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Reflections of pioneers in early childhood education research on their collaboration with practitioners in the development of theories and innovative practices

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ABSTRACT

This paper, based on interviews conducted for the *Early Childhood Oral History Project*, draws on oral life-history interviews with 14 prominent early childhood researchers who have been active since the 1970s within diverse European countries. A common theme across the interviews is the key role that collaborative research between academics and early childhood practitioners played in the construction of theories and innovative practices. The interviewees reflect on personal, social-political, epistemological and practical factors that underpinned their engagement in collaborative research, and the challenges they encountered. They give insight into the role practitioners played in the construction of education as a social-historical science – contextualised knowledge that is intrinsically related to ethics, values and innovation.

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Introduction

This paper draws on interviews from the *Early Childhood Oral History Project*, in which, so far, over 30 interviews have been conducted with prominent early childhood researchers and advocates from Europe, Canada and the United States, South America, and Australia and New Zealand, who have been active since the 1970s. Since that time, growth in the provision and science of early childhood education and care has been remarkable. The interviewees were involved in, and in many cases driving, this process. A common theme in many of the interviews is the key role of collaborative research between academics and practitioners, and in particular, their construction of theories and the development of innovative practices. The interviewees reflect on the personal, social-political, epistemological and practical factors that underpinned their engagement in collaborative research.

Because of our ongoing process of collecting and analysing interviews, we focus here on 14 interviews from nine European countries: Denmark, France, Finland, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom. We draw on the interviewees' stories

to illuminate the productivity of collaborative research. We make no claim that our interviewees are in any way representative of their country.

Oral history and the making of science

Early childhood education and care is a social-historical science shaped in historical context and based on values and philosophical assumptions (Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence 1999; Formosinho and Pascal 2016; Kessen 1979; Singer 1992). Yet we are often scarcely aware of how deep pedagogical and developmental psychological theories, concepts and research questions are anchored in cultural, moral and social-political choices and problems. Oral testimony from leaders in early childhood education can help us to become aware of the theories and epistemological foundations on which our knowledge is based (Clark 2005).

Participants for the *Early Childhood Oral History Project* are selected based on their being recognised as leading advocates, or having contributed significant research in a national context and internationally. They belong to the first generation of academics specialised in early childhood education and care.

Interviews last between 2 and 4 h (longer interviews are conducted in two parts over consecutive days). They are conducted in English and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts are edited and returned to participants for approval. The interviewees in this paper have approved the non-anonymous quotes. Analysis includes reading the transcripts multiple times and studying the publications of the interviewees. Within the initial tranche of 30 interviews, the theme of 'collaboration with and learning from practitioners' emerged. Interviews that included this theme were entered into Nvivo and further sub-themes were identified. They form the basis of this paper.

Collaborative research of pedagogues, developmental psychologists and practitioners

Nowadays, 'collaborative research' in education is defined as collaboration of academics and practitioners, where practitioners are regarded equal partners with expert knowledge of the cultural context in which they work, deep insights into the growth and development of children in their care and the needs and aspirations of families, as well as knowledge and understanding of ways to effectively support children and families (Jones et al. 2017). Before the Second World War, there were strong pedagogical traditions – 'pedagogies' – influenced by the ideas of Rousseau, Froebel, Montessori and Dewey, among others. They combined in various degrees philosophy, social-political goals, theoretical reflections, research and innovative practices (David, Goouch, and Powell 2015). Their focus was to disrupt existing practices by introducing new visions of children and social-political goals. In the UK in the early twentieth century, for example, Rachel and Margaret McMillan combined the development of social political theory and practical responses to the needs of young children and their mothers, political lobbying and advocating social justice (Nutbrown and Clough 2013). Likewise, in the 1920s, Susan Isaacs experimented with innovative practices along psycho-analytical lines, in the Malting House School for three- to seven-year olds in Cambridge (David et al. 2015). After the Second World War, Malaguzzi developed, in cooperation with teachers and parents, the pedagogical approach of Reggio Emilia (northern Italy). His precept of 'Hundred languages of children' inspired practitioners *and* researchers to acknowledge

the expressive talents of children that previously had been largely unrecognised (Edwards, Gandini, and Forman 1998).

