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Supporting students' development through collaborative reflection: interrogating cultural practices and perceptions of good practice in the context of a field trip

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This study examines the perspectives of a group of 10 UK undergraduate students and one Master's student on a residential field trip to four Danish forest kindergartens. Two dimensions are examined: the impact of collaborative reflection and co-construction of knowledge on student learning; and the influence of cultural assumptions on understandings of early childhood education and care in practice. The methodology was interpretive, and inductive approaches were employed to analyse qualitative data sets. The study is framed by cultural-historical theory, acknowledging that learning and development takes place in social context and is shaped by cultural and societal values and practices. Findings suggest that students' collaborative reflections enabled them to identify and question their own assumptions about good practice and to develop their understanding of the relationship between culture and pedagogy. The community of learning that developed afforded rich opportunities for drawing out meaningful relationships between practice and theory. Students emerged with greater understanding of the relevance of research and of their identity as researchers.

Key words: students as researchers; theory and practice; cultural-historical theory; co-construction and collaboration; early childhood; residential field trip

Introduction and background

This study reports on a week-long student field trip to Copenhagen, where tutors accompanied 11 students enrolled on early childhood courses in a UK university for the purpose of gathering data for a university research study.

This paper is relevant to academic staff and students in higher education institutions interested in developing or enhancing learning through a pedagogy of engaging students in research. Enhancing students' identity as researchers is both integral to undergraduate pedagogy and central to professional life in the 21st century (Council on Undergraduate Research and National Council on Undergraduate Research 2005; Brew 2007). This study seeks to show that engaging students in a cross-cultural research field trip has three potential outcomes: to challenge and deepen students' understanding of early childhood education and care through collaboration and co-construction of knowledge; to bridge the theory practice divide (Lampert 2010); and to illuminate cultural influences on early childhood pedagogy. This report foregrounds research and enquiry as a fruitful context for learning in higher education institutions (Healey and Jenkins 2009, 3) and addresses some of the challenges of bridging the theory practice divide, through first-hand research activity which, in this case, contributed to both individual student research and the research of academics. As such, it adds to the discourse of higher education pedagogy.

The particular focus of this report is the co-construction of knowledge as part of an academic 'community of practice' (Lave & Wenger 1998). It draws on a single case, exploring the perspectives and understandings of a group of 11 English-speaking undergraduate and Master's students during a week-long field trip to four early childhood outdoor settings in Copenhagen. Students were included in a funded research project which aimed to establish a shared understanding of early childhood forest and outdoor experiences in different cultural contexts. This report reflects the perspectives of students (many of

whom were likely to go on to teach or to be involved in early childhood education and care sector) as researchers gathering research data.

The principal aims of the project were twofold; *firstly*, to challenge and deepen students' understanding of the influences which shape early childhood outdoor pedagogy, through collaboration and co-construction of knowledge. Future contributors to the early childhood sector in the 21st century will need to develop deep and sensitive understandings of contextual influences on the construction of pedagogy, the child and the establishment. This requires practitioners to recognise their own position and to work to support an intersubjective space which is responsive to cultural diversity (Fleer, 2006). Opportunities to challenge and reflect on belief systems were seen to provide a context for 'true learning' to take place (Gilbert 2013, 23) and to engage with the fact that "there are other readings of the world" (Moss 2010, 5). The project was designed to open up uncertainties for students and to examine practices that might not reflect the professed view and existing discourses of outdoor pedagogy in England. Contrasting students' preconceptions on what constituted quality outdoor pedagogy with their views post-project illuminated the value and impact of their experience. *Secondly*, the project aimed to bring together theory and practice within a real-world context, and to demonstrate and interrogate the link between them. A sound grasp of the theoretical underpinnings of pedagogy in practice, mitigates against the vulnerability of pedagogy to be subject to ideology, or to dominant discourses and regimes of truth (Moss 2007). These are current threats to the early childhood sector which might be countered by professionals in the field having effective critical thinking skills. However, practice and theory are often considered by students to be separate dimensions (Lampert 2010) and establishing a meaningful relationship between them is challenging. Observations and reflections on an 'unfamiliar' pedagogy within the study created the opportunity for students to actively locate and understand theoretical perspectives in practice and to illuminate their

own assumptions and cultural lenses within the framework of cultural-historical theory (Hedegaard et al 2008).

