

# Chapter 4

## Princesses (Don't) Run in the Mud: Tracing the Child's Perspective in Parental Perceptions of Cultural Formation Through Outdoor Activities in Norwegian ECEs



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**Abstract** By examining Polish parents' perceptions of outdoor activities in Norwegian Early Childhood Education (ECE), this chapter discusses how focusing on the child's perspective can change and challenge parental gender-related value positions, thereby changing perceptions of the cultural formation taking place through outdoor activities. The empirical data on the basis of which this question is answered are comprised of group interviews with 30 Polish migrant parents (18 mothers and 12 fathers) whose children were in Norwegian ECEs. The applied theoretical toolkit of a cultural historical wholeness approach (Hedegaard M, *Mind Cult Act* 19:127–138, 2012) enables the description of (parental) experiences of cultural formation through outdoor activities as anchored in the value positions established within and across involved societies. It also allows us to grasp those moments when the focus on the child's perspective in outdoor activities challenges parental value positions and cultural traditions of heteronormativity. The concluding remarks point to the importance of enhancing both the child's perspective and the specific plane of interpersonal interactions in ECE collaborations with parents and caregivers.

**Keywords** Outdoor activities · Cultural formation · Child perspective · Gender performance · Parental collaboration

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## 4.1 Introduction

Apart from their other tasks, Norwegian ECEs are expected to “work in close cooperation and agreement with the parents” (UDIR, 2017, p. 29), and these parents may sometimes represent other value positions and thereby have different perspectives on various institutional practices as well as the cultural formation that takes place through them.

This chapter examines Polish parents’ perceptions of outdoor activities in Norwegian ECEs and their children’s cultural formation taking place through these outdoor activities. This creates a foundation to discuss how a focus on the child’s perspective on the process of cultural formation through outdoor activities can change or challenge parental perceptions of these activities, thus challenging the silent assumptions regarding heteronormativity present in the institutional lives of modern Western societies. The chapter first presents the cultural historical wholeness approach as a framework that enables the researcher to (a) anchor the process of cultural formation in sociocultural and institutional foundations, (b) link the perceptions of certain institutional practices with value positions and (c) spot those moments in reflections on outdoor activities from the child’s perspective that challenge traditional parental gender values and/or heteronormativity. Next, explanations of cultural formation, heteronormativity, and aspects related to gender in Poland are presented. The chapter then presents the research project, including its methodology, a presentation of the participants, and the results. These findings form the final basis for the discussion, which focuses on the possibility of challenging conservative gender attitudes as well as heteronormativity in general by including the child’s perspective on cultural formation through outdoor activities.

## 4.2 The Cultural Historical Wholeness Approach and Cultural Formation

The cultural historical wholeness approach describes the child/individual as always operating in a particular context. Hedegaard (2012) divides the context into three planes:

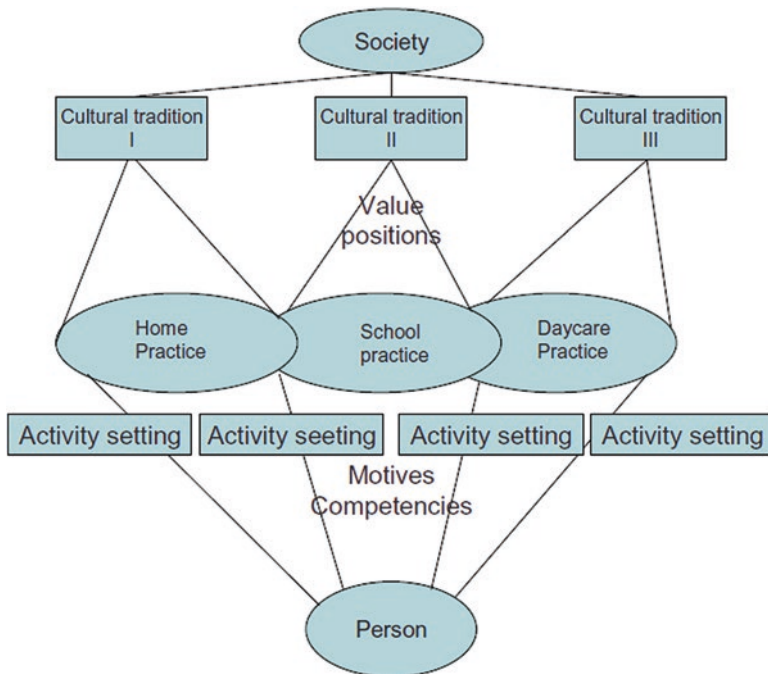
- A *formal societal* plane that reflects historically evolved traditions in a society that are formalized into laws and regulations as *conditions* for the existence of an institution (in the model depicted as cultural traditions in a society for different institutions, reflecting different value positions).
- A *general institutional* plane that reflects informal conventional traditions and demands (i.e., related to school and home), taking form as practices (in the model depicted as, respectively, home, school, and day care practice).