With regard to theories of child development, Piaget, Vygotsky, and others focused on the understanding of child development. They were often engaged in qualitative studies embedded in theoretical and philosophical reflections. Piaget ([1951] 2013), for instance, observed his own children and, inspired by his training in biology and ecology, he became interested in epistemology. Vygotsky (1962) is known for his insights in the role of culture, community and adults in the learning and development of young children. His theories created a new vision on children as active learners and had a huge impact on early childhood education.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, in the USA research on child development was mainly focused on collecting data to establish chronological age norms for typical development (e.g. genetic theory of Gesell); and on discovering the effects of the environment on children's learning (e.g. behaviourism of Watson and Gesell) (Frank 1962). From these perspectives, much effort was invested in the development of tests and instruments to increase objectivity in measurement (e.g. IQ tests, EEG, scales for development). The general positivist principles of objectivity and detachment of values are seen as essential in scientific research (Kessen 1979; Senn 1975) and consequently viewed as superior to the knowledge of practitioners (Lomax 1978). In the 1970s, these positivist assumptions on the science–practice relationship, were strongly criticised by several of the interviewees. Below we outline the individual, social and political, epistemological and practical factors that influenced the interviewees' engagement in collaborative research and the challenges they faced.

Pedagogical expertise and experience as teachers

For 7 of the 14 interviewees included here, engagement in collaborative research was a logical continuation from their earlier career as teachers. Their knowledge about early years teaching was grounded in their professional knowledge of enlightened early childhood pedagogies and practical wisdom of their teacher colleagues. Interviewees expressed their admiration of the expertise of their teachers at teacher training colleges and of former colleagues. Anne Trine Kjørholt (Norway), for example, notes:

In the early 1970s the quality standards in kindergartens were very high in Norway. Highly emphasising the children here and now. The teachers were recognising children's perspectives, children's experiences, children's voices. The important and dynamic role of the teacher was highly emphasised, as a facilitator of play and creativity. It was a very stimulating and inspiring environment.

Margy Whalley (UK) reflects on experiences during her teacher training year that had a formative influence on her life-long work with families and practitioners:

It was a village primary school where children just walked through the fields to school and with an amazing early years teacher. It wasn't a wealthy community, but the school had this ethos where children's autonomy was respected, the teachers adored the children, and they knew them intimately and knew their families.

These seven interviewees' intimate understandings of the complexities of daily practice often led to strong epistemological beliefs that contravened tenets of positivist scientific research dominant at the time. For example, whilst positivism would argue that the results of experimental studies of effects of some isolated, measurable 'factors' can easily be

generalised to new contexts, those with experience of EC settings are highly aware of the impossibility of isolating and manipulating ‘factors’ in complex early years’ settings (Love et al. 2003). As a consequence, several interviewees became committed to socioculturally informed theoretical perspectives that acknowledge what Chris Pascal (UK) refers to as ‘the complexity and the chaotic reality of everyday life’ of early years’ settings. Pascal:

My fundamental focus is in the grounded reality of daily life and practice. It’s a practice and a real world, real life thing that fascinates me, and my academic work and study is a value only through the fact that it helps me to make sense of real life practice.

Their experience as teachers alerted them to marginalisation and discrimination that are commonly experienced by teachers. Tricia David (UK), for example, who received a degree in mathematics before she became an early years’ teacher, recalls one incidence of ‘marginalisation’:

A lot of people still regarded teachers who worked with young children as not very bright. Somebody came on a visit to the nursery school – she must have been in some kind of relatively powerful position. The children had made a lovely permanent collage from pieces we’d collected from a scrap metal dealer. We had sorted out everything that was circular to put onto this collage. When this woman came, she started asking me silly questions. I felt like saying ‘Excuse me, I do have a maths degree.’ She really talked down to me as though I didn’t know why we had chosen to do the collage with shapes.

