Play, Learning, and Children's Development

Everyday Life in Families and Transition to School

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CAMBRIDGE

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107028647

First published 2013

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data
Hedegaard, Mariane.
Play, Learning, and Children's Development: Everyday Life in Families and Transition to School /
Mariane Hedegaard, University of Copenhagen; Marilyn Fleer, Monash University.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978-1-107-02864-7
1. Child development. 2. Families. 3. Play. 4. Learning. I. Fleer, Marilyn. II. Title.
HQ772.H415 2013
305.231–dc23
2012031865

ISBN 978-1-107-02864-7 Hardback

PLAY, LEARNING, AND CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT

This book explores the dynamics of children's daily lives as they move between school and family, where their motives change in relation to the new challenges they meet. Professors Mariane Hedegaard and Marilyn Fleer follow children in four families, two in Australia and two in Denmark, over periods of up to a year. Using these case studies, they articulate the ways in which everyday activities and the demands of both family and educational contexts influence children's play, learning, and development. Inspired by Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory, the authors formulate an analytic approach that includes and accounts for children's perspectives. Through theoretical and empirical work, Hedegaard and Fleer convincingly show how children's development occurs through participation in everyday activities.

Mariane Hedegaard is a professor of developmental psychology and head of the Centre for Person, Practice, Development and Culture at the University of Copenhagen. Her recent publications include *Motives in Children's Development* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), coauthored with Marilyn Fleer and Anne Edwards.

Marilyn Fleer holds the foundation chair for early childhood education at Monash University, Australia, and is the research director for the Child and Community Development research group. Recent publications include *Early Learning and Development: Cultural-Historical Concepts in Play* (2010) and *Play in the Early Years* (forthcoming), both from Cambridge University Press.

Acknowledgments

This book is a study about children during the period when they transition into school. The inspiration to start this research came from the study of Barker and Wright of children growing up in a Midwestern USA city in the 1940s. We, however, wanted to combine their ecological ideas of this research with the cultural-historical tradition formulated in Vygotsky's theory of development, orienting the research foci toward children's activities and what they were engaged in in their everyday life.

As researchers, we wanted to be active in following children in their everyday life, including their activities with other family members, as well as their activities outside the home, in school, and after school. The intensity of this approach restricted the number of families that we could observe. We chose to follow children in two families in Denmark (in the city of Copenhagen) and two families in Australia (in the state of Victoria), documenting their everyday lives over an extensive period. This approach allowed us to explore the diversity of how children grow up in contemporary Western communities with similar social conditions.

It was challenging to bring together the material that forms the basis of this book, which formulates a conception of children's learning, play, and development using a wholeness perspective. We are very grateful to the families for the way they treated our presence.

In the Danish context, the children took a lot of responsibility for the researchers, as we followed them around, telling their friends that we were their researchers and ensuring that we felt comfortable wherever we went with them. The research assistants for the Danish observations, Louise Kryger and Kasper Hanghøj, contributed to the research process through their engagement in the family project. Their participation was supported by a grant from BUPL's Research Fund (*Børne-og ungdomspædagogernes landsforbunds*

forskningspulje). The research data presented in this book came from a larger project, conducted with Jytte Bang and Pernille Hviid, reported in M. Hedegaard, P. Hviid, and J. Bang (2009), *Børneliv på kryds og tværs* (Copenhagen: BUPL).

In the Australian families, the children were younger; they also greeted the researchers with enthusiasm and were always welcoming. Gloria Quinones went with Marilyn on all the visits to the family homes, and at the end of the research Carol Fleer helped with video recording the children in school. Their participation in the research was supported by the Jean Denton and Lillian deLissa Research Fund for Early Childhood Education.

The Danish and the Australian research assistants made important contributions to our study, developing a close relationship with the families and with us. We thank them very much for their contributions. Finally, we are deeply grateful to the children and their families for participating in this study of children's play, learning, and development in everyday life.

Over the course of several years, while researching and writing this book, we cooperated on the writing and editing of three other books, which enriched our conceptions and influenced the writing of this book. The first was *Studying Children* (2008). This publication gave us the background for coordinating our research and theoretical approach. The second was *World Yearbook of Education 2009: Childhood Studies and the Impact of Globalization: Policies and Practices at Global and Local Levels*, together with Professor Jonathan Tudge from the University of North Carolina–Greensboro; and the third was *Motives in Children's Development* (2012), together with Professor Anne Edwards from Oxford University.

