Taking Children and Young People Seriously
A Caring Relational Approach to Education

Introduction

This book is about children, their learning and development as active agents with motives and intentions. It is also about what practitioners can do to support children's learning, development and well-being. It is therefore relevant to adults who work with children in different age periods from birth to late adolescence, both within and beyond formal institutions. We also intend it to be useful to researchers and other professionals concerned with children and young people.

Our aim is to look forward toward children's futures and how they can be supported to benefit from and contribute to what society has to offer. We argue that, by taking children's intentions and emotions seriously, we can create an education that benefits children across the age range. Practitioners, families and other carers are therefore key. We shall offer them tools for analyzing children's development in ways that also capture practices, activities and children's experiences. We also recognize that as children move through the institutional practices that society creates for them, they will learn, acquire new motives and develop. Therefore, the tools that we offer will allow carers and practitioners to tailor their support to children in different age periods. These ideas underpin a relational form of pedagogy, which is particularly, but not only, important when children are dealing with changes in society's expectations for them. These changes occur as they move, for example, between family, day care or school or when new challenges arise in familiar situations.

One of our starting points is our concern that so many of society's expectations for children are backward-looking, trying to fit children into institutions that have changed little. Sadly, these expectations do not recognize what children bring to situations from their life experiences or their motives for engaging with what education offers. We of course value powerful knowledge and, for example, want school-age children to be able

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to work knowledgeably on problems. But approaches to education that don't pay attention to emotion, motive and agency, and which do not allow rounded pictures of children, are short-changing them. The result is that many children fail to engage with formal learning and other opportunities offered by society, so that their alienation and dropout are major problems for societies globally. Society is therefore also being short-changed, as it loses the contributions that these children and young people might make.

We therefore take two themes through the book. One is about being sensitive to *children as agentic*, with feelings and motive orientations, potentially able to propel themselves forward as learners. Their agency is central to how they negotiate their way in settings inhabited by the family carers and practitioners, who guide them toward adulthood. In these negotiations, children are seeking meaning, building their meaningful understandings of the practices they inhabit. Creating this understanding intertwines cognition with affect, embracing the child's emotional engagement. We shall trace the mutual development of cognition and affect from infancy to late adolescence and show how emotional engagement may be expressed in different ways in different age periods. The second theme is *what practitioners can do* to work with the explanations we offer, especially in critical situations such as when children meet new expectations. We want to support professionals both in recognizing the emotional aspects of learning and development and in working relationally with children, by taking children's emotions and motives seriously.

In order to look forward we look back to the cultural-historical psychology of Vygotsky (1896–1934) and those who have since worked with his legacy to relate it more closely than he did to education. We particularly draw on his ideas about children, learning and development and connect them, through our own work and that of others, to how children can be supported as curious and intentional beings.[1] Vygotsky was a developmental psychologist whose central arguments were that the unity of the child and her environment characterized children's development across in different age periods. Importantly, this means that we should not locate a child's difficulties within the child, but instead examine the

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[1] Even though Vygotsky's theory was formulated nearly a century ago in Russia, it is relevant for today's research and education (Dafermos, 2018; Stetsenko, 2017). Vygotsky's texts were banned in Russia until 1956 (i.e., until Stalin's death). It wasn't until 1962 that they started to be translated into English and several other languages. His work is still being translated, re-translated and published (Vygotsky, vols 1–6, 1994–2000, 2019, 2021).

environments they are acting in and adjust them to better support the child.

Vygotsky (1989, 1998) described the dynamic unity we are advocating as a *child's social situation of development*. The extract below reveals the importance of agency in this dialectical relationship between child and environment and that the relationship changes as the child meets new social realities.

> One of the major impediments of the theoretical and practical study of child development is the incorrect solution of the problem of environment and its role in the dynamic of age when the environment is considered as something outside with respect to the child, as a circumstance of development, as an aggregate of objective conditions existing without reference to the child and affecting him by the very fact of their existence. The understanding of environment that developed in biology as applied to evolution of animal species must not be transferred to the teaching on child development.

> We must admit that at the beginning of each age period, there develops a completely original, exclusive, single and unique relation, specific to a given age, between the child and reality, mainly social reality, that surrounds him. We call this relation the *social situation of development* at the given age. (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 198)

Vygtosky's colleagues, D.B. El'konin (1972/1999) and A.N. Leont'ev (1978), and the next generation, including Bozhovich (2009), Davydov (1988–1989, 2008), Galperin (1969), Lisina (1985) and Zaporozhets (2002), have, in different ways, contributed to and extended this theoretical approach by studying different aspects of children's social situations of development in different age periods.[2]

One of the developments of this cultural-historical view has been Hedegaard's emphasis on institutional practices and how they mediate the demands of wider society. Leont'ev described the dialectics that underpin a cultural-historical approach to human development with the statement: "[S]ociety produces the activity of the individuals forming it" (Leont'ev, 1978, p. 7). Hedegaard refined this definition by inserting the idea of institutional practices into this notion of society. She asks us to pay attention to what she describes as "the conceptualization of the historical institutionalized demands that mediate this [transformational] progress" (Hedegaard & Fleer, 2013, p. 200). Edwards captures this meaning by describing practices in institutions as "knowledge-laden, imbued with

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[2] We shall draw on English translations of their work throughout this book.

cultural values and emotionally freighted by the motives of those who already act in them" (Edwards, 2010, p. 5).

This development of Leont'ev's work to focus on institutional practices is central to our intention to help practitioners help children. Hedegaard's refinement means that practitioners and other carers have two tasks: making adjustments to practices to enable the unfolding of children's agency and guiding children's motive orientations so that they engage with activities in ways that reflect what matters in the practice. The focus on institutional practice also means that we can examine how practices give shape to the activities that comprise them and what is involved when children move between practices as they go from home to school to sports clubs and so on. Throughout this book, we therefore show the value of studying children's learning and development through a lens that recognizes the dynamic and evolving unity of child and practice.

The Cultural-Historical Theoretical Underpinnings of Understanding Children's Development

Vygotsky differentiated between children in different age periods. By age he did not mean chronological age, but the expectations in a society for how children in different life periods (early childhood, school-age and adolescence) should act. Importantly, he argued that the meanings connected with a child's emotional experience may be different for children in different age periods, because they may have developed different needs and attributes and therefore are differently motivated toward the same situation. We can see this, for example, in how children of different age periods join in family interactions or games. Bozhovich later elaborated on Vygotsky's view of how children's emotional experiences are influenced by their age period. She argued that: "[I]t may be said that the function of [a child's] experience is to orient to the subject within his environment and consequently motivate him" (1969, p. 213).

When a child makes a major life transition, such as from home care to nursery, from kindergarten to school or from school to higher education, they enter a new institutional practice where a new age period is socially constructed and a new social situation of development arises. In these transitions the child or young person reaches out to what is meaningful for them in the practices and may engage with ideas that are valued by caregivers in the practice and develops commitments. A central purpose of education, we shall argue, is to care-fully ensure that these commitments reflect what is valued by caregivers, such as the societal values that embrace

collaboration, sociality, mutual responsibilities and life-competences. A key concept here is a child's *leading activity*. Different institutions hold different expectations for children; while children's own development means that they experience demands in line with those expectations. For example, in most societies play is a leading activity in the preschool years, while learning in educational settings is the leading activity in middle childhood. The leading activity is therefore the interaction with the environment that produces the kind of development that is valued by society.

Throughout this book, we shall highlight the important role of adults in supporting children as they make these transitions. Key to that support is recognizing children's motive orientations, what they orient to in an activity. Hedegaard has described the development of motive orientations as follows: "Motive development can then be seen as a movement initiated by the child's emotional experience related to the activity setting" (Hedegaard, 2012a, p. 21). Motive orientations give direction to how people recognize, interpret and take actions to respond to the demands in a practice and are therefore crucial to learning and development.

Learning and development often arise from conflicts in motives. Conflicts can occur when children meet new demands in a new institution. They can also arise when children have acquired new competences that do not fit into the existing practice (e.g., when children start to walk) or when children get a new motive orientation because of being bored in the current practice (e.g., when children in kindergarten start to orient to school because older siblings go to school) Conflicts or crises in children's lives can therefore be seen as necessary, reflecting contradictions between a child's different motives or between a child's motives and the demands in the practices they are currently inhabiting. These crises may lead to a reorganization of a child's whole relation to the activities and people in his everyday life (Vygotsky, 1998). Development is therefore more than learning new competences or acquiring new motives. Development can be observed when children's social relations to other people are reorganized in each practice that the children inhabit (such as home and kindergarten) (Hedegaard, 2012b). Crises are nonetheless only potentially productive for a child. They can become detrimental if caregivers do not support the child to move forward and generate new motives and competences to meet new demands.

In general, parents want to do what is best for their children, and practitioners in kindergarten, school and other institutions want to engage children in the activities they offer. But they frequently find themselves

concerned about children and their actions. Often these concerns can reflect crises for both adults and children, from which they need to find a way forward. Examples of crises include the challenge of caring for an infant who cries when being taken to nursery, while their parents have difficulty in leaving them there; or a toddler who, just learning to walk, moves into dangerous situations; or when an adolescent who is new to a school finds it difficult to settle. Concerns can also include children's lack of activity such as school refusal, or the anxiety of a shy child in a classroom setting, or a young person who is not able to communicate his intentions. We will not characterize such concerns as problems belonging to the individual child, and instead argue that they should be seen as relational problems belonging to new challenges or changes in children's social situations and which call for action by carers and practitioners.