Rather than taking for granted the claim of superiority of positivist academic knowledge, these interviewees highly value professional and personal knowledge. Some, such as Tricia David, assess the value of academic theories by comparing them to their personal experiences:

I think when I found something that rings true for me, it’s as it were to affirm what I’ve learnt from being with children and observing children.

Political movements and social activism of the 60s and 70s

Many interviewees were inspired by the political movements and social activism of the 60s and 70s, such as: left wing, feminism and civil, equal, and children’s rights movements. These movements were diverse in their focus on oppressed groups, ideologies and political strategies (e.g. communist vs. social-democrat). But they all aimed to fight against inequality and abuse of power, and for a better and just society. There was also a common interest in the provision of early childhood education to readdress inequality, sexism and discrimination (e.g. day care for working mothers; compensatory education for children from disadvantaged families; pedagogical innovations to challenge authoritarian education). Several interviewees collaborated with practitioners to develop new practices to realise democratic and pedagogical values and to meet the local needs of children and parents in a changing society.

Stig Broström (Denmark), for example, studied at the University of Roskilde, founded in 1972 as an alternative to the traditional Danish universities. Roskilde was known for its liberal education as opposed to undemocratic curricula controlled by professors. Within that university, multiple perspectives were explored through project work. Broström recalls how much he enjoyed the heated discussions that ensued with students and preschool teachers. He continued this approach in his work on early education (Broström 2002), first as a teacher with his wife who was head of a preschool. Broström:

My wife implemented new ways of organising the morning meeting with the children. That was children's decision making, and what they decided was organised in project groups, as we had learned at the University of Roskilde. For example, a project on how different families live. They took visits to children's homes. They studied rich and poor families, they made pictures and drawings and also started with political reflections. The reflection was based on the Marxist idea of contradictions. When contradictions are brought together something new will develop.

Not all interviewees were overtly politically active, but nevertheless many were infected by the spirit of social and political change of the 1960s. Kjørholt:

When I look back, not that many students at ECD teacher education were actually left wing political activists. But many of us, students and practitioners, were impacted by the values of the 1968 movement, independence, equality and justice.

The 1960s and 1970s was a time of high expectation that science could contribute to a better world. Reflecting on herself as a young student Tricia David, says:

I think my ideas very much fitted with what people, especially those of us who were students in the 1960s, believed. That there wouldn't be any more war or famine or terrible things happening to people. We would do our best and probably we believed that science could sort out a lot of stuff. I guess now we don't believe that it can do everything.

Critical theories and participative learning

The involvement with oppressed groups made interviewees aware that social reality is multi-faced, but in science often constructed from the perspective of the dominant group: white, male, capitalistic and highly educated. They criticised positivism and mainstream theories, recognising hidden values – sexism, racism, colonialism, misuse of power, control and disciplinary regimes. They studied critical theories to understand knowledge–power relationships and ethics and values in research, for instance Marxist dialectic theories of Marcuse and Engeström; postmodernist theories of Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari; sociological analyses of knowledge of Bernstein; and pedagogical theories of Dewey and Freire. Interviewees questioned the superiority of 'evidence-based' scientific knowledge, and developed methods of research to give a voice to experiences that were ignored or suppressed, and developed 'participative pedagogies' based on dialogues and mutual learning (Formosinho and Pascal 2016).

Chris Pascal was inspired by Freire:

The empowerment and the liberation of people from their trappedness, finding their voices and shaping their world.

She argues that the unique experiences of practitioners have to be valued:

And who owns knowledge? If you're in reality, you have some knowledge but the knowledge resides with everybody within that reality. It doesn't lie in a book or in a specialist's expertise. Then you can get that dialogue going to co-construct, then you really get a sense of that reality. You've got to accept that actually that person might know a hell of a lot more.

Critical theories helped Pascal to understand her personal experiences and to make sense of the complexity of early childhood practices:

When you start to read theories and ideas, that helps to understand your story. They helped me to make sense of it and realise that there are others that share the same narrative. Very strengthening effect. Theories help to put patterns on something that's complicated and chaotic.

Ideas about mutual and participative learning deeply influenced interviewees' teaching of students at the university – who often combined study and work in early childhood. Pascal:

Most students were doing research in their own class, in their own school. We were learning on the job, and writing methodologically – recording practice. I was reading people like Vivian Gussin Paley, John Holt all those who were just capturing in more of a narrative sense. I've always been very interested in narrative accounts rather than experimental design.

Most interviewees were involved in workshops with practitioners, politicians and academics to produce insights into critical issues and ideas about political actions. A recent example is 'the laboratory' for critical, democratic preschool education, organised by Stig Broström and colleagues in Denmark:

We meet with 24 pedagogues. My colleague or I give some short speech and invite them to sit in small groups of 3 persons from each preschool. They discuss what can we gain from these speeches? How can we plan a new practice? Then there are 3 months' practical work, they try out. They make up their own new practice, make notes and video tapes. It gives us a lot of data. We look at it together, analyse, make criticism and find out how can we take the next step? Then they go to practice to take a next step. So we construct new didactic concepts and methods.

Deconstruction and reconceptualisation of the child

Viewed through these critical lenses, images of 'the child' had to be deconstructed. Gunilla Dahlberg (Sweden), who studied sociological and philosophical theories of knowledge (for instance, Bernstein, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari), produced together with Peter Moss and Alan Pence a philosophically grounded approach, denying 'universal knowledge' of best practices and valuing 'pedagogy of listening' to voices of children, parents and practitioners (Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence 1999). Exchanges between Dahlberg and Swedish colleagues, with Malaguzzi and his colleagues from Reggio Emilia in Italy, opened up new ways to work with these ideas in practice. Dahlberg and Malaguzzi shared the conviction that you cannot copy 'Reggio' in Sweden or in any other place (Cagliari et al. (2016). Reggio pedagogy is always contextualised: teachers, children and the parents, have to experiment and do research in their own context.

As from 1993, Dahlberg and colleagues were involved in practice-oriented research projects. They founded the Reggio Emilia Institute in Stockholm and setup networks that still exist for exchange of experience between the practices of preschools, teacher education and early childhood educational research. Dahlberg argues that to make change happen, post-structural thinking has mainly been used as a challenge in relation to observations and documentations of the different practices. Dahlberg:

I realised that we had to bring documentation into each session of the network, and start from there with deconstructions of our images of the child, knowledge and learning and the affordances which we have got in the environment. That has been absolutely the most important thing that I have done in my whole research life.

The conviction that Reggio is not a method but a philosophy built on a strong idea of democracy combined with a pedagogy of listening, led to a paradigmatic shift in pedagogy and changed teachers' views on their work. According to Dahlberg, the approach gives educators courage for engaging in open discussions in the network. Dahlberg gives an example of a teacher who showed a video of his work for discussion:

I was surprised, he said: 'I thought I was a good listener, but I'm intruding all the time.' That was a very, very important moment in the network. Also, because he was so courageous to show us.

The process of deconstruction and working from Reggio philosophy is intense and time consuming. Dahlberg recalls that in the beginning many colleagues were disappointed with the process of change and transformation. In some participating services, for example, only inconsequential, cosmetic changes, that reflected the 'Reggio' look, were made – like incorporating 'some easels'. Dahlberg:

First I got so unhappy to hear such comments. But then I realised how I could answer: 'Oh, did they try to work with inspiration from Reggio. Oh, I'm very happy about it.' I have learnt so much how hard, and time consuming, it is to change paradigm. You mustn't be frustrated and blame the ones who don't follow on. Our traditions and dominant discourses are so inscribed in our practices, so just a few years of challenges is not enough. But if you never start you will never manage to change!

