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# The Use of Visual Methods in a Study of Kindergarten Food Practices

*Visuality Design in and for Education*

Baizhen Ciren | ORCID: 0000-0001-6440-5945

Department of Sport, Food and Natural Sciences, Western Norway University  
of Applied Sciences, Bergen, Norway

KINDknow – Kindergarten Knowledge Centre for Systemic Research on  
Diversity and Sustainable Futures, Western Norway University of Applied  
Sciences, Bergen, Norway

*baci@hvl.no*

## Abstract

Visual methods have been emphasised as alternative and complementary to traditional data collection methods in research with children and as useful tools in presenting conceptual and analytical frameworks. In their capacity to evoke the non-rational and material aspects of life, visual methods are also particularly beneficial in exploring everyday, taken for granted, institutional food practices. This article describes the way in which two sets of visual methods, namely *representations* and *researcher-created data*, were utilised within a study on a changing food practice in a Norwegian kindergarten. The representation is of a conceptual model, featuring Hedegaard's cultural-historical wholeness approach and Fullan's change model, which is visually presented. With this visualized conceptualisation, the study realises the goal of understanding the societal, institutional and individual perspectives in the change process. The researcher-created data included visual materials and video observations, exemplifying the change outcomes in relation to children's experiences and participation in the "new" meal situation as well as their liking of, acceptance and consumption of the new food. This article concludes that the visual methods adopted are helpful both in conceptualisation and in data collection and generate important insights about the change of food practices.

## Keywords

food practices – cultural-historical – change – conceptual framework – video observation – kindergarten

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## 1 Introduction

During the past few decades, a gradual but major shift has occurred in the ways in which children and childhoods are viewed, which has been substantially aided by scholarship around children’s rights and the emergence of the interdisciplinary field of childhood studies (Graham et al., 2015). This shift has been marked by the conceptualisation of children as active social agents of “being” rather than as objects of “becoming” (James et al., 1998). This shift has also led to a methodological repositioning in research involving and actively engaging children, especially through the adoption of a range of creative visual methods (Bergström et al., 2010; Lomax, 2012; Trell & Van Hoven, 2010). For the purpose of this article, visual methods are understood beyond their narrow definition as part of the data collection design as “a series of research approaches in which visualisations are developed, analysed, and/or disseminated to examine a specific phenomenon” (Shannon-Baker & Edwards, 2018, p. 937), and two different types of visual data, termed by Prosser and Loxley (2008) as *representations* and *researcher-created data*, will be described. According to their way of conceptualisation, representations refers to data with a visual orientation to represent data and findings, and researcher-created data refers to the recorded/ documented data of empirical research (Prosser & Loxley, 2008).

This article attempts to demonstrate how the researcher-created data and representations the author pursues here can be used for theoretical conceptualisation and data collection in a study of changing food practices and, therefore, as a means of documenting and presenting study findings. The author first briefly outlines a recently completed case study on changing lunchtime practices in a Norwegian kindergarten, upon which this article is based. Following this, a macro-visual conceptual framework as a form of representation informed by Hedegaard’s cultural-historical wholeness approach and Fullan’s educational change model is presented, which is further “zoomed in” on and discussed at each level representing the different elements and concepts in the framework. Consistent with the framework developed by the author, video

observation as a form of researcher-created data is described in the second part with a discussion of how this method works in the presented case study.

### 1.1 *Visual Methods Employed in this Study*

Visual representation typically involves the use of visuals in the presentation of research results. In the present article, close attention is given to how visual representation is utilised for the purpose of analysis. In their research, Ødegaard and Oropilla (Ødegaard, 2020; Oropilla & Ødegaard, 2021) have illustrated a range of thinking and analytical tools for understanding and developing practices through visual conceptualisations in early childhood research. Furthermore, it has been mentioned by Oropilla and Ødegaard (2021) that visual conceptualisation helps identify the conditions for various practices concerning children in their everyday lives and, therefore, contributes to the translation/transformation of knowledge into practice. In this study, a visual conceptualization as a conceptual and analytical framework is created.