The study is framed by cultural historical theory. We draw principally on the work of Fler (2006; 2016) in foregrounding a Vygotskian perspective which recognises the importance of context, social interaction, history (experience) and collaboration. Cultural-historical theory positions the researcher as an active and reflective partner in research: the students acted as researchers alongside the tutors, contributing in the way they interacted with participants in the study, as well as with each other. Elhoummoumi (2002, 117) suggests that Vygotsky's theory is holistic, always located within a 'wider social and historical context'. The recognition of this is reflected in the ways in which the students interacted with each other and with their data in order to transform their thinking as they reconceptualised their own learning. Pascal and Bertram (2012, 489) identify the importance of participatory and practice based research, with the 'active and authentic participation of those involved generating their own agendas for further exploration, enquiry and change'. Key aspects of cultural historical theory are present in this study in the ways in which the participation of the students is foregrounded, recognising that they relate to each other and to their context while developing their own understanding.

Methods

This interpretive study sought to describe and understand the development of a group of students on a residential field trip through the collection and analysis of data relating to their perceptions and reflections on practice in four forest kindergartens in Copenhagen. An implicit assumption of the design was that the data would contribute to the creation of a rich picture of the students' perspectives of their experience and the impact it had on them. The field trip was available to students from a third year university undergraduate module

(International Perspectives of Early Childhood) and to Master's degree students studying outdoor pedagogy. 65 students were invited to apply to take part in the data gathering field trip indicating why they wanted to be part of the project and how they might gain in terms of their own academic and professional development. Ten undergraduate students and one Master's student were selected for the field trip by means of purposive sampling, as being most likely to 'satisfy (the) specific needs (of the) project' (Robson and McCartan 2016, 281). A small contribution from the university towards costs incurred was available on application, otherwise the trip was self-funded by the participants which may have been a factor discouraging more students from applying. All students had a UK background with English as their native language and had experienced short placements in early education and care settings in the UK as part of their university studies. One student was a school teacher.

The students gained ethical approval from the University's ethics committee prior to gathering data. Informed consent was also obtained from the settings visited for students to collect observations of children engaged in outdoor play and forest activity, including photographic evidence if permitted, and to keep a research journal with anecdotal observations and field notes. Confirmation that parent/carer permission and consents for such observations and photographs were in place, was given. Permission for students to draw on data gathered in settings for their own degree-related research relating to outdoor pedagogy, was also obtained on the understanding that such student research would be restricted to academic submissions related to their courses of study. Confidentiality and anonymity plus the right to withdraw data and consent at any time was assured, as was access to any publications resulting from the university research project. Tutors gained consent from students to use data relating to their reflections and collaborative meaning-making in an impact report. An important focus for the research was to respect the voices of the children observed, as well as those of the pedagogues and the students.

Students, in their role as researchers, were conscious that cultural perspectives and understandings of unfamiliar practices should be observed and reflected upon in a respectful way, by acknowledging different perspectives and understandings in unfamiliar contexts. It was important to acknowledge that an inability to understand the local language spoken by children and pedagogues might impact on the way in which the data could be gathered and how they could be interpreted. In order to mitigate this challenge, guidance was provided by university tutors on gathering a range of observations, recognising that children communicate in a multitude of languages (Rinaldi 2006). Methods used to gather data from multiple sources informed an exploratory and explanatory description of the case by means of 'case-based themes' (Creswell 2007, 73). The methods were chosen to reflect the nature and aims of the case study: observations and field notes allowed researchers time and metaphorical space to look closely at body language and tone, as, although the Danish pedagogues were eager to explain their approach in English, the children spoke Danish throughout.