- A *specific* plane that reflects the shared activity settings of persons in a specific institution (i.e., a specific home or a specific school, depicted as activity settings in the model). (Hedegaard, 2012, pp. 129–130)

All three planes are inseparable when trying to understand the child's development or social situation. By social situation, Hedegaard (2012) understands "the person's relation via motives and competences to different activity settings" (p. 130). The motives occur in relation to the realised demands and result in certain activities that can lead the child to grow certain competences, which are again the basis for further motives, activities and thereby development.

Behind certain institutional practices and their demands lie particular cultural traditions with their value positions. Cultural traditions and value positions may differ across societies as well as within a society. This means that the social situation of the child also includes the child's relation to the value positions and cultural traditions that lie behind the institutions in which the child is participating.

The model (Fig. 4.1) illustrates the three planes on which the child's development takes place. Moreover, it includes the value positions that mediate the plane of cultural traditions and institutions, as well as the motives and competences that mediate individuals' social situations (their relation to various activity settings). The human being develops by acting in response to experienced demands created by



**Fig. 4.1** A model of children's activity settings in different institutions. (Source: Hedegaard, 2012, p.130)

others, institutional practices, and/or sets of values and meanings presented in institutional practices and lying behind institutional settings. Activity in response to experienced demands can, however, include resistance—and thereby the occurrence of activity that differs from that expected by the institution.

Vygotsky states the following:

Experience is a unity, in which, in indivisible form, on the one hand the environment, that which is being experienced, is presented—the experience of everything relates to something existing outside the person—and, on the other hand, how I experience it, that is, all of the special features of personality and all the special features of the environment are present in experience. (1934, pp. 97–98)

This dialectical character of an activity, which includes both the cultural traditions and demands *imposed* on the child, but also the child's own responses to these traditions and demands as a result of their own motives and competences, makes it possible to relate the categories of social situation and activity to the concept of cultural formation.

### 4.3 Cultural Formation

Cultural formation, also called *becoming* and, in Norwegian policy documents, *formative development* (UDIR, 2017), is a concept developed to embrace the dialectical character of the experience joining together the outside physical and cultural world with the internal processing of the experienced content (Ødegaard, 2016). Ødegaard and White (2016), in describing the historical development of the concept of *Bildung/danning/becoming*, present as critical the dialectical relationship between the culture, represented by the community, older generations and educational institutions, and the individuals actively involved in the social institutions. This allows us to see cultural formation as both the culture shaping individuals (when an individual is framed and formed by demands anchored in the values and meanings existing in the culture) and as individuals negotiating their own subjectivity (creating their own selves in dialogue with the *imposed* cultural values).

The Norwegian Framework Plan for Kindergartens: Content and Tasks (UDIR, 2017) relates formative development to the facilitation of a “probing and inquisitive approach to the world” (UDIR, 2017, p. 1). On the one hand, this promotes the sharing of values and norms. On the other hand, it endorses the strengthening of “courageous, independent and responsible participation” and the valuing of “individual expressions and actions” (UDIR, 2017, p. 21).