In brief, these crises are potential growth points and when they are negotiated fruitfully a child learns and, for example, becomes a school child able to orient toward new demands in the new setting. All children need help with these transitions and the shifts in motive orientation that they entail, and, as we shall see, some children require quite intensive support. We shall argue throughout the book that practitioners need to work relationally and care-fully with children, to support their new orientations. Our overarching aim is to reinstate care into a pedagogy that enables children's agency in handling their social situations. Therefore, over the chapters we will describe a care-full process of reciprocity between a caring adult and a child as she or he negotiates their way forward and learns.

We turn to Lisina's (1985) research on infants and young children to explain how care can nurture agency. She writes about what has been translated as "love" in the following way.

> If we interpret love in the broader sense, as just not tenderness, but as demanding tenderness, as a constant readiness to persuade and explain, to share experience and knowledge. Then love can never be excessive. Love of this kind is an inseparable part of showing respect for young children and of the endeavor to achieve mutual understanding with them. (Lisina, 1985, p. 91)

Lisina sees the adult as the guide to development and writes: "[A] child can only acquire independence through his interaction with adults" (p. 91).

We are also in tune with Noddings' writing on ethics, care and education. Like her, we recognize that a climate of care underpins successful pedagogy (Noddings, 2013); but we add a more detailed focus on how that climate is achieved through relationships. We therefore also agree with her emphasis on confirmation in interactions with children.

Noddings explains the challenge: "To confirm another we must know and understand the other's reality. Given the structure of today's schooling, this may be asking the impossible" (Noddings, 2013, p. xix). We don't underestimate the challenge, but throughout this book we shall offer examples of attentive listening and care-full interactions to show that it is not necessarily impossible.

In the chapters that follow, we examine how children are helped to negotiate transitions between institutional practices and orient toward demands within these. The chapters are organized by age periods. This is not because our approach is based in an unfolding of innate qualities as a child matures. Instead, by analyzing conflicts between children's motive orientation and the different forms of possibilities and demands children meet in situations, we can reveal the crises that give rise to their development. We recognize that the demands connected to transitions both between and within practices will be different for children in different life periods. Our intention is to offer tools to carers and practitioners so that they can identify these crises and help guide children's engagement as they participate in new practices.

A Wholeness Approach

So far we have focused on relationships between people and the demands of different practices. We are also aware of how practices, in families and schools, mediate the societal demands that arise through historically formed expectations and national policies. For example, in Denmark the objectives embedded in laws relating to schools focus on students' subject-matter competences, while the statutory requirements for preschool provision emphasize play and social competences over other learning goals. The examples and analyses in this book will recognize such societal imperatives but will focus mainly on the coevolution of the dynamic unities of children and the practices in which the activities they participate in are embedded. To do so we look below statutory demands to reflect how different institutions interpret and enact societal priorities and what that means for the children and young people in activities within the practices.

Hedegaard's work on what she has termed 'a Wholeness Approach' (Hedegaard, 2012b, 2014) has demonstrated how the practices of different institutions such as families, day care and schools mediate broader societal values and shape the activities that occur within the practices. Such mediation is fashioned by what matters for practitioners in each institution
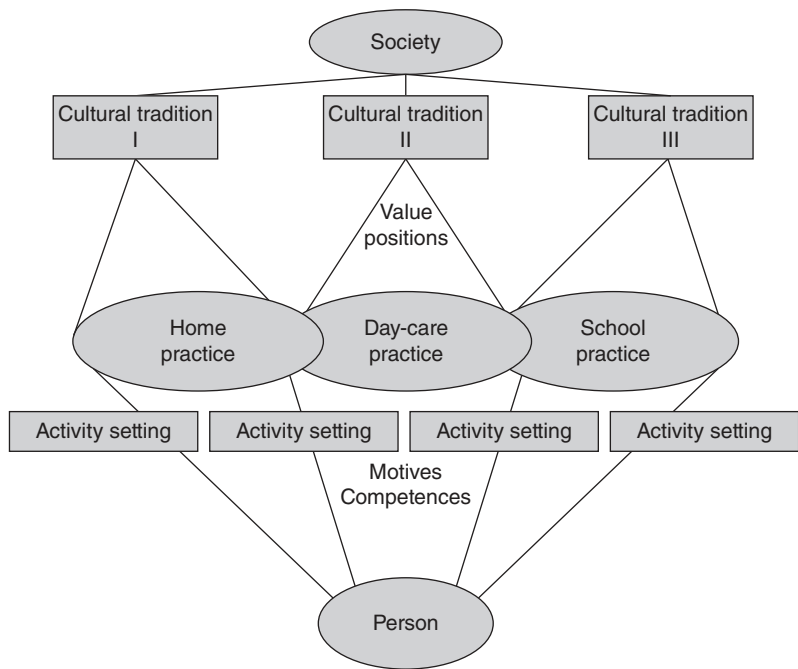
Figure 1.1   Different perspectives for analyzing children's development

and gives rise to the expectations held for children and young people as they engage in, and in turn shape, the activities.