Contents

SECTION 1

A WHOLENESS APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF CHILDREN'S EVERYDAY LIFE

Chapter 1

Children's Social Situation and Their Activities in Everyday Settings

Children's development within the fields of psychology and education is now a hotly contested area, with a plethora of critiques having been made over the years (e.g., Rogoff, 1990, 2003). Yet all of the alternatives that are put forward, whether theoretical or empirical, have neglected to look at how the everyday life of children can act as the source of children's development. The aim of this book is to show how children's play, learning, and development in everyday family life can be conceptualized within the everyday settings and institutional practices in which children participate. In this book we specifically take account of the child's social situation of development, theorizing children's development from a cultural-historical perspective. We begin this theoretical orientation by introducing in this first chapter one of the four families who make up the content of this book of family practices and child development:

Breakfast in a Danish family is a shared activity for all family members. It is the early winter-morning period and the Fredriksberg family are assembled at the table eating their breakfast. The family is made up of the mother, father, Laura (10 years), Lulu, (8), Emil (6), and Kaisa (4). It is an ordinary day for a family with school children. It is late autumn and this extract is taken from a four-hour observation that began at *6:30 a.m.*

> The whole family is gathered around the table eating breakfast, either cornflakes or porridge.
> The researcher asks if the family always rises so early.
> The mother says that they used to rise at this time, but today they were up a little earlier [because of the researchers' morning visit].
> Emil claims that he also rises at that time when he is off from school.
> The mother denies that.
> Then he argues he is the first to rise when they do not have to go to school.
> Kaisa says that she is the first to rise when they are off from school.

> The mother then says they take turns at being the one that rises earliest. The mother tells the researcher that on weekdays they have to rise so early because she leaves for work at 7:15 AM, in order to be able to leave work at 2:30 p.m., to fetch the children from the daycare institutions at 3:00 p.m. While the mother has been talking, Emil has crawled onto his father's lap. Lulu brings up her music lessons and tells about how the music teacher is annoying, because he never lets them sing a whole song, but stops them and asks them to redo what they already have done. She does not understand why he stops them all the time and they never finish a song. Kaisa tells about how they are singing in the kindergarten, and starts singing a song about the blowing wind.
>
> Emil starts singing along. He knows the song better, and Kaisa gets annoyed.
>
> The father tells Emil to stop singing, which he does [so Kaisa can finish her song].
>
> The mother asks if it is raining, and Kaisa wonders how it can rain in wintertime [when it is supposed to snow]. (Period 1, Visit 5, November – Autumn)

The morning periods in the Fredriksberg family have been followed over nine visits. The morning setting described above is re-created every weekday morning with some variation, depending on the particular concrete conditions. The morning period is consistently structured by the demands of being at school on time. There are often events from school that are taken up by the children in the morning talk, as was noted above when Lulu discusses her music teacher's approach to singing songs. What both children and adults bring to the situation from their other relationships in school, work, and kindergarten, or when playing with friends, will influence the specific morning setting.

In this book we conceptualize a wholeness approach for studying children's learning and development, and we advocate that to understand children's development we must also examine the societal conditions and institutional practice along with the children's perspectives in everyday life settings (Hedegaard, 2009; Hedegaard & Fleer, 2008). These concepts will be discussed in full in relation to the specific concrete examples that we introduce throughout the chapters of this book. To implement a "wholeness" approach when focusing on a child in a single practice (i.e., home practice), one has to be attentive to how other practices (i.e., daycare, school, after-school/community program, parent's work) influence the child's activities in the specific settings. We do this to gain insight into children's play, learning, and

development at home or in school. Specifically, we have to follow how children participate in several institutions (e.g., family, home, after-school care) within the same day to see how practice in one institution crosses over and influences children's activities in another institution. When we do this, this constitutes what we mean by a *wholeness* approach.

In specific situations, often several different institutional practices[1] influence children's social situation and activities. For example, we see this when school starting times or parents' work hours impact how much time is available in the mornings for children to play. Consequently, children's development can be seen as a sociocultural pathway through different institutions over time (Dreier, 2008; Hedegaard, 2009; Vygotsky, 1998; Elkonin, 1999). The family is the core institution for a child in the child's early life, but gradually children participate in new institutions, and these influence the activities of the whole family. In Western societies, the most typical institutions that children participate in are daycare, school, and higher education. It is argued in this book that children (as well as adults) develop through participating in the everyday activities in the different institutional practices that make up these societal institutions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Rogoff, 1990, 2003).

Theoretically, we position ourselves within cultural-historical activity traditions (Vygotsky, 1998; Leontiev, 1978; Davydov, 1988; Hedegaard, Chaiklin, & Jensen, 1999). In this theoretical tradition, activity is a central concept (Leontiev, 1978). Leontiev's conception of activity is extended in Hedegaard's cultural-historical theory of development (Hedegaard 1999, 2009, 2012) so that the concept of *practice* is introduced as a particular condition that also shapes children's development (see Figure 1.1).