The dual nature of *danning* fits the cultural historical wholeness approach, where becoming's first dimension relates to the individual being introduced to the particular demands of interpersonal, institutional and sociocultural expectations. The second, self-creating, dimension relates to the individual developing various motives and activities in response to the experienced demands. (Re)acting in response to the

various demands in a dialogical involvement with them constitutes the process of formative development. This suggests that the concept of cultural formation particularly activates the *specific plane* (Hedegaard, 2012, p. 130), as it explains how culturally anchored meanings and values are lived and negotiated in institutional practices by interacting individuals who exchange and challenge each other's values and meanings through their own activities.

In this chapter, the everyday practice of ECE institutions is narrowed to their outdoor activities and the children's cultural formation taking place through them. The focus of the research is on individual (parental) perceptions of outdoor activities in Norwegian ECEs, as well as the cultural formation through outdoor activities in which children participate. As parental perceptions are shaped by parents' cultural traditions and value positions connected to gender, as well as their capability to acknowledge the child's perspective, the process of experiencing their children's cultural formation taking place through outdoor activities links the plane of cultural traditions and value positions with the specific plane of interpersonal relationships (for Hedegaard's model, see Fig. 4.1). The significant institutional context in this case is the ECE setting and *home's* perception of it.

What is interesting in the parental perceptions presented below is that not of all them include the child's perspective on the process of cultural formation.

#### 4.4 The Child's and Children's Perspectives

Following Sylvia's (2010) conceptualisation, I understand the child's perspective as directing

adult's attention towards an understanding of children's perceptions, experiences, and actions in the world. Thus, child perspectives are created by adults who are seeking, deliberately and as realistically as possible, to reconstruct children's perspectives, for example through scientific concepts concerning children's understanding of their world and their actions. (Sylva, 2010, p. vi)

However, no matter how sympathetic the adults are and how close to the children they get, they will always end up generating adult objectifications of the children's experiences. Nevertheless, the effort taken seems to matter, as it can be distinguished from parental perceptions of, for example, ECE outdoor activities. The children's perspectives are here understood as representing

children's experiences, perceptions, and understanding in their life-world. In contrast to the child perspectives, the focus here is on the child as subject in his or her own world, the child's own phenomenology. This is what adults attempt to understand through their child perspective, for example in attempts at child-focused interpretations of children's intentional acts and statements. (Sylva, 2010, p. vi)

This perspective will be applied to outdoor activities in the ECE setting in this chapter.

#### 4.5 Gender Equality: A Value Position Occurring Across Countries and Societies (Poland and Norway)

Today, gender equality is a fundamental value position (EEAS, 2018) imposed on various cultures and societies operating in the European geographical area. Norwegian ECE is required by its steering documents to “promote equity and equality irrespective of gender, functional ability, sexual orientation, gender identity ... . Kindergartens shall combat all forms of discrimination and promote compassion” (UDIR, 2017, p. 10). Outdoor activities, then, apart from being rooted in long-standing Norwegian outdoor life traditions, are activities based

on the principle of equality and antidiscrimination and help to ensure that the children are able to experience and create an egalitarian society. Everyone shall have the same opportunities to be seen, heard and encouraged to participate in a shared activities in kindergarten. (UDIR, 2017, p. 10)

To make this happen, the staff has to act according to value positions connected to gender, which requires reflection and change. The Framework Plan for Kindergartens articulates expressly that the staff “must reflect on their own attitudes in order to best convey and promote equity and equality” (UDIR, 2017, p. 10).

ECE settings can however not expect such gender related values and attitudes from the parents, representing diverse cultural and/or national origins. In Poland, although it is formally a member of the EU, mainstream values in relation to gender consider traditional and separate social paths for two biological sexes to be the *right* paths. Women are expected to be feminine in terms of physical appearance (ideally beautiful and delicate) and choice of jobs (ideally connected to education, care and service as well as household work, with the main responsibility of caring for their own children) (Gal & Klