Early Learning and Development

Cultural–historical concepts in play

Early Learning and Development provides a unique synthesis of cultural–historical theory from Vygotsky, Elkonin and Leontiev in the 20th century to the ground-breaking research of scholars such as Siraj-Blatchford, Kratsova and Hedegaard today. It demonstrates how development and learning are culturally embedded and institutionally defined, and it reflects specifically upon the implications for the early childhood profession.

Divided into parts, with succinct chapters that build upon knowledge progressively, the book discusses the everyday lives of children at home, in the community, at preschool and at school in the context of child development and pedagogy. The book explicitly problematises the foundations of early childhood education, inviting postgraduates, researchers and academics to drill down into specific areas of international discourse, and extending upper-level undergraduates beyond the fundamental underpinnings of their learning. Ultimately *Early Learning and Development* offers new models of 'conceptual play' practice and theory within a globally resonant, cultural–historical framework.

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This book is dedicated to my late father, Franz Johannes Fleer
1931–2008.

Foreword

IN THE FIELD of early childhood education, one is presented with a dilemma – whether to guide and educate young children in relation to already established values or whether to give children room to become people in their own right. How do we engage and orient children towards the world through play activity? Fleer confronts this dilemma by drawing on the cultural–historical research tradition evolved from Vygotsky's theory and shows a way forward, a way, although rather complex, that views the child as both engaged and self-initiating, while at the same time as part of a collective cultural tradition. This dilemma starts the moment the child is born.

When, in the early 1970s, I was a newly educated researcher in developmental psychology and had had my first child, what do you think came to mind? To document the child's development, of course. I was inspired by several great men in child psychology. In the 1970s infant research started to show that babies were more competent than had been previously conceptualised in child psychology (Bruner 1968, 1999). This work inspired me, so together with a more experienced colleague, I decided to make a video of my first child from six weeks onwards and to follow him over the next two years. My colleague was a professor and an experienced clinical child psychologist. She suggested using tasks from Cattell's Infant Intelligence Scale to interact with my young son. I agreed. At that time video was a rather new tool for doing research, so we asked the technicians at the department of psychology to help us.

The first day of video recording came and I arrived with my son. Video technique did not always function well in those days, so it took some time to become organised. I waited in my lab with my son. After a while he started to become a little fussy looking at the bright light that was needed

to make the recordings. Finally, we could start. He had to follow different objects with his eyes, react to different sounds by turning his head, and so forth. My son did not focus well on these tasks, rather, he was more interested in his mother. Consequently, I had to turn him so that his back was to me to help him become more attentive to the tasks. When we got through the testing I was exhausted and the child was tired. The next day my colleague came with a smile and told me the IQ of my six week old child. I was so amazed that she had scored the tasks, as I had never for one moment thought this was the aim. I was upset because I did not want to reduce the activity we had videoed to a score; for me, it was the child's competence to act as a six-week-old that was interesting.

I looked closely at the video material, and made a qualitative description of all the activities he was involved in, and noted what he was oriented towards. It was easy to see that the child oriented himself towards the light, was interested in his mother, and followed the technician and the tester as they moved around. But the objects the mother showed him did not catch the same interest. To get him to concentrate in the test setting we gave him a pacifier, but then he concentrated on sucking and not on the tester and her tasks. In this research situation what I came to realise was that I had entered naively into a scientific tradition in which one thinks that one can find the child's biological capacities as objective entities. This event was the fuel that made me orient my approach as a researcher in developmental psychology to the child's perspective, and to the theoretical writings of Vygotsky, who provided a framework for orienting research and education towards the complexity of the child's social situation. This situation involves more than just looking at the child; it also seeks to examine how one enters into an evaluation of the conditions that are expressed through the child's activity, conditions that are both cultural and historical. I dropped the idea of recording my son's development of competences and instead started to orient my research towards the everyday life activities of small children and their social and material conditions. I find the same spirit in Fleer's approach and theoretical discussion throughout this book.

Vygotsky's theory encompasses an educational and a wholeness perspective on children's development. It includes the complexity of children in their everyday life activities and how caregivers enter into a relationship with children to create children's developmental life course. Every caregiver, whether a parent or educational professional, enters into this complexity because they are motivated to do a good job. As a parent one wants the best

for one's children; as a pedagogue or teacher one also wants the best for the children in one's care. To do one's best is not easy. Parents and caregivers take over procedures developed by an earlier generation and modify them in relation to the demands of the institutions and society they live in today. To create a quality educational experience is not so simple that it can be reduced to scientific or educational procedures. It implies an understanding of the social situation of the child as well as how this social situation is nested in traditions with different values of what education should provide and what knowledge is. The aim of educational science is to explicate and to modify accepted procedures and create new procedures and tools in the form of models of what can contribute to children's development and models of what is high-quality education. Fleer enters into this complexity with her discussions of valued curriculum concepts in early childhood education and of how the goal of education has to be related to what is seen as valuable forms of thinking and knowledge. Based on these discussions she provides models of good education that build on a conceptualisation of child development as an integrated whole.

Vygotsky argued for a wholeness approach in research and education of children (Vygotsky 1998; Hedegaard & Fleer 2008), an approach that researchers and educators have to take seriously if they want to better understand and provide a fuller, more encompassing support for children's development in relation to UNESCO's stated goals about children's rights. This implies that the child's relation to other people, the material world, community cultures and societal traditions should be included in an early childhood approach to education. The whole – the individual and the collective – has to be conceptualised together. Instead of building knowledge up from small building block, Fleer advocates that educators have to enter into the complexity of combining young children's everyday life with theoretical concepts to create conceptual models that can guide their interaction. It is valuable that she takes the child's as well as the teacher's perspective in this discussion, and in so doing thereby makes a contribution to education that brings the phenomenological understanding of the subject's orientation in the world into the cultural–historical tradition and surpasses the sometimes too functional view on Vygotsky's work, which she also criticises, an approach Vygotsky started himself by introducing the concept of the child's 'social situation of development' (1998), a concept he did not develop effectively because of his untimely death.

It is due time to start to conceptualise early childhood education from a wholeness perspective (Chaiklin & Hedegaard 2008). It is clearly evident that national boards for planning early childhood education conceptualise upbringing of children within institutions earlier and earlier. As more and more women enter the workforce an increased demand for childcare becomes evident. Significantly, most people in industrial and information societies conceptualise child development not as an unfolding event that refines inborn capacities, but rather as an appropriation and recreation of cultural competences that are social, emotional and cognitive. As such, upbringing and the education of young children has to transcend parents' responsibility and become a societal demand for education. Approaches to this problem have tended to move school education to earlier ages so that children start their formal educational experience younger and younger. This is reflected in research about literacy and maths learning in early ages and in curriculum plans in maths and literacy for younger children. To take the existing ideas and methods from school education into early childhood education the way it has been created for older children will be damaging for these young children. This generation who now starts in preschool and kindergarten will not get the possibility for exploring the world and social relations in play if these activities are not supported through the curriculum. When young children do not have the possibility to play and instead are expected to follow a kind of early school curriculum that focuses on learning for the acquisition of competences, it creates problems for them. The logic of what is important for young children to learn needs to be analysed. Instead of school teaching being pressed downwards to younger ages, the emotional and creative aspects of children's competence, so important for their development of social and cognitive competence, should be emphasised, yet this has long been forgotten and it is this that Fleer is up against.

Fleer gives solutions for these problems in advocating for a play approach to early childhood education. She advocates for educators to reflect on the education and knowledge they provide for young children and recommends that this should be different from the institutionalised curriculum of school. She gives us ideas that draw upon a newer version of the cultural–historical approach to play-based curriculum for how one can create educational approaches that build on play. Education creates the conditions for young children to orient themselves to the emotional and creative aspects of activities, elements that are central for the development of young children's social and cognitive competences.

I hope the richness in this book will lead to discussion of early childhood education both in scientific and educational communities as well as becoming a tool for educators for solving problems of education of young children.

Professor Mariane Hedegaard
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2009

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CHAPTER 3

The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations provided funding for the development of a set of early learning resources that are cited in this chapter. Consortium leaders were Professor Bridie Raban and myself. It was through this project that it was possible to undertake some fundamental research in numeracy, and into conceptual understandings of literacy and numeracy by staff. The overall results and theorisation are reported in M. Fleer and B. Raban (2007); early childhood literacy and numeracy in *Building Good Practice*, Canberra: Early Childhood Australia; and in M. Fleer and B. Raban (2006), A cultural–historical analysis of concept formation in early education settings: Conceptual consciousness for the child or only the adult? *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 14(2), 69–80.

PART 3

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by Professor Mariane Hedegaard, and is reported in M. Hedegaard and M. Fleer (2008), *Study Children: A cultural–historical approach to research*, Berkshire: Open University Press. The findings of the study are reported in M. Fleer and M. Hedegaard (forthcoming), Development as participation in everyday activities across different institutions: A child's changing relations to reality, *Mind, Culture and Activity*.

CHAPTER 13

Some sections of this chapter make reference to data from research reported in M. Fleer and C. Richardson (2009), Cultural–historical assessment: Mapping the transformation of understanding. In A. Anning, J. Cullen and M. Fleer (eds), *Early Childhood Education. Society and culture* (2nd edn), London: Sage, pp. 130–44, and M. Fleer and C. Richardson (2003), Collective mediated assessment: Moving towards a sociocultural approach to assessing children's learning, *Journal of Australian Research in Early Childhood Education*, 10(1), pp. 41–55 and S. Farquhar and M. Fleer (2007), Developmental colonisation of early childhood education in Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia, In L. Keesing-Styles and H. Hedges, *Theorising Early Childhood Practice. Merging dialogues*, Castle Hill: Pademelon Press, pp. 27–50.