In this particular conceptualization, institutional practice frames the *activities*. A person acts within the institutional practice, but the institution gives the cultural frame for the person's activities. Activities are oriented toward cultural objects and ideals. For instance, when a small child reaches for an object, the object already exists within a practice setting, which creates expectation and conditions for how the object should be handled. In a home practice with breakfast there are different objects, some of which are adequate for a child's activity of eating breakfast (such as a glass of milk, bread, crackers), but there may also be other objects at the breakfast that are not evaluated as adequate for a small child to handle from the caregiver's perspective and may even be seen as dangerous for a child (e.g., a sharp knife,

[1] *Practice* is used with another meaning than in the edited book *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory* (Schatzki, Knorr-Certina, & von Savigny, 2001), where *practice* is related to a person's actions. *Practice* in our terminology is related to institutional traditions: activities we relate, as Leontiev (1978), to a person's actions.

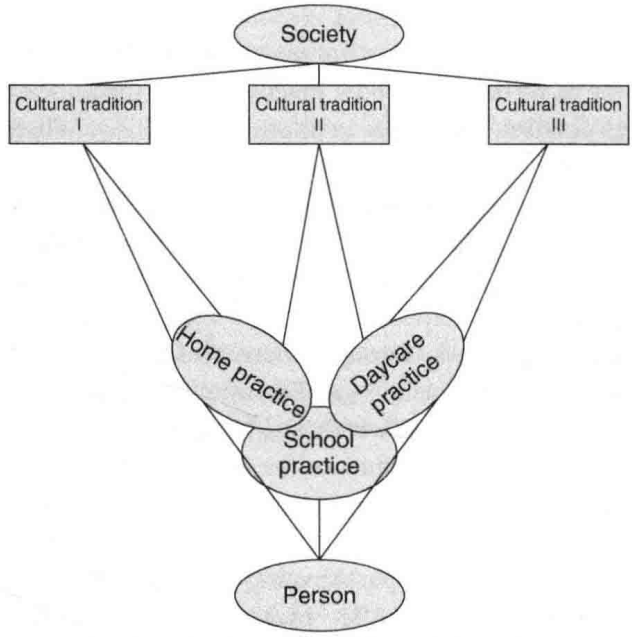

FIGURE 1.1 A model of children's everyday life lived through participating across different institutions

a hot teapot). Rogoff (2003, p. 6) has demonstrated this difference in values visually with a picture of a very young child from an African society who is handling a sharp machete to cut a coconut. A North American (Ochs & Izquierdo, 2009), Scandinavian, or Australian (Fleer et al., 2006) young child would never be allowed to handle this sharp object. What are seen as safe objects for a child to handle is evaluated differently by caregivers in different societies. A caregiver will approve and help a child reach for an object the child desires, or the caregiver will do the opposite, depending on both the traditions and values of a particular society.

Even when an object is acceptable, there can be objections in relation to how the child's activity with the object should take place. For instance, one of the Australian families described in detail later in this book (the Peninsula family) has a small vegetable garden at the rear of their house for growing a range of vegetables. The home tradition of preparing a vegetable garden gave specific meaning to the tools for the children: watching their father's activity using the tools for growing vegetables and also being allowed to use these tools themselves. The gardening tools were easily accessible to the children, and they would play with these adult tools. To the children, these tools were there to be explored, and to use on plants and soil around the backyard. Although the children competently explored these tools in a range of ways, to

the researchers these gardening tools represented dangerous objects, particularly when they were being swung close to children's heads or near children playing on swings, as described below:

> Nick (6) and Andrew (5) begin lifting up the gardening equipment, which is very heavy. Nick uses the spade to dig out the basil plant, which later the dad finds and is very cross about. Andrew takes the rake and, after raking the grass, tries to balance it on top of the swing set, as both J.J. (3) and Louise (2) are playing on the swings. The researchers intervene due to perceived safety issues. (Period 1, Visit 6, April – Autumn)

As will be shown later in this book, these children were accustomed to exploring everyday objects and being physically active in their home context. They already had a high level of physical and spatial competence to manage exploring what were essentially adult tools. The institutional practice (here home practice) provides the objects and possibilities for what a child can do; the activity is what a child does within the frame of possibilities.

Each institution has its own practices that are often related to different objectives demanding different activities, and even when the activities seem the same, such as playing at home and in school, the way the activities take place will vary, as will be illustrated later in this book. To understand a child's activities, the activities have to be seen within institutional traditions, where traditions for practice can be seen as structuring the practice into several activity settings. For example, we see how family traditions structure Emil's family's morning routine of eating breakfast and preparing for school, and later in the day the family's afternoon routine of drinking tea and doing homework, and the routines in their dinner and bedtime settings. Each of these settings can be seen as relating to a cultural tradition of how families in a specific society create such settings and routines, but it can also be seen as relating to how a specific family creates its own traditions within the practice setting. The family practice can also reach into, and influence, the practices in other institutions. For example, eating lunch in school can be quite different for different children in the same setting because different home traditions may influence children's activities in settings away from home (Thorne, 2005). For instance, when children are not used to sitting at the table for a meal at home, and they begin attending childcare for the first time, they will take to the new practice setting their known ways of eating meals (see Fleer, 2010).