This Researcher-created visual data, as opposed to participant-generated visual data, comprise visuals made by the researcher. Although there has been growing interest in the use of research participant-generated methodologies over the past decades (Guillemin & Drew, 2010), the highly traditional mode of researcher-created visual methods is still very commonly used in the fields of social sciences and anthropology, particularly in investigating areas that are otherwise difficult to verbalise or articulate, such as food practices (Wills et al., 2016). Empirically oriented researchers using such methods have also adopted more ethically engaged and thoughtful approaches in their research design (O'Connell, 2013). Such design has paid special attention to the relational aspects of researchers and participants, and many visual methods have been developed by researchers as prompts to build rapport, facilitate communication and engage participants (Pain, 2012). Image-based methods—for example, the storybook method as outlined by Anderson and Balandin (2011)—can foster rapport and minimise power imbalances in research. To this end, a storybook and a poster were created in this study.

As a popular researcher-created visual research method, video observation is promoted within early childhood education to engage children and enable them to give voice to their experiences (Fleer & Ridgway, 2013; Pálmadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2016; White, 2016). It is argued that the use of video “forces a re-examination of established methodological and ethical practices in education research and has implications for the construction of knowledge theory in the field of education” (Flewitt, 2006, p. 25). In addition, video data unveil how young children use the full range of material and bodily resources available to them to express meaning (Flewitt, 2006). The use of video data is also

promoted as having the potential to deepen cultural-historical researchers' understanding of young children's development across a variety of settings (Fleer, 2014). Over an extended period of investigation, Hedegaard and Fleer (2013) showed how video observations can be used in a cultural-historical approach to capture children's everyday activities, including mealtime routine activities (Hedegaard & Fleer, 2013). It is argued that, through video recordings of daily practices, it is possible to analyse and interpret social values, institutional practices and individual perspectives in an iterative way (Fleer, 2008). In order to gain a picture of children's experiences and participation in the mealtime, video observation was adopted in this study.

### 1.2 *Food Practices and Visual Methods*

Food practices are culturally and historically situated (Douglas, 1972). Food preparation and consumption practices in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings are primarily located in food-care relations (Hansen et al., 2016), and the routine mealtime is described as "a unique cultural phenomenon co-constructed by the ECEC community of children and educators" (Harte et al., 2019, p. 1). In their capacity to "evoke the sensual, non-rational and material aspects of life", it has been noted that "visual methods are well suited to the study of a subject such as food, which encompasses social processes from the embodied and tacit experiences of preparing and consuming food" (Power, 2003, p. 9). Visual methods may be particularly appropriate for food studies in ECEC settings not only because food practices in ECEC are often performed as a routine, unreflective and taken for granted activity but also because the practices are often mainly such that adult voices dominate and the food children gain access to depends primarily on what adults offer them (Hamburg et al., 2014). Therefore, visual methods may be better at "engaging with the diverse ways in which young children communicate their feelings and experiences" (Clark & Statham, 2005, p. 47).

## 2 **The Case Study**

This article is part of a case study conducted in a Norwegian kindergarten in February 2020 (Ciren et al., forthcoming). In the case of the kindergarten of interest, lunchtime practices changed from a traditional Norwegian cold lunch (consisting of coarse bread with toppings, including sliced vegetables, meat cuts and cheese) prepared by the kindergarten teachers to a hot lunch cooked by a hired chef. This change also represented a transition from a primarily self-serve style, in which children served themselves and passed food to their peers,

to a table service, in which the teachers helped with the arrangements. The case study aimed to explore the change process and identify factors that supported the development of an effective change for the case kindergarten. Qualitative data collection methods were adopted in the study, including interviews with six kindergarten staff supplemented by non-participatory video observations during lunchtime and written observational notes.

### 3 Theoretical and Methodological Underpinning

#### 3.1 *Hedegaard's Cultural-historical Wholeness Approach and Fullan's Change Model*

Mariane Hedegaard emphasises that, in the cultural-historical approach to learning and development, a child is understood within the relationships between the child and the immediate and historical socio-cultural environment (Hedegaard, 2008). To conceptualise the variability within children's development, she uses a cultural-historical perspective focusing on practices and activities and integrates children's perspectives that are anchored in situated everyday life and development (Hedegaard, 2008). According to her, developmental pathways are studied in the context of the concrete activity settings, institutional practices and societal conditions that shape the demands and expectations that children encounter in their day-to-day lives (Hedegaard, 2012). She developed a model for analysis that examines children's learning and development in everyday settings and addresses societal, institutional and individual perspectives and dynamic interactions (see Figure 1). With this model, she introduced a wholeness approach, relating a child to society by mediating cultural practices across institutions and activity settings.