Observations and field notes were the principal methods employed by the students: these data were recorded in their research diaries during visits to the settings, using a number of key elements as prompts which signposted particular areas for observation. These elements included descriptions of the environment, adults' activity, children's activity, modes of communication, body language, resources and photographs. Students were encouraged to add reflective sections to their field notes at the end of each day prior to meeting with the whole group in the evening.

In addition to these field notes, observations and individual reflections, early evening seminars lasting one hour were held, where students and tutors discussed and reflected collaboratively on their experiences during the day. These meetings took place in the hotel in which everyone was staying. This opportunity for collaborative reflection and analysis whilst immersed in data gathering, enabled students to consider their own perspectives of theory,

and to explore the ways in which these reflective meetings were an important part of drawing meaning from the data while interrogating their own taken-for-granted understandings. The project drew on elements of praxeology in encouraging reflection and action, and a willingness to engage with the unexpected, thus supporting transformation through the development of skills such as self-awareness and critique, 'knowledge co-creation and knowledge transfer' (Pascal and Bertram 2012, 488).

At the evening seminar students were invited to share observations of practices that had surprised or intrigued them. University tutors sought to extend and support the students' reflections, and to draw theoretical perspectives into the discussion, thus highlighting the relationship between theory and practice. The tutors kept notes capturing the key points of the discussion and emerging themes, which were subsequently shared with the group for further independent reflection. One of the roles of the university educator in relation to field experiences is to bring students into a collaborative reflective space where personal education theory and perspectives can be transformed into new meaning in relationship with others (Gelfuso, Parker and Dennis 2015). Students will, and do, independently make meaning from field experiences; however, this may be based on the more narrowly framed basis of their underlying assumptions and previous experience of teaching and learning and their interpretation of ideas engaged with in coursework. Without collaborative discussion, tools such as reflective journals may in fact be re-enforcing personal theories.

After an interval of six months, during which time they had written reports relating to their individual research projects and dissertations, students participated in a reflective semi-structured conversational dialogue with us. During these dialogues students drew on a developing reflexive stance which had been nurtured through use of a reflective research journal. This reflective conversation was orientated by the tutors towards the interests of the research aims (Gray 2009) focussing on adjustments they had made to their personal

educational theory, the changes in their assumptions resulting from their involvement in the project, and the extent to which this supported them in linking theory to practice. As Alasuutari, Brannen and Brickman (2008, 6) suggest, ‘one of the keys to good research is to challenge one’s own assumptions and to carry out the study in such a way that the data have the possibility of surprising the researcher’.

A thematic approach was used to analyse and make sense of the data related to the student perspective, which included their reflections on observations in their field notes, reflective meeting notes and post field trip semi-structured conversational dialogue. Rather than emerging from the data in a ‘passive’ way (Braun and Clarke 2006), themes were informed by the key aims as well as the theoretical framework within which the research is located. In locating the study within a cultural-historical framework, the researchers were mindful of the importance of social relationships as well as individual perspectives, and endeavoured to take note of the ways in which students engaged with each other and with the tutors. A focal point for consideration was the way in which the individual develops and learns in relation to their engagement with the social world (Fleer 2006; Hedegaard et al. 2008; Lave and Wenger 1998).

It was anticipated that the spectrum of data gathering methods would give rise to the emergence of a rich picture which would address the study aims and add to the knowledge base relating to the value of collaborating with students as researchers. Whilst we make no attempt to generalise from the findings, themes emerging from this study illuminate the relevance of engaging students as researchers in their study of culturally diverse approaches to early childhood pedagogy.

Findings

Questioning assumptions

Data from students' observations, field notes, notes taken by tutors during reflective seminars and transcripts of post-trip reflective dialogues were thematically analysed to identify the impact of the research field trip on the students' understanding of early childhood outdoor pedagogy. Students in this report are referred to by pseudonyms to maintain anonymity.