Along similar lines, Christa Preissing (Germany) worked in the triangle of research, constructing curricula with practitioners, and policy, inspired by critical theories of Freire and others. She and her colleagues developed the 'Contextual approach of curricula for day care centres and kindergartens' (Prott and Preissing 2006) that has been implemented in Berlin and other Germany cities. The 'Contextual approach' values the knowledge and pedagogical goals of parents and practitioners. An example is the collaborative research undertaken by Preissing after the reunification of West and East Germany in the 1990s, to design a curriculum that would align with the education goals of an unified Germany. Preissing:

In the 1990s we started participatory research on: What does quality mean in early childhood education? In the first phase we worked with 25 kindergartens in different regions, in the eastern and western part of Germany. We elaborated together with the professionals and with the parents what is good quality for them. Then we clustered the results together and brought that back to the 25 centres, discussed it again. We did this 5 times.

The second phase of the research focused on how these quality criteria can be fulfilled. The criteria have to take into account working conditions – that are never perfect – opportunities, assessment of the children, and parents' perspectives. Preissing and colleagues developed materials for self-evaluation that respected the knowledge and values of the educators and parents responsible for the children and pedagogical practices.

Developmental theories: making sense of children's learning

Interviewees were also inspired by development theories to engage in collaborative research. Participants especially mentioned Piagetian and Vygotskian approaches as enabling academics and practitioners to cooperate in discovering the 'active child', and to observe mental capacities in very young children that were earlier considered impossible. Sylvie Rayna, a former student of Piaget, explained how much she owed to him. First because of his style of lecturing and openness to new insights:

I remember he did not want people imitating him and he was very proud about some of his colleagues, assistants or people working in his centre, because of developing new things in other contexts, such as Guy Cellerier (cybernetics) or Ariane Etienne (ethology).

His views on education continue to inspire her:

His pedagogical approach of defending of active pedagogies, that is to say, creating workshops in the classroom, children doing research in team, teachers as animator.

Rayna is also indebted to Piaget for his theoretical tools to analyse knowledge as process. Joining a research project, initiated by Mira Stambak et Hermina Sinclair in crèches in Paris, Rayna contributed to show the logical capacities in babies and their discovery of physical properties of objects (Sinclair et al. 1982). Rayna's analysis of the babies' spontaneous manipulations of mixed objects demonstrated how they explore them, organise them and experiment with them. The analysis led to understandings about the logic underlying the succession of the babies' actions, as well as the development of increasingly sophisticated organisation of their actions and physical knowledge. Exchanges with staff around the observations, marked the beginning of collaborative research. Staff became surprised by what was observed in babies' thinking. Rayna recalls that the staff were worried about a two-year old girl who had been in hospital for a long time:

We put all this mixed material, sticks and cubes, clay with her. For long, long minutes nothing happened. Then after having a look at all the material, but without any manipulation, she put all the cubes like this, in a line. And immediately she took all the sticks and she put one stick in each cube, a term-to-term correspondence and went away. The director of the crèche said: 'we could have said: nothing interesting is happening, let's do something else'. But she was thinking ... She was acting abstractly...

Subsequently, collaboration with staff developed and led to an action-research focused on pretend play among three-year olds (Stambak and Sinclair 1993).

Likewise, in Sweden, Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson was inspired by Piaget, especially by his clinical interview method, to study children's thinking (Pramling Samuelsson et al. 2000). She developed methods for students and practitioners to talk with and observe children and to find out how they think, act and structure experiences in diverse areas, such as mathematics, literacy and art.

My first more scientific popular book was with Elisabeth Doverborg about making interviews with children, in 1985. Then there were generations of preschool teachers who did interviews and analysed what they were hearing and saying and things like that.

Pramling Samuelsson taught her students who were mostly early years' teachers:

You can tell children, you can give children all kinds of experience, but knowledge is developed in children. You always have to respect the child and the child's world because they're learning. Children are doing just like we are doing as researchers, but we are doing it on another level, it's the same kind of knowledge process. Children have to be both supervised and challenged.

Vygotskyan theories played a key role in the collaboration of Bert van Oers with preschool teachers in the Netherlands. He studied the theories of Vygotsky and his followers, and was committed to improving education practice. Inspired by Vygotsky, he introduced 'tools' for thinking – schematising activities (van Oers and Poland 2007). Also, he collaborated with students who combined their study with teaching in pre- and primary schools. Through this process, a learning community of academics and teachers developed.