While Hedegaard's cultural-historical approach is particularly helpful in understanding the cultural-historical conditions within which institutional food practices are formed, Fullan's model for understanding educational change (Fullan, 2016) is greatly beneficial in comprehending the change that took place in the case kindergarten, because it enables a detailed understanding of the "what", "why" and "how" of a change and of the local culture in addition to the individual actors to understand the change. In line with the particular focus on the context within which a child is embedded in cultural-historical traditions, Fullan has also addressed the need to understand both the so-called small (individuals) and the big (the broader social forces) factors that influence change to comprehend the change (Fullan, 2016). Fullan endorses the traditional three phases to the change process: *initiation* (the process leading up to a decision to adopt a change), *implementation* (the process

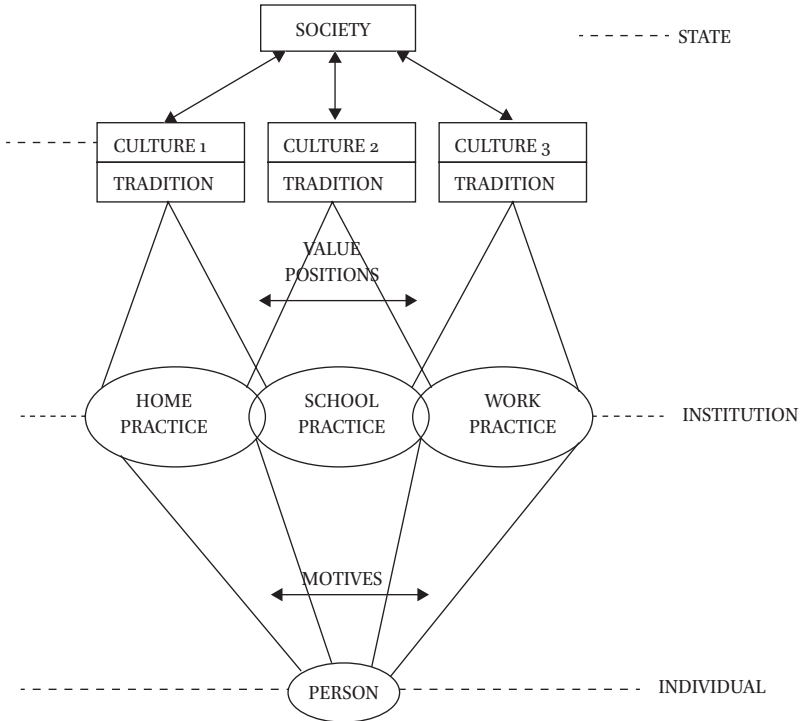


FIGURE 1 Hedegaard's cultural-historical model  
HEDEGAARD, 2009 (P. 73)

of putting an idea into practice) and *institutionalisation* or *continuation* (the process after an innovation unfolds, representing “another adoption decision”) (Fullan, 2016, p. 77). According to him, the outcome refers to several different types of result from the perspectives of students, teachers and the institution (Fullan, 2016, p. 56). He has visualised a simplified overview of the change process that depicts the three phases in relation to outcomes (see Figure 2). This model presents a non-linear change process in which “one phase can feed back to alter the decision made at previous stages” (Fullan, 2016, p. 57). In addition, he added a newer model called the lean startup, the central idea of which is that the change process is dynamic, and he calls for iterative design in planning and doing change.