Neither society nor its institutions (i.e., families, kindergarten, school, youth clubs, etc.) are static; rather their practices change over time as a dynamic interaction among a person's activities, institutional traditions, societal discourses, and material conditions.

In this book the focus is on a family that is constituted as a father, mother, and children in a shared home, even though we are well aware that there are many different variants of being a family in modern society (Golombok, 2006; Dencik et al., 2008). This is our focus because the families that are reported on in this book were constituted in this way. Although the focus is on children's everyday life in families, their lives are concurrently connected to several institutions, such as the extended family, daycare, schools, clubs, medical care, and religious institutions; these are the main institutions, but for some children there are other types, such as boarding schools, foster homes, orphanages, or child labor institutions.

Learning and development in everyday life happens slowly, often unnoticed. As a child lives and moves between home, childcare, and school, we notice the demands, motives, transitions, and conflicts that arise in everyday life. The aim of this book is to follow children's everyday activities and social relations as change in children's social situations and how this change may lead to children's development. This can be better understood when we take the child's perspective, meaning that the focus is on the activities the child initiates, the demands that children meet and put on others, and the conflicts that the child experiences within his or her social relations with others. When we take a child's perspective, it is the child's intentions that we follow. Here we notice how children's relations with others and their material world may be experienced differently by individual children, thus affording different opportunities for play, learning, and development. In examining the child's perspective we also show how the relations for the same child change, thereby affording new opportunities for play, learning, and development. It is the child's self-awareness of these new and changing relations across activity settings that constitute the social situation of development.

Roger Barker and Herbert Wright's book – *One Boy's Day* (1954) – has been an inspirational source with their concept of behavioral setting for analyzing the results of our research into children's everyday life activities and also as a contrast where we wanted to overcome the idea of cultural habitat in the presentation of children in their everyday life. Barker and Wright present their work as an example of "a child in its cultural habitat" (1949, 1971). This conceptualization presents the child within an ecosystem where relations are described. We want, instead, to take an analytical approach and analyze children's activity to formulate concepts of children's learning and development that relate to children's everyday activities framed within institutional practices and societal conditions, thereby transcending the idea of cultural habitat as a parallel to biological habitat. Although Barker and Wright have been inspirational with their concept of behavioral setting, we instead draw

on Leontiev's (1978) concept of activity, which transcends the idea of the child within a habitat: we see the child as acting and taking initiatives, and we therefore name the setting *activity settings* (as do Tharp & Galimore, 1988, p. 3). This choice is related to our desire to highlight the child's motive and the objectives of the setting more directly in our analysis. In this conceptualization of the unit of analysis, we are able to stress the dynamic of the *children's social situation* (Bozhovich, 2009) as it evolves from the situation while simultaneously being shaped by the person. Specifically, we discuss the everyday concept of the *child's social situation* across the activity settings that a child participates in and actively contributes to so that we may draw out what are the demands, motives, and values operating within particular activity settings that contribute toward the child's social situation of development.

Each child's *social situation in a family* describes the child's relation to other persons and to the family practice. A child's social situation is created through his or her participation in the everyday activity setting in the family practice. Each child experiences and contributes to these family practices differently, as we saw previously in the same breakfast setting in which Kaisa begins singing a kindergarten song, Emil knows it better and sings it more competently. Lulu instead discusses singing more conceptually by being curious about why the teacher continues to interrupt singing to go over particular parts of a song. The family's everyday life practice influences a child's activities and motives. To conceptualize how this influence takes place, one also has to conceptualize how children's activities and motives at home are interwoven with demands and possibilities that transcend the single activity setting at home, and examine how an activity setting at home can be influenced by other practices. In a family with school children, school practice influences home practice, but in the different families, differences in their home practice also give different conditions for children's participation in school practice (Tharp & Galimore, 1986; Moll et al., 1990; Heat, 1983; Thorne, 2005; Willis, 1977).

CENTRAL CONCEPTUAL RELATIONS IN A CHILD'S SOCIAL SITUATION

Institutional Practice and How It Creates Conditions for a Child's Social Situation in Different Activity Settings

Families usually share similar traditions for participating in particular activities. In families who have school-age children, the practices usually include a morning period where children are dressed, eat breakfast, and