Prior to the field trip, students communicated a clear picture of what they considered to be 'good early childhood practice' in the outdoor environment. Their perceptions, influenced by student placements, by the English statutory framework for early years education and by their personal experiences of early childhood provision, foregrounded the role of the adult and the position of the child in the learning process:

Good practice in England means taking the indoor classroom outside. It involves the teacher planning activities and linking them to the curriculum and making the outside part of a curriculum area. It's using the outside to promote more formal learning outcomes. (Marion)

The adult was constructed as a 'well-meaning' guide to children's development and learning, reflecting cultural perceptions of their key role in helping or facilitating children's learning. Additionally, the focus on 'safety' and 'liability' was seen to position the adult role as facilitator and supervisor and the child as a weaker partner in learning.

The child can't learn without direction; adult/child relationships are hierarchical with the teacher being responsible for the learning. (Isa)

Drawing on England's national statutory curriculum document (Early Years Foundation Stage, 2012), one student identified the importance of children articulating and evaluating their learning. She described the 'presumption that children can't learn if they don't know

what they are learning' and the need to 'direct children's learning'. The adults' perspectives were seen to be the driving force, orientated towards being able to show evidence of 'progress' and to helping or facilitating the children's learning.

...it's about progress, so when we go into the outdoors, we must learn something specific that's linked to the curriculum. We still view it as good practice because we are taking them outdoors and we are following their interests. (Marion)

Students' reflections on their observations and field-notes, together with collaborative reflections during the field study, began to illuminate alternative constructions of outdoor pedagogy, the adult role and the image of the child, and to challenge students' assumptions of what constituted 'good' practice. They began to perceive a more powerful image of children as co-constructors of identity and knowledge rather than as a weaker partner or passive recipient in learning, evidenced by their observations of practitioner trust in the children and the value of children having autonomy over their learning and activity.

Perceptions of the adult role became a subject for extensive discussion at the reflective meetings. Students were keen to discuss 'surprising' observations of children 'out of the sight of adults' for significant periods of time, where learning was not being 'controlled by an adult' and where children seemed to be intentionally given 'thinking time' to 'take in the world from a puddle'(Students). Discussion and analysis enabled students to reframe their thinking in terms of a contrasting construction of the child as a subject in the learning process, with his/her own ideas, innate creativity, desire and ability to learn independently as well as alongside others (Froebel 1887; Von Mareholtz-Bulow 1877) and to relate this to theoretical perspectives. This caused students to question a 'school readiness' approach where learning intentions and goals are foregrounded in the adult role.

We think we are giving the child a really good experience, focussing on their interests. We do believe it is a good way to do it, but we are really talking about the adult perspective. (Isa)

Photographic evidence of children playing for significant periods of time, unsupervised by adults, provided a fruitful shared context for stimulating discussion. Students began to perceive the value in allowing learning opportunities to arise from the situation, in nature, amongst animals and bugs, within a generous affordance of time, and to identify and question the reasons for approaches they had experienced in English settings. Assumptions about the need to 'teach' children and adult perspectives related to resources, came under interrogation.

The experience helped to challenge our views, even if it doesn't change them. (Karen)

It has altered my perspective as a future educator. (Niki)

The meetings illuminated the process of making meaning from reflecting on data, collaboration and discussion, literature and theory and provoked questions about the difference between the adults' and the children's perspectives and where the two met.

The meetings helped me – we identified themes which really helped me to reflect on my own observations. Until children are able to navigate their own thoughts and emotions and start to develop their own persona in context, and with one another, as well as develop a natural interest in learning, it doesn't seem logical to teach them academic knowledge. (Niki)

The group engaged positively in the reflective meetings, demonstrating a willingness to engage with their own subjectivity. The opportunity to bring their own observations to the discussion and to reflect on the meaning of them in terms of pedagogy and theory stimulated and motivated them to observe more acutely on following days.

The combination of two full days plus having time to reflect together each evening and then going back the next day to see it in a new light, worked well. (Sue)

Linking theory and practice

The two tutors supported collaborative reflective conversations at the end of each day of the research field trip which created a context for scaffolding and supporting students' growing understanding of the significance of the day's observations and their links to theoretical perspectives, thus enabling them to reflect on and question their personal educational theory.