### 3.2 The Representation: a Visual Model of Elements of Change in Food Practices

The proposed conceptual framework relies upon Hedegaard's cultural-historical approach and Fullan's change model. Building on these two models and taking into account the study's objective of understanding the change in the

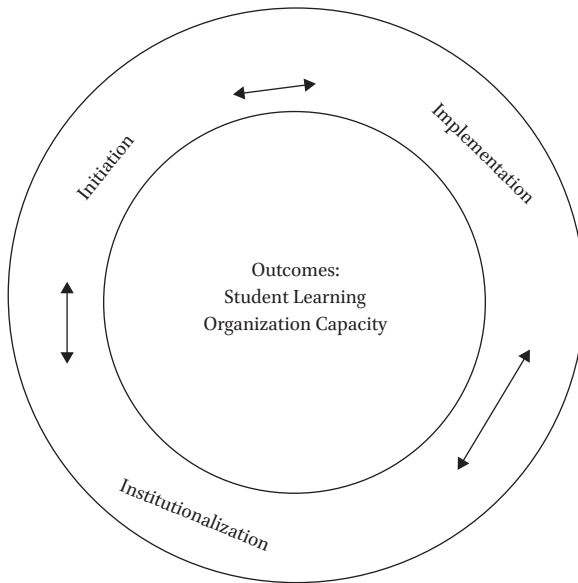


FIGURE 2 A simplified overview of the change process  
FULLAN, 2016 (P. 56)

case kindergarten, this article has developed a visual conceptualisation as illustrated in Figure 3. This framework also took inspiration from Oropilla and Ødegaard's (2021) article that presents a conceptual framework drawing upon Hedegaard's cultural-historical wholeness approach to understand the conditions for various intergenerational practices. It is within the cultural-historical system of concepts that the framework proposed here examines the dynamics connected to the change in food practices from the perspectives of societal conditions, institutional practices and individuals. The framework includes three levels, and each level is represented by a circle, with the largest circle representing the societal level and the smallest one representing the individual level. The middle circle, which represents the institutional level, is where the change of food practices took place. As suggested by Fullan, three phases are presented at this level: initiation, implementation and continuation. Finally, in the smallest circle, this study intends to focus on what Fullan called the outcomes of such change at the individual level. Taking inspiration from Fullan, who made a clear distinction between "how people actually experience change" and "how the change might have been intended" (Fullan, 2016, p. 9), the author aims to illuminate the experiences of the change participants, especially the children, as outcomes of the change. Furthermore, the study employs the time dimension in this conceptualisation. This is necessary for several reasons: First and foremost, change—no matter what its driver or what its type—occurs in

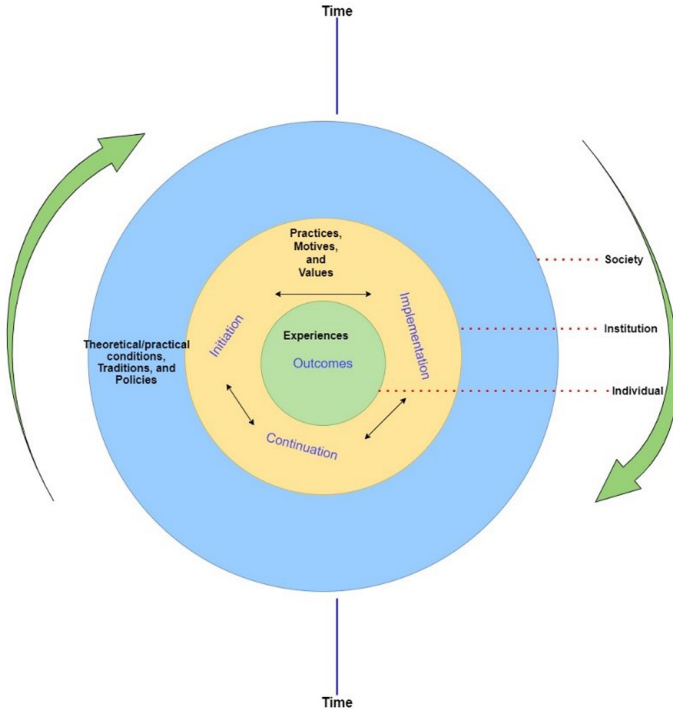


FIGURE 3 Conceptualization of the change practices in the kindergarten case

a specific time and space. Second, according to Hedegaard’s cultural-historical approach, neither a society nor its institutions are static; rather, they change over time in a dynamic interaction between a person’s activities, institutional practice, societal traditions and material conditions (Hedegaard, 2009). Third, Fullan points out that the dynamics of educational change as a socio-political process should be studied as localised in all kinds of individual, local and national factors in interactive ways (Fullan, 2016). Also, he explains change outcomes, especially in relation to students, over time in the context of change (Fullan, 2016).

