transparent any dilemmas in the research.

Reflexivity is ... an ability to notice our responses to the world around us, to stories, and to other people and events, and to use that knowledge to inform and direct our actions, communications, and understandings (Rennie, 1998; Wosket, 1999). When we extend that skill [reflexivity] into the practice of reflexive research, we need to be aware of the personal, social, and cultural contexts in which we (and others) live and work and to understand how these affect our conduct, interpretations, and representations of research stories. (Etherington, 2007, p. 601)

In summary, ethical research is connected to action for change, but to achieve it we need to negotiate with participants what the research should be and how it should be conducted. This requires us to have a rich understanding of the context surrounding the site of the research. We must also accept uncertainty and be reflexive about our roles so that the power imbalance in our relationship with participants does not result in a covert control. We have a responsibility as researchers to find out about the relevant contexts and not just expect our collaborators to be the ones to inform us. We must also be aware that the negotiation can result in the research being “productive failure” (Harris, 2013, p. 89), rather than the change that we jointly want to work for.

### **Unease and the project proposal**

In the negotiation of new projects with organisations that we had not previously worked with, our understandings of ethical research made us pause when some unease was shown. In the projects, we wanted to work with kindergartens teachers and parents of multilingual children. In one project, we hope to develop and trial playful mathematical apps that would encourage children to discuss them with kindergarten teachers in Norwegian and with their families in their shared languages. The change that we want to produce through having children engage with the apps is for them to develop both their Norwegian and home language(s) for discussing mathematical ideas.

However, in the initial meeting, the complexity, connected to combining ICT, through mathematical apps, with the development of children’s mathematical register in more than one language as well as a request to involve immigrant parents, seemed to overwhelm those we talked to. The response was positive in that they felt the kindergartens would want to participate, but there was a constant stream of questions about what would happen and what the teachers would have to do. Although we tried to explain our aim of negotiating the project with the teachers and the parents, there was unease about why we did not have a clear plan for what we wanted (the teachers) to do. This unease made us reflect on the context of kindergartens in Norway, to determine what might provoke a need for certainty.

Our reflection indicated that the projects came at a time when those working with kindergartens face much uncertainty and it became important to identify the features of the shifting landscape which affect kindergartens teachers’ work. We considered that an increased awareness of this landscape

would support us to be more respectful of the circumstances and improve our possibilities to negotiate with kindergarten teachers and parents about how the projects should be implemented.

## **The shifting landscape**

In this section, we present our understandings of some of the features of the shifting landscape including discussions about changing the role of kindergartens as one of preparing children for school, through supporting children to learn better mathematics and Norwegian and by incorporating ICT into children's play. Each issue has been the subject of much debate over the last few years. Our investigation indicated that in discussions about kindergartens, teachers were often positioned both as responsible for the problems and simultaneously also the solvers of the very same problems.

### **Changes to curricula philosophy for early childhood**

In Scandinavian kindergarten curricula, the focus has traditionally been on the whole child, emphasising their integration into society (Bennett, 2005). A revision of the Norwegian curriculum for kindergartens, the so-called Framework Plan (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2011), that sets out their responsibilities has been ongoing for some years. However, in 2016 the Minister for Education rejected the draft, which followed the philosophy of play-based learning, proposed by contracted early childhood professionals. In particular, this delay to revising the Framework Plan seemed to result in our potential collaborators being uncertain and frustrated. However, the Minister had decided that his department would write the Framework Plan (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2016a; Støbakk, 2016) in line with a white paper that he had commissioned about providing “better content” in kindergarten (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2016b). Although this suggestion has received significant criticism from those working in the field, the Minister continues to talk about kindergartens needing to prepare children for school. As noted in some of the critiques (Bae, 2016), play – although in the title of the white paper (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2016b) – is almost completely missing from the discussion with the attention being on what children are to “learn”. This indicates a deliberate change to situating kindergartens' primary role as preparing children for school. This interpretation was reinforced with the revelation that Norway was to participate in the first round of PISA tests for 5 year olds starting in 2017/2018 (Moss et al., 2016). In Norway, five year olds attend kindergartens and comparing them on international tests will emphasise the importance of school knowledge. Mathematics will be one of the knowledge areas assessed in these International Early Learning Studies (Moss et al., 2016).

### **Mathematics and the “realfag” strategy**

In a series of initiatives contributing to shifting the focus of kindergarten away from the social policy pedagogical tradition (Bennett, 2005), another report, specifically about improving mathematics and science subjects, “realfag”, in kindergartens and schools, was commissioned by the Minister and released in August 2015 (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2015). The Minister in justifying and promoting this policy had linked Norway's future financial well-being to a need for more focus on mathematics in kindergartens (Lange & Meaney, 2016). This prompted discussion about whether moving more towards a “readiness for school tradition” and away from the “social policy pedagogical tradition” is appropriate for Norwegian kindergartens. Like the white paper about better content in kindergartens (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2016b), this report and its recommendations have been criticised by those working in the field even before it was published (see for example, Pettersvold & Østrem, 2014;

Schaanning, 2015). A question arises about what improving the content in kindergarten means when the current Framework Plan (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2011) already contains goals for providing mathematical learning opportunities to children (Digranes, 2014). The implication was that kindergarten teachers were not doing enough to support children to learn the necessary mathematics knowledge for school. For kindergarten teachers and the administrative leadership, there remains uncertainty about how to implement the “realfag” strategy while they wait for the Framework Plan to be finalised. Although the outcomes are clearly connected to “improvement”, perhaps assessed through tests of 5 year-olds, the lack of information for kindergartens about how to work with this report remains a source of frustration.