They were doing their Master thesis research in their own classrooms. So step-by-step I got more involved with that type of work. All the research projects that we did were always very much informed by the ideas of teachers and teacher educators. Teachers, teacher educators and we as academic researchers learned all the time from each other.

As Nico van Oudenhoven (who worked in poor areas and non-western developing countries) reminds us, pedagogy is not 'applied' development psychology; even when it relates to well established and research-based insights (Van Oudenhoven and Van Oudenhoven 2014).

When we do not take the life conditions into account, we can add to the problems of parents and practitioners. Van Oudenhoven:

Most of us urge parents to do more: read books to the children, join parents' groups, tell stories, play more with them. All this, though well intended, adds to their burden. These are nice things to tell to parents who have plenty of resources and time, but not for those whose lives are daily battles for survival.

Responding to new challenges facing practitioners

Related to the feminist movement and needs of the labour market, in particular women's workforce participation, new demands for early childhood provisions arose in the 1970s. Of particular interest is the rise of day care for infants and toddlers. Before the 1970s there were few pedagogical models available for very young children in group settings. New models had to be invented. Pedagogically talented practitioners and academics took the lead. Trying out practices and research went hand in hand. For example, in Italy in 1971, a national law was introduced requiring municipal and regional authorities to take responsibility for planning, regulating and running nido (baby) centres. Tullia Musatti, who did pioneering work on learning and peer relationships of under three-year-olds in group settings, notes:

In the 70s and early 80s there was no culture of early childhood education in Italy; there was no knowledge about it. There was a strong political resistance against crèches; from the Catholic Church, from psychoanalytic psychologists.

To address pedagogical quality, councils called on the knowledge and expertise of researchers working with teachers. Through Malaguzzi's initiative, a network was established for practitioners, academics and politicians to increase knowledge and share ideas about how to work with infants (Musatti and Picchio 2010). Musatti:

Gruppo Nazionale Nidi Infanzi was a great help. It was a place for exchange, national meetings, contacts and so on. A place for reflection and exchange with practitioners and decision-makers.

Methods of collaboration were developed that remain active today. Musatti, for instance, regularly has meetings with practitioners to discuss research notes and videos of practitioners. Together they analyse why some pedagogical actions work or not (Picchio et al. 2012). Musatti:

We showed the learning processes in young children: imitations, cooperation, argumentation, etc., and how you can make a setting convenient to the way babies learn. So after several research, our little team put together what we learnt with infants and very young children and with innovative teachers.

Likewise, in Finland, Maritta Hännikäinen studied 'togetherness' among very young children, and teachers' strategies to build a preschool community of learners. She used ethnographic methods: being a reactive observer in the day care groups, with interviews, discussions and simulated recalls with practitioners and children (Hännikäinen 2005). Drawing on her experience as a teacher, she undertook an action research project on health education. The whole project was the initiative of the practitioners.

We developed together with the staff the curriculum guidelines and action plans regarding health education for each children-age group, and evaluated the development process to step to the second stage of the process. It was necessary that we, two academically educated researchers, also had kindergarten teacher education, as personally experienced knowledge of ECEC [Early Childhood Education and Care] turned out to be necessary in the process.

Collaborative research is not restricted to professional pedagogues. In the community of learners the voices of parents and children were also included (Clark, Kjørholt, and Moss 2005). Margy Whalley tells how parents cooperate in collecting data at the Pen Green Centre for children and families (UK):

It's a joint way of working. From the very first day [of Pen Green] we used to lend video cameras to parents. Parents would take tiny video vignettes of their children at home and we did so at the nursery. We put those videos together for discussion. That was developing deep mutual understanding.