In addition, this study “zooms in” on the framework to obtain a closer look at the three different levels from the micro level of the individual to the macro level of the society. At the individual level, as shown in Figure 4, this study highlights the two main actors—the children and the staff (represented by two Venn circles)—and in the foreground marks their experiences of the change at the time when the study was conducted. These two actors in the change process have unique individual experiences due to their different perspectives on what Fullan called the “meaning of the change” to them and what Hedegaard theorised as motives and intentions in the practices. The overlap



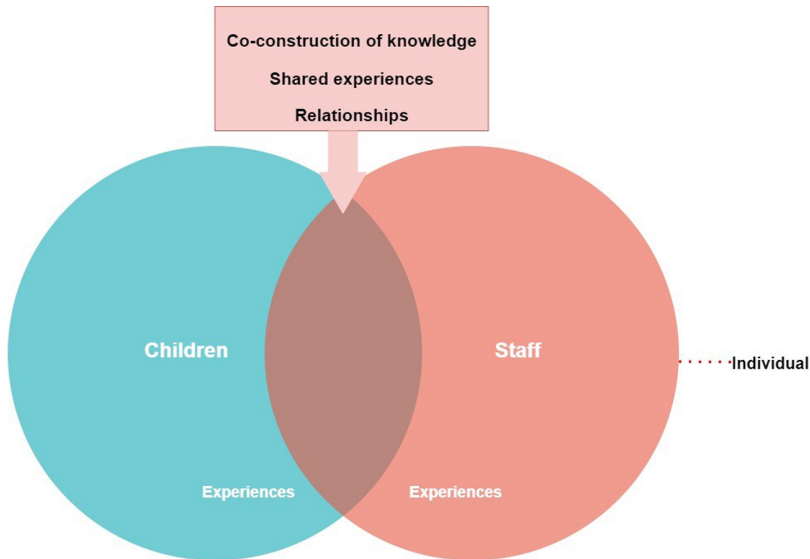


FIGURE 4 Individual perspectives in the change process

of the Venn circles represents the co-construction of knowledge and the participants' shared experiences during the change process and highlights their interactional relationships while coping with the change. As for their individual experiences, this study gives special attention to the children's actual dietary intake and food consumption, as it answers the question of what and how much children eat, and to the children's social situation concerning how they participated in the new meal situation. In the next, institutional level, where the change of food practices occurred, four key actors/stakeholders in the change process have been highlighted: the head teacher, the chef, the teachers and the children; they are represented by the four rectangles in Figure 5. The middle circle representing the change process is adapted from Fullan's model. Finally, in the conceptualisation of the societal perspective, which is represented as the outer circle of the institutional level, the components of the societal perspective in the change process, which include new policy funds, cultural traditions and expectations, have been highlighted in Figure 6.

### 3.3 *Researcher-created Data: the Visual Materials and Video Observations*

Two forms of visual material (a poster and a storybook) were created to build rapport with the children. The poster, including the author's photo and a short research project description, was sent to the kindergarten to hang on the wall by the wardrobe. The aim of the poster was for the participants, especially the