Before taking on the role of researcher, students had engaged intellectually with theory, specifically cultural-historical theory and socio-constructivism as an integral part of their undergraduate and post-graduate modules. Collaborative reflection and analysis of observations in relation to theory during the field trip, began to illuminate the relevance and meaning of the theory in relation to early childhood practices, enabling students to delve deeper into co-constructing new understandings of both familiar (English) and unfamiliar (Danish) outdoor pedagogy. Reflections six months after the trip revealed the ongoing nature of the reflective process in relation to developing understanding of the relevance of theory to practice.

Cultural-historical theory embodies children within a social environment – it's the same in England but within a different frame. It's made more sense of the theory.

Theory is theory but you need to see it in practice. (Marion)

Students appreciated the value of engaging with contrasting experiences, and time for reflection and co-construction of meaning, in order to really understand the theory.

It brings the theory to life, because we are culturally embedded ourselves. We are our own evidence! (Isa)

The relationship between culture and pedagogy was illuminated as students articulated the link between practice and the social situation in which the setting was embedded. Students started to appreciate how cultural-historical theory and socio-constructivism could shed light upon and deepen their understanding both of their observations of practice in the Danish settings and of their own assumptions of outdoor pedagogy. Post-field trip conversations revealed the continuing impact of the experience on the students.

Our assumptions are barriers. I didn't recognise them as barriers until we were there; I thought I was quite open; but I realised I had cultural stereotypes in my head and I didn't realise the impact of my upbringing. (Isa)

Danish culture allowed the practitioners to behave in a certain way, which then allowed the children to behave in a certain way. The same happens in England. Our culture informs how we teach. (Marion)

It opened up my understanding of what a true socio-constructivist model looks like. The meetings helped me to (understand) my own observations. (Niki)

Supporting student learning through collaborative practices

Students in the study had previous experience of individual small-scale research projects linked to their undergraduate and Master's level study and were developing an emerging identity as researchers in their final year. The opportunity to engage alongside tutors in a collaborative project afforded opportunities that nurtured student learning in a number of ways, as tutors supported them in understanding the process of making meaning from data. Specific elements of this process identified by students included analysing their data, identifying emerging themes, making links to theoretical perspectives, and interrogating the data to answer and report on their own specific research questions. This modelled an

approach which supported and enriched their development as critical reflectors, researchers and writers. Students reflected their individual growth in semi-structured reflexive conversations six months after the field trip:

It took my learning to a new level. (Niki)

It was a valuable process – to be able to use the data, link it to theory and link it to academic work. You begin to reflect more, see patterns, read literature, see emerging themes. (Sue)

You need to do something with what you have observed otherwise it's lost. If I hadn't written a case study ...I wouldn't have made the meaning....I didn't think I could write a dissertation based on my notes, but I did. We've learned so much from it. (Isa)

The experience....has encouraged me to want to carry on to Master's level. (Isa)

The value of the opportunity to use data for their own research projects was identified by students as a significant part of their learning. The students made links between observations, research questions, theory and data which helped them to develop a construction of themselves as 'researchers' in their own right. The process – to be able to collect and reflect critically on their data, develop a deeper understanding of theoretical perspectives and then go further and link it to their own academic projects was seen by them as immensely valuable. This contrasted with other contexts for learning which were more based on knowledge as a path to understanding.

