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Dynamics of enculturation: results and consequences of engagement in ECE practices

When reading the articles in this issue of EECERJ one may once again be impressed by the versatility of the domain of early childhood education and care. Nevertheless, it is also obvious that all articles share an interest in studying how young children become part of a cultural community. This process of ‘enculturation’ is well-known to be multifaceted, including issues of knowledge acquisition, skill mastery, values, normativity and so on (see for example Bourdieu 1991; Bronfenbrenner 1979; Bruner 1996; Rogoff 2003; Vygotsky 1997).

It is a widely accepted view nowadays that processes of enculturation start out and develop through interactions with other people in the context of cultural practices (Lave and Wenger 1991). With regard to the enculturation of young children we can find such practices in the huge variety of (pre)school settings, but also in different settings in ECE-teacher training, which finally also have an impact on how young children act and interact. The articles in this issue are examples of this diversity.

Although there is no generally accepted encompassing model as yet for the understanding of the dynamics of young children’s enculturation, different dimensions can be found in the literature that are deemed to play a role in this process. One of them is *the role of the adults*, and how they interact with children on the basis of their presuppositions and ideologies. In addition to studying the role of adults, it is equally important to look more in-depth at children’s *meaning construction* in early childhood practices, often with the help of adults or peers. In children’s construction of meaning, the *role of language* is indispensable, that is to say the use of all kinds of symbolic means used for the regulation of other peoples’ and personal acts. Each of these three dimensions has to be elaborated for the future development of our understandings of young children’s development. All articles in this issue can be read as a contribution to these evolving understandings.

The role of adults

Eleni Loizou and Maria Demetriou address the problem of learning new knowledge and skills in ECE-Teachers training. The researchers explored the reflective comments of prospective teachers concerning ways to interact with young children in order to enhance these children’s learning. During their training these teachers visited early years classrooms and could try out and experience different ways to organise children’s learning (through routines, structured play, purposeful playful intervention, and quiet time observation). It is interesting to see how prefabricated strategies frame the children’s actions and learning.

The role of presuppositions in adults’ conceptions of young children is also beautifully illustrated in the article of Clionagh Boyle. On the basis of interviews and observations with different stakeholders in early intervention implementation, the researcher found that the now popular (but also contested) discourse of neurology of the infant brain is increasingly seen as a powerful perspective for interventions in ECE practices. Boyle’s intriguing Bourdieu-inspired argument opens a new and indispensable perspective to unravel the cultural construction of ECEC practices, beyond validation merely by neuroscience.

But educators are no machines: they experience all kinds of work-related emotions. Simona Prosen and Helena Smrtnik Vitulić focus on the rarely discussed emotion of anger in preschool teachers. In their study, the researchers rarely found expressions of anger, but if it occurred, it might have different sources (e.g. children, parents, colleagues). The teachers' ability to use emotion regulation strategies appeared to be an important factor. No significant mental health problems were reported as a cause for occurring anger.

In the cross-cultural work of Xiu-Min Hong and Ming-Zhu Zhang the focus is also on ECE-teachers' emotions. The research findings are partly in line with the work of Prosen and Vitulić. Unlike the findings of Prosen and Vitulić, however, they found that emotions like anger regularly occur in ECE classrooms as a reaction to the children's behaviour.

Constructions of meaning

Anne Greve and her group of Norwegian and French colleagues studied how food practices in preschool settings can also be contexts for the construction of meaning regarding risks related to food (in terms of health, body growth, etc.). On the basis of ethnographic analyses of filmed everyday practices in both countries they could identify different types of risks, like for example body-related obesity-risks, or pedagogy-related risks concerning restrictions of movements during meals, or socio-cultural inequalities concerning the quantity and quality of meals that children brought from their homes. The authors conclude that risks are mostly culturally constructed, based on 'top-down instructions rather than bottom-up explorations'. That is to say: risks are most of the time anticipated and prematurely prevented on the basis of adults' beliefs about what possible risks could be in a specific situation.

Ole Sando studied the relationship between the indoor environment, physical activity and well-being of young children. Sando concludes on the basis of correlational analyses that the organisation of the physical environment was highly important for the affordance of free physical activities, and for the well-being of the children. Hence, the meaning constructed of the environment supports the emergence of play, which contributes to the well-being of children. It turned out that the presence of high tables assigns meaning to the environment that impacts on children's physical activities.

Lena Sotevik, Nils Hammarén and Annette Hellman explored how 3- to 6-year-old children in their play construct the meaning of gender, sexuality and age. From an ethnographic point of view, the researchers observed and analysed children's play in a 'Mum, Dad, Child-play setting', particularly looking at the ways how children reproduce and (re)negotiate age, gender and sexuality. On the basis of their research, the authors argue that the construction of heterosexuality as a norm should be seen as a normalising practice on its own, interacting with age and gender, rather than as only a part of gender constructions. Given the importance of age in this heteronormative type of play, the authors suggest that the play can be best characterised as age-coded heteronormativity.

Symbolic tools

It is easy to see in the articles discussed above, the extent to which symbolic tools are involved in the interactions of young children. It is important to keep in mind that symbolic tools appear in a variety of ways, like conversations, dialogue, representations.

The article of Agnese Vezzani asks 'What works best for children's cognitive development and how to improve pupil engagement?' when focusing on children's engagement in classroom conversations. The results show that children's engagement benefits most from narrative and shared knowledge contexts, especially when guided by open questions.

This effect also depends on the duration and complexity of the child- initiated interactions as well as on group size.

Shu-Chen Wu researched children's play and learning in a Chinese context (Hong Kong) in order to gain more insight into children's conceptions of the relationship between play and learning. Through interviews with kindergarten children it was found – contrary to the traditional Chinese juxtaposition of play and learning – that children themselves saw play as a useful context for meaningful learning that was valuable for their future lives.

The study of van der Wilt, Boerma, van Oers and van der Veen stands out as being an experimental study in early childhood education into the effects of interactive reading approaches on young children's language ability. Children were assigned to one out of three interactive reading approaches which differed in the type of scaffolding involved: one supported the children just by pre-questioning and interaction while reading, a second approach articulated a specific point of attention in advance, and the third assisted children in making a symbolic tool ('mind map') while reading. A final comparison of the approaches showed that there were no differences among the approaches with respect to different language parameters (vocabulary, comprehension, etc.) on a post-test. All children showed a significant gain in language ability. Obviously, the power of text-related dialogues during book reading was strong enough to yield the improvements. This finding is consistent with the outcomes of Vezzani's study. The contribution of graphic organisers ('mindmaps') in ECE still deserves further study.

Final reflection

It stands to reason that all articles taken together cannot give a complete explanation of the dynamics of enculturation of young children. Nevertheless, each article clarifies a bit of the processes involved in three main dimensions of enculturation. It is striking that most of the methodologies used here, are based on qualitative methods (interviewing and observing). Nothing wrong with that, but for future developments we might think about ways to disclose the domain with the help of correlational (see Sando) and experimental research (see van der Wilt et al.) too. Moreover, more conceptual work is needed on the notions of play and learning. Both phenomena often go undefined in the present articles. Lastly, most interventions and observations focus on outcomes that can be seen as a direct and intended result of the interactions. In addition to such 'results', unintended consequences also may occur (like fatigue, anger, anxiety, like/dislike, etc.). A thorough understanding of the dynamics of enculturation should not overlook such consequences of education and their possibly devastating impact.

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