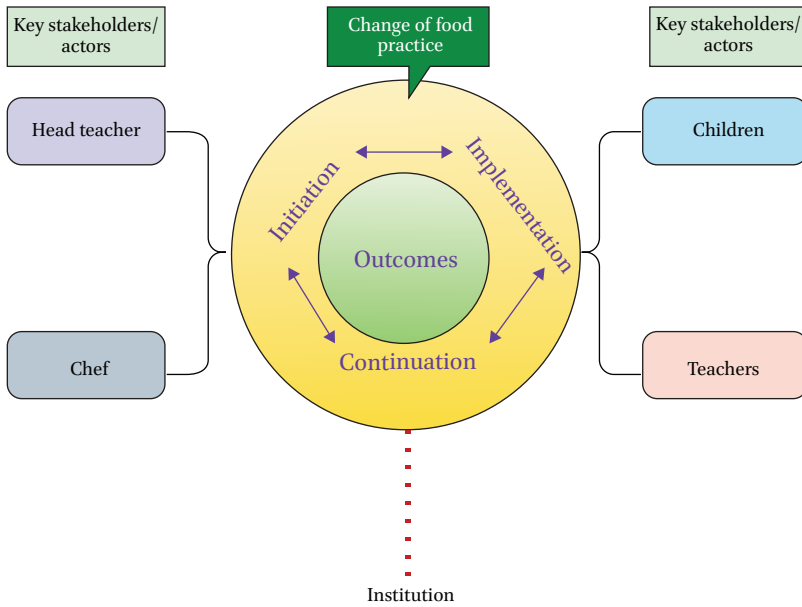


FIGURE 5 Institutional perspectives in the change process

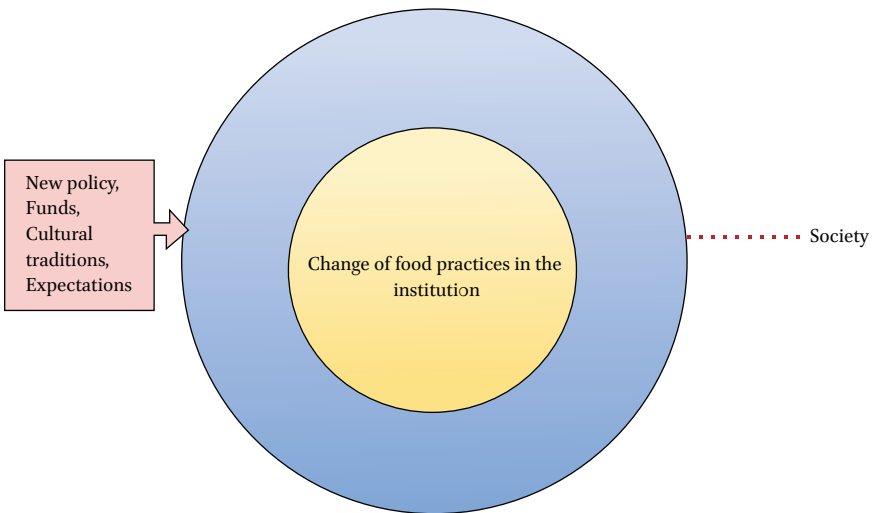


FIGURE 6 Societal perspectives in the change process

children, to see the author and build familiarity before the data collection. For this research, gaining access did not mean merely getting consent from the children's legal guardians; it was necessary and important to get the children on board. Thus, a storybook was created to introduce the research project in simple language. The author explained the research process and the children's role in the research project in the storybook. The children were given time to ask questions about the research. The author believes that using a storybook provided an excellent opportunity for her and the children to know each other and achieve the balance of power vital for hearing children's voices (Morgan et al., 2002). According to Morgan et al. (2002), there is a "tendency to view the facilitator as an authority figure", and this relationship needs to be "redefined, and an atmosphere created that encourages spontaneous contribution" (Morgan et al., 2002, p. 8). The author believes that adopting this child-friendly technique was beneficial in further promoting the children's participation and thus "formulat[ing] a communication process that gives more agency to children as active researchers" (Fleer & Li, 2016, p. 348). These collaborative relationships empower the participants and shape the agenda of the research.

In general, observations are considered the best way to examine children's real-life behaviours in natural settings (Bukatko & Daehler, 1992), and the use of technology for observation gives the opportunity to capture every moment of the everyday practices, interaction processes, facial expressions and roles of the research participants (Devi et al., 2020). Most importantly, it facilitates a deeper understanding of children and their contemporary realities in context from the record of the video observations (Walsh et al., 2007). Following a cultural-historical tradition of studying children and their activities within an institutional setup, non-participatory video observations were conducted during lunch mealtime to document the children's movements, talk and actions as well as "what", "how" and "how much" the children ate.

The video observation reveals important knowledge about children's participation in lunch mealtime and the dynamic interactions during the meal. By carefully analysing the food practices taped, it was found that children engaged in the collective mealtime in a fun and playful way by participating in diverse child-initiated and teacher-initiated play. The videos are replete with examples in which both children and adults initiate and negotiate interactions of various kinds in their everyday meals. Since the way in which children participated in the mealtime was consistently structured by the new demands from the kindergarten, it was beneficial to document the nuanced aspects of how this may have affected the children's participation in relation to the context.