You get told things, but as soon as you walk out of the room...OK, I've learned something today (a fact), but do I understand it? (Marion)

Discussion

Participation in the research had the potential to challenge and deepen students' understanding of the nature and expression of early childhood outdoor experiences and learning, and the influences which shape them, building on the precept that when one learns more about another culture, one also learns more about one's own (Rogoff 2003). Students brought to the situation a set of understandings of early childhood outdoor pedagogy based on professional experiences in settings, personal experiences, current discourses in England, and their university studies, meaning schemes and perspectives that informed their personal paradigms. These serve as a 'belief system for interpreting and evaluating the meaning of experience' (Mezirow 1991 11). One of the roles of the university tutors in this study, was to support critical reflection and collaborative meaning-making in order to position the students to actively and fully consider their own perspectives and their future activity in relation to students, children, communities and society, with greater sensitivity, knowledge and understanding. This socio-constructivist approach to meaning-making, scaffolded by a knowledgeable other in the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978), facilitated potential for deeper engagement and conceptual development, and enabled the students to apply that which was learned collectively in a social context, to their own subjective understanding (Elhammoumi, 2002). This reduced the possibility of limiting the interpretation of observations in ways that might re-inforce, rather than develop, previous understandings (Gelfuso 2015).

Analysis and discussion during the field trip of their observations of outdoor pedagogy encouraged students to re-think reasons for the differences they were observing between the Danish settings visited, and their own local practices. Their first impressions were evidence of their own cultural lens where the adult well-meaningly, but persistently scaffolds children's play in order to achieve certain outcomes and show evidence of the

children's learning. Problematizing this analysis positioned adult-child interactions as a site for struggle.

Hedegaard et al. (2008) assert that it is necessary to consider the cultural and historical practices of the society in which children live and learn, in order to understand the social situation of children's development which takes place in concrete historical settings, which in this case was the outdoor environment. The social situation of a child 'is determined by the society and cultural context in which the child is embedded' (Fleer 2006, 132).

Hedegaard et al. (2008, 6) take a Vygotskian perspective in their analysis of the social situation of development which 'integrates the child's perspective and competencies at different developmental ages in relation to social reality'. Studying children's everyday settings allows the researcher to perceive the social situation of their development.

Furthermore, considering the child's perspective enables researchers to explore how children contribute to their own developmental conditions.

The practices that are developed in settings are connected to ideas related to what is understood to constitute a 'good life', an understanding that is linked to the pedagogues' image of the child. This varies according to place, culture and time and reflects different elements of the society in which institutions are embedded. Accordingly, different pedagogical practices may develop as a result of cultural differences and emphases on the value ascribed to particular areas of children's development (Rogoff 2003), because the role of culture frames the contexts in which the development of children is supported (Fleer 2006). Students in the research observed and reflected on subtle nuances and differences in emphases in the outdoor 'forest pedagogy' of the Danish settings which prompted them to reflect on the cultural influences on their own understandings of practice.

All relationships complimented each other (child to child; child and environment; adult and child), providing a valuable resource for further interactions. (Niki)

I thought there would be limitations on children's play, but the children's imagination was limitless. I wonder if children in the UK would have the same imagination and engagement or is it culturally embedded? (Karen)

In Danish society, you learn through responsibility. (Pedagogue to student)

This reflects a children's perspective-orientated approach based on the assumption that adults seek to promote a child-focused perspective: seeing the child as a person; empathic participation with the child; an interpretative attitude; guiding the child in a sensitive way; recognising Early Childhood Education and Care as a dialogical process where both contribute (Sommer, Samuelsson and Hundeide 2013, 463).

Through their academic studies, students had knowledge of the Nordic welfare model (encompassing family and public responsibility for ECEC, women's participation in the labour market, and gender equality) with its ubiquitous childcentredness, expressed through a belief in the naturalness of childhood, equality and egalitarianism, democracy, freedom and emancipation, and solidarity with Nordicness (Einarsdottir 2015). However, these understandings had remained at a theoretical level, i.e. as 'ideas' encountered in coursework (Dewey 1933; Gelfuso, Parker and Dennis 2015). Through collaborative reflection, deeper consideration of theoretical perspectives, discussion with Danish pedagogues and further independent study, students' awareness of their own culturally informed position and values, and the influence of culture on pedagogy emerged. The interaction between students, and between students and tutors, afforded opportunities for rich theory-to-practice connections and deep learning which both challenge and mitigates against the traditional 'silo' conceptualization (Dewey 1933) of theory and practice. Growth in linking theory and

practice was evidenced in the surprise experienced by the students as they realised their own assumptions, as well as the practices observed in the Danish settings, could be considered from a cultural-historical perspective. An emerging ability to reflect on and analyse observations from a theoretical perspective was evidenced in the reflective seminars and later in their individual research reports, reflecting Dewey's assertion (1933, 139) that 'We reflect in order that we may get hold of the full and adequate significance of what happens'.