Collaborative research and academic standards

During the late twentieth century in many European countries, teacher training colleges became part of the university. Seven of our interviewees were among the first professors in newly established departments for early childhood education and cultural childhood studies: Stig Broström in Denmark, Gunilla Dahlberg and Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson in Sweden, Tricia David and Chris Pascal in the UK, Maritta Hännikäinen in Finland, Anne Trine Kjørholt in Norway. Integration of teacher training into the university raised the status of early years' teachers, and gave them opportunities to start Master and PhD research. But the academic context also has challenges. The interviewees spoke about their different experiences within the academy as a result of conducting collaborative research with practitioners

Chris Pascal explains the fundamental differences in scientific paradigm between pure academic research and her research:

My fundamental focus is in the grounded reality of daily life and practice. And I think that's very different to somebody whose focus and reality is based on the data, the research, the theories that are proved or not proved, and they're only proved through a kind of empiricism that comes in to help them.

Several interviewees explained that they did both academic and collaborative research. Academic research was initiated by the researcher and focused on theoretical analyses, survey studies with statistical analyses or ethnographic studies of new phenomena in child centres. But also the academic studies of interviewees had an epistemological underpinning that differs from positivist epistemology. Indeed, Tricia David denies that 'regimes of truth' can be owned by scientists or practitioners. She believes in multiple perspectives, sharing knowledge and debates. David:

I accept the work of colleagues from both ends of the spectrum, positivistic and those criticising positivism. But the only way we can begin to understand about children and ourselves – is if we observe and talk together and, yes, bring in the theories and bring in the philosophies

In pedagogical science we have to verify whether 'facts' still hold. Society changes and values, goals and contexts change (Tobin, Arzubiga, and Mantovani 2007). Susanna Mantovani:

So you have to follow change. Whatever you do, you have to go back to observation, collect evidence and discuss with others. But it is not change for the sake of changing. You have to discuss, why do we do it? What are our goals?

Acceptance of collaborative research by the scientific community

Among the interviewees there were significant differences in the degree to which their research with practitioners was accepted by the scientific community. These differences

were largely related to national policies and the kind of institution with which the interviewees were affiliated. For instance, Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson was strongly supported by her university. Sweden had a progressive education policy since the 1970s; in Sweden and within her university there was interest in dialogue and communication with practitioners and children. Pramling Samuelsson:

Since I was very early in the development of an academic profession in ECEC, I got money everywhere because it was quite unique, there were not many to compete with in that area. I have been lucky to get research money during my whole career.

Several interviewees noted that acceptance of collaborative research is becoming increasingly difficult. Christa Preissing notices a change occurring in German universities, away from critical theorising in ECEC, towards evidence-based quantitative approaches, and less valuing of collaborative research with practitioners.

My analysis is that critical thinking and critical theories like post-structuralist, post-colonialist, feminist theories are not valued anymore in our universities in Germany. It's much more the mainstream of so-called evidence-based research with quantitative methods, with measuring outcomes on all levels. There is less interest in how you can do cooperative research with practitioners and support quality development.

Most interviewees working at universities or research institutes mentioned the pressure to publish in peer reviewed journals for an academic audience. Some noted that this pressure reduces their capacity to initiate cooperative research with practitioners. Tullia Musatti, for example:

I had to have a result in terms of 'publish or perish'. International publications were mandatory to keep your position as an academic. From that perspective, there is no use to spend the time in cooperative research with practitioners.

Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson rages:

I mean it's so stupid, what are we doing, looking for a high-ranking journal, where maybe only two people who are interested in early childhood education read it. Publish somewhere where thousands of early childhood people read it, I mean how have we got into this business? I just think that's so stupid, and we are accepting it. Why do we continue with this?

Five interviewees were co-organisers of institutes outside the strict frames of the university. They used the opportunities offered by NGOs, local and national governments and international EU projects: Gunilla Dahlberg in Sweden, Chris Pascal and Margy Whalley (UK), Christa Preissing (Germany), Nico van Oudenhoven (the Netherlands). For example, somewhat circumventing the traditional academy, Margy Whalley established and became Director of the Pen Green Research, Development and Training Base that is allied to an university, but based in the Pen Green Centre for children and families in the UK (Whalley 2007).