### **Multilingual children in Norwegian kindergartens**

Alongside discussions about the role of mathematics within kindergartens, there have also been discussions about the children needing to learn “good” Norwegian language. These discussions are diverse and in some ways contradictory. Some of them refer to the white paper on better content in kindergarten (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2016b), which includes the push by the Minister to introduce mandatory language testing of kindergarten children, such as in Fladberg (2015), and to the legislate requirements for Norwegian language skills of employees in kindergarten as noted by Haugsvær (2016). The Minister’s justification for the testing was that a significant proportion of children begin school without good Norwegian skills (Svarstad, 2015). Although the suggestion for mandatory language testing was rejected by the parliament in June 2016, uncertainty about how kindergartens should work with children’s language development remains (Fyen, 2016; Schaanning, 2016).

Connected to these discussions, although often implicitly, is the issue of immigrant children and their learning of Norwegian so that they would be ready for school (Redaksjonen, 2016). Children who have another language than Norwegian as their home language are given the same tests as those who have Norwegian as their home language. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the results generally indicate that multilingual children are not as competent as children who speak Norwegian at home. However, in this debate, the kind of language development seems to be implicitly about ensuring conversational language. Language to discuss mathematics is not specifically mentioned either in discussions about more mathematics in kindergartens or in discussions about improving language development.

Linked to the issue of multilingual children’s Norwegian language skills is a long running debate about family payments that parents can use for children to attend kindergarten or to look after them at home (Rosa, 2007). Recently, attendance by immigrant children in kindergartens has increased (Barne-, ungdoms- og familiedirektoratet, 2016), providing them with increased opportunities to learn Norwegian. The discussion about insufficient Norwegian for school has been linked to children who are kept at home during the kindergarten years, although the Minister rarely acknowledges this. Still, there is some evidence that children may not be learning conversational Norwegian while in kindergartens. The responsibility for improving the situation lies with the municipalities which oversee kindergartens.

At the same time, there also has been criticism about the lack of effort by kindergartens to achieve the Framework Plan’s (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2011) requirement to develop all of the children’s languages (Sundby, 2016). Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that it is difficult for kindergarten staff to do this if they are not be fluent in these other languages (Otterstad, 2016). Again, kindergartens are

situated as being responsible for not doing enough but with no clear pathway for how they could improve their possibilities for supporting children's home language skills. There is no discussion about using home languages for discussing mathematics.

### **ICT and kindergartens**

ICT is an area that children in kindergarten are also supposed to have experiences with, according to the Framework Plan (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2011). Yet the discussion about whether or how to incorporate ICT in kindergartens continues to circulate, partly because of the constant changing of hardware and software. For example, the rapid increase in the use of touch-screen devices by children at home (Hardersen & Guðmundsdóttir, 2012) has not been matched by their use in kindergartens (Bølgan, 2012). As well, research in information literacy skills connected to ICT has shown that older students who speak other home languages than Norwegian are likely to have less of these skills than those who speak Norwegian at home (Hatlevik & Guðmundsdóttir, 2013).

In seeming contradiction to the Framework Plan's requirements, the Minister has been critical of the unbridled enthusiasm for ICT in kindergartens and schools, suggesting that there is limited research evidence to show that ICT contributes to children's learning (Todal, 2015). During a visit to a kindergarten, he described his fondness for paper books over digital ones (Ruud, 2016). For kindergartens deciding how to use ICT with children, there are mixed messages about if and how they should integrate ICT into possible learning opportunities for children.

### **What did we learn from mapping the landscape?**

Although as researchers we were aware of the debates raging around kindergartens, it was not until we investigated them that we understood how they may be affecting the possibilities our potential collaborators saw for negotiating with us. As teacher educators, we also face major changes to our working environment, initiated by the Minister of Education. However, our standing as academics, which provides us with recognition and discussions beyond our immediate working environment, perhaps made us blasé about the impact that uncertainty had on kindergartens' perceptions of what they could do. Kindergarten staff, even though many have a Bachelor degree, are often not given the same status as those working in universities or even schools by the general public. By investigating what was being discussed and in what ways, we better understand the uncertainty that kindergarten staff saw in how we presented the potential project to them.

The debates, around kindergartens and what their focus should be, situate kindergarten teachers and administrative leaders as being both responsible for the problems and also their solutions. As discussed in the previous section, kindergarten staff were being presented in the media debates as not preparing children well enough for school. Official reports situated them as not developing the children's, especially multilingual children's, language(s). They were also not providing children with the mathematical understandings that they needed to be successful at school and this was endangering Norway's economic well-being. Within these debates, kindergarten staff were positioned as not being competent, with kindergarten assistants' Norwegian language skills needing to be tested.

Simultaneously, the debates constantly shifted and changed, providing contradictions and no clear guidelines about what kindergarten staff should focus on and how they should implement any of the reports. Instead, they may have felt their competence was further being tested by whether they could

work out appropriate solutions to these issues. Having been judged as contributing to the problems, they are now being judged on whether they could become the kindergartens' saviours through finding solutions to those exact same problems. Being the focus of so much media attention, with limited possibilities for responding and positioning their work in positive ways, may have affected their willingness to engage with us, as outside researchers. It is not surprising that they seemed to want a specific plan for their participation in the proposed projects. Following someone else's plan not only would allow them to show they were working on solving the issues, but if the plan did not work then we would be responsible.

Yet ethical research demands that we negotiate with kindergarten staff and parents if action for change is to be achieved. Our investigations showed us that we needed to accept their concerns as genuine and be mindful about how we situated them in our negotiations. Recognising this shifting landscape provided some indication about how we could be respectful of their contexts. Still there remains significant ambiguity for us on how to conduct, not just the negotiation, but also the project itself.

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