In addition, video observation provides important information on what and how much the children ate, which are aspects essential to assessing the

children's acceptance of the "new" food. Video observation gave this study the scope to document, more than what the staff could report, the food items available on the table, the accessibility of food to the children and their actual food consumption. It is common to measure children's food intake through a weighed food record (Sambell et al., 2019); however, as the aim of the case study was not to conduct a dietary assessment or to quantify and calculate the food consumed by the children but to gain an overall impression of children's food consumption and satisfaction by observing the meal, the method of video observation was very helpful. Also, the videos reveal details regarding how many children finished the food on their plates and how many asked for a second serving as well as capturing the verbal and non-verbal acceptance of the food.

#### 4 Discussion

This visual representation in the depiction of the theoretical orientations, building on Hedegaard's cultural-historical wholeness approach and Fullan's change model, is particularly helpful in realising the goal of understanding the changing food practices from a cultural-historical perspective in the case kindergarten. Visualising the relationships and elements at each level yields a deeper understanding of the three broad phases (initiation, implementation and continuation) of the change process from three perspectives (societal, institutional and individual). As suggested by Harte et al. (2019), mealtimes in ECEC settings are embedded in structures of social relations and are thus "a unique cultural phenomenon co-constructed by the ECEC community of children and educators". It was found in the study that, by participating in the mealtime, the children and teachers interacted and co-constructed their knowledge, co-decided how the mealtime should be and exercised their power as agentic individuals (Ciren et al., forthcoming) in the new meal situation.

In the study, it was decided to use video observation as a data collection method. The adoption of video observation in this study made it possible to understand how children participate in the mealtime. Previous research suggests that, as occupants of their own space, children use their agency to subvert educator strategies to shape their food consumption (Dotson et al., 2015) and that they playfully develop a peer community culture and a sense of togetherness during eating-together times, thereby recreating meaningful and enjoyable routine mealtimes (Alcock, 2007; Mortlock, 2015). In addition, the possibility of revisiting the video clips repeatedly (Fleer, 2008) enabled making interpretations from a range of perspectives. Although it has some

potential methodological limitations, particularly due to the time limit for this research project and the fact that the change had been implemented by the time the study was conducted, it was beneficial to use videotaping to cross-validate data from the narratives of the kindergarten staff and the observational notes. Since the same group of children and kindergarten staff who participated in the study had been through the entire change process, the videos provided great opportunities for validation of staff-reported children's experiences in the change process in addition to what food had been offered to the children.

However, visual methods, for all their advantages, should not be construed as being without any drawbacks, as there is both potential and risk associated with using them in research (Murriss & Menning, 2019); therefore, all phases of the research process require critical reflection and awareness. Also, it is to be highlighted that the choice of a visual method for this study was guided by the ontological and epistemological positions of the author, wherein children are seen as active participants in the change process instead of passive receivers of the change. This shaped the agenda of the study and the decisions on the choice of methods used in the study, particularly the adoption of the video methodology in the meal situation. Additionally, as food provision in kindergartens is often embedded in broader discourses on health and nutrition, in which participation is traditionally not prioritised, a conscious awareness of power relations is needed when using video as a method for data collection. Finally, it is also noteworthy that food practices are magnified by powerful global driving forces and shifts in values and practices; it is, therefore, important to create space for incorporating such ideas when using visual methods in food settings.

## 5 Conclusions

This article draws attention to the opportunities that visual methods provide for conceptualising and conducting a study on changing food practices in the case kindergarten of interest. The adoption of visual methods offered several advantages for this study. First, the visual conceptualisation model was helpful in connecting and integrating Hedegaard's cultural-historical wholeness approach and Fullan's change model in one framework and further improved the quality of data analysis and interpretation. Second, the visual materials developed were valuable in facilitating the building of rapport with the children, and, third, video observation allowed a more careful and critical

evaluation of the interpretations in a way that embraced both the material and relational aspects of food.

The author envisions that the visual conceptualisation model could be utilised in future research investigating changing food practices and changes of all kinds in kindergartens and school settings. It would also be helpful to include more actors, such as parents and broader communities, to provide different contexts for interpretation and broaden the empirical scope of a study. Additionally, the author suggests that the use of visual materials and video observation offered great theoretical and methodological opportunities for research with children in matters affecting them.

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