Figure 1.1 (Hedegaard, 2012b) shows the interrelated analytic perspectives that comprise the Wholeness Approach. These are ways of entering an analysis of how societal priorities, such as those embedded in laws, national policies as well as values and norms in cultural traditions, are mediated into institutional practices such as those found in families and schools, and evidenced in activity settings within practices, such as mealtimes or classrooms. In brief, what matters in a practice gives shape to the activities within its activity settings and the demands the activities make on those who engage with them. For us the central analytic entry point in this book is how children enter activity settings, meet activities and bring to bear their own motives and competences when engaging.

As researchers who focus on how children learn and develop, our aim is to understand how children experience institutional practices and the activities in them, while recognizing that these practices are located in wider societal conditions.

In her work with families and practitioners over the years, Hedegaard has emphasized the need to relate to children, to try to see how they are experiencing and interpreting the demands to be found in activities that are situated in different practices. First and foremost, this relating involves understanding the child's actions from the child's perspective, how the child experiences the world. Here Hedegaard is following Vygotsky's observation (Vygotsky, 2019) that the world does not influence the child directly but is mediated through the child's emotional orientation founded in the child's social situation of development.

Vygotsky's developmental focus is important here. It reminds us that a child's perspective and emotional experiences in these practices are dependent on the child's age period (Bozhovich, 1969). Children's emotional development is connected with the development of the other psychic functions, such as imagination and memory, and cannot be understood independently of these. We elaborate the development of psychic functions in chapters that follow. Here we simply note that children's development of emotions involves making meaning through their growing understanding of cultural signs, such as the way language and facial expressions are used. At the same time, children learn to regulate their emotional responses in line with cultural expectations (Holodynski, 2013). Consequently, families and practitioners need to see children as active subjects with motives and intentions that influence how they act in different institutional activity settings.

A Wholeness Approach also recognizes that in a single day children can engage in several practices with other children and adults (Hedegaard, 2009). Consequently, a child experiences several social situations that together become part of their social situation of development. In this way a child's life is interconnected through their everyday participation across different institutional practices, giving rise to a multiplicity of social relations. A developmental perspective therefore sees a child's life as a pathway through central institutions such as family, nursery, kindergarten and school. Children's life courses, therefore, can be seen as pathways through the possible trajectories that a society affords its citizens (Hundeide, 2005).

This does not mean that their life courses are societally determined; our emphasis on agency and meaning-making ensures that we reflect the dynamic unity that is the social situation of development. One aspect of that dynamic unity is seen in the negotiations that children make when they move, for example, from the informal practices of family life with their own sets of expectations, to the formality of school and the need for motive orientations that allow them to interpret and engage with school

activities. They also need to negotiate when engaging in afterschool sporting or other activities and interacting with peers, where expectations are again different.

The processes involved in connecting demands from school with motives and competences in the context of family life are revealed in Hedegaard and Fleer's (2008) family research. There, Hedegaard followed four children in a middle-class Danish family, the Frederiksberg family: Kaisa (4 years), Emil (6 years), Lulu (8 years) and Laura (10 years). Each child was seen as having a different social situation of development and different motive orientations, through being oriented to different practices outside the family. Kaisa and Emil were still in preschool practice, with Emil just starting in the transition class, class zero, which prepares him for formal schooling. Lulu and Laura were school-age children oriented to activities and friends in school.

Following the children during the week, the researchers found that the children participate in several practices. All of them participate in shared activity settings in the family; only Kaisa participates in kindergarten practices and only Emil in the transition class. Both Lulu and Laura participate in school, and Emil and Lulu are involved in afterschool practices. Only Laura attends club activities. Sometimes they visit friends and one evening each week Lulu and Laura go to gymnastics. We will return to this family in later chapters where we follow how the children's participation in different practices influences the shared family activities. One such example is how Lulu's school practice, through being given homework, influences home practice for the whole family. We will illustrate this here with an observation extract from a mid-week homework setting in the Frederiksberg family.[3] When analyzing the children in this activity setting, we can see that although in the same situation, each child's social situation of development is different and is reflected in their different motive orientations.

Extract from observation 4. November

Mother sits down at the dining table together with Laura who had started preparing a written text, a task for her mother tongue subject (Danish).

Laura says "I'm writing sloppily, because it is only a draft."

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[3] In this research, four families were followed over a period of one year in three different periods of 30 days in each family, distributed into three periods by participant observations over 3–5 hours each time. In this chapter, we draw on the observations from the first period in the Frederiksberg family with four children to illustrate main points in Hedegaard's Wholeness Approach to development.