According to Dewey (1938), making meaning of our experiences must include a balance of the familiar and the new. Experiencing something strange or curious prompts us to refer to the familiar in order to make sense of the new, and as Fler (2006, 130) asserts, 'Examining cultural practices from within one's own culture is much more challenging than when looking cross-culturally. Stetsenko and Ho (2015, 226) draw on Vygotsky to emphasise the need for an explicit intention to make meaning by 'acting in the world rather than passively experiencing or contemplating it.'

This study has suggested that focussed and research-based field experiences, integrated with coursework and partnership with university staff, facilitated a fruitful community of practice which afforded benefit for the 11 students. This accords with Wenger's (1998) description of a Community of Practice as a group having common domain of interests, engaging in shared activity where 'apprentices' learn from 'experts' (Lave and Wenger 1991). Furthermore, the tension or catalyst for student transformation of being at once researcher, subject and collaborative meaning maker created a stimulus for their own development (Vygotsky 1987) and supported the realisation of the assumptions and perspectives they bring to observation, and the position from which they make meaning from those observations.

Implications and Concluding Comments

Collaboration, meaning-making and reflecting on belief systems have the potential to contribute to preparing the students for the world of the twenty-first century, a world in which they will be required to deal with ever changing knowledge, and where every day they will need to engage with ideas and perspectives which are potentially different from their own (Brew 2013). This project therefore has implications for the design and approach to fieldwork and research for teacher training and education studies in higher education institutions. Time commitment and context are integral to the development of fruitful communities of practice in which individuals can fully benefit and develop (Gelfuso 2015), and need to be taken into account in course planning. Developing students understanding of the relationship of theory to practice through collaborative reflection, preparing them for future active critical and reflective engagement in the sector and supporting their identity as researchers in the field has the potential for underpinning a rich future contribution to children's experiences in settings. This approach also offers potential for on-going professional development of practitioners already engaged in the sector.

The value of foregrounding cultural influences on practice and pedagogy is illustrated in this study by the students' increasing awareness of their own cultural lenses. Children's perspectives were acknowledged as being embedded in particular cultural beliefs, theories and world views (Sommer, Samuelsson and Hundeide 2010) which explained perceived differences in pedagogical practices. Different pedagogical stances observed in the Danish settings were considered and linked to alternative constructions of the child in society and ideas of a 'good childhood' which are linked to social context and framed by societal values and practices. The opportunity to challenge students' beliefs by engaging with the contrasting understandings created the context for true learning and development to take place (Gilbert 2013). The cross-cultural field trip could be considered a rich context in course planning for facilitating such development.

Collaboration and discussion with others, supported by university tutors, enabled students to develop their initial analyses and interpretations of outdoor pedagogy beyond the framework of their personal educational theory and ‘ideas’ gleaned from their university study, to engage with alternative perspectives. Theory emerged as meaningful and relevant as students began to perceive formerly obscure relationships between theory and practice more clearly. Their role in the research field trip increased the students’ confidence, leading to a growth in identity which was enhanced by contributing to a university research project. The voices of the students in this study were foregrounded, as were those of the children and pedagogues in the settings. Analysis of the data illuminated and challenged taken-for-granted understandings of approaches to forest experience and how this characterised the child as a competent and powerful social individual. The study found that students’ assumptions about the child required reconsideration in the light of a culturally different approach to outdoor pedagogy.

The researchers acknowledge that although in this case the context for the field trip was a Danish outdoor kindergarten, there is no reason why similar outcomes might well have unfolded had the research taken place in the context in a different culture, in relation to a different aspect of practice, or a different phase of education.

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