All interviewees explained that international networks, journals and conferences have been very important in the fight for legitimisation of collaborative research. Chris Pascal:

We felt that the way to do that was launching a journal that met international standards of academic rigour and was more open to a wider range of methodological and paradigm approaches and gave them all equal status of standing. That is EECERJ [European Early Childhood Research Journal] that has appropriate peer review structures. I think that was and remains a deeply ambitious thing but I think we're doing it.

The interviewees are convinced that collaborative research is crucial in the science of pedagogy and education. Because of collaborative research, they have witnessed engagement of a wide range of stakeholders – academics, practitioners, parents – and increased quality

of life for children, parents and teachers. Nevertheless, this kind of research continues to be marginalised and tends not to inform national agendas. The big challenge in collaborative research is to clarify the paradigm and the kind of data that it produces (Formosinho and Pascal 2016). Pascal:

So the work which we tried to do was finding out ways how to build in reflective dialogues, how to build in strategies to make sure that somebody can't say 'oh that's just your story and you've pulled out a part of the data'. So that you can conduct rigorous audit trails about how you layered your narrative and how you selected from that. To accept that there are other ways than experimental and quantitative designs. There are equally valid and useful ways of doing research that generate knowledge that's useful to practice and policy.

In conclusion

The interviews with leaders in early childhood education shed light on the development of collaborative research of academics and practitioners in Europe since the 1970s. Their engagement with collaborative research was underpinned by a range of factors. For some, (1) their experience as (preschool) teachers meant they highly value professional knowledge, and drove their desire to capture the chaotic nature of daily practice. (2) They were inspired by the social-political movements of the 1960s and 1970s to make a better world. (3) Their engagement with critical theories made them reflect on knowledge–power relationships, ethics and democratisation of pedagogical knowledge and to criticise positivism. (4) They were inspired by development theories to engage in collaborative observations of children's behaviour and active learning, and to introduce innovative practices. (5) They responded to the need of practitioners to develop and experiment with new pedagogical models related to new provisions and new pedagogical goals.

The interviewees spoke of the diverse ways they collaborate with practitioners. When interviewees guide Master and PhD students, the role of practitioner and academic researcher almost coincides. Students research and publish aspects of their own practice and introduce new views on children. As academics they have to meet academic standards and as practitioners they have to meet the standards of their institution. In other cases, practitioners are the ears and eyes of the academics in observing new phenomena, problems and solutions, while the academics introduce theoretical concepts for understanding. Sometimes the role of the academic is restricted to supplying tools and concepts to support practitioners' self-evaluation and research on their practice. The academics often publish and reflect at a theoretical level about the process and results of collaborative research. As well as having their professional responsibility, to which academics can advise but not supersede, practitioners play an important role in trying out new ways of working, and transferring these ideas to colleagues in professional networks, trainings and symposia.

Several of the interviewees mentioned the growing pressure to conform to an academic culture where output is defined by the quantity of papers published in academic, peer-reviewed journals; collaborative research and publications with or for practitioners are hardly valued. The interviewees point to the need to continue the legitimisation of collaborative research by developing rigorous methods to validate findings, and to advance the epistemological underpinnings.

The interviewees were pioneers. Through collaborative research, they ploughed new fields of research in group settings and constructed theories of young children's social,

emotional and cognitive learning. They formed national and international networks that increased opportunities for research and influence on pedagogy. Much of the pedagogical innovations they were involved in are now available for younger generations of researchers and practitioners in handbooks and pedagogical methods (e.g. David, Goouch, and Powell 2016). But the critical reflections have to go on. In this respect, historical consciousness might support the recognition of the uniqueness of the educational and pedagogical sciences. The collaborative research that has occurred since the 1970s can be considered as a continuation of the rich pedagogical tradition of philosophies, theories and methods that existed prior to the Second World War. Pedagogy is a creative activity. There is no definitive answer for ‘what must be done to achieve pedagogical goals?’ – as societies change, their values, priorities and goals are changing as well. Practitioners are often at the forefront of these new challenges. Working collaboratively with practitioners enables researchers to make valuable contributions to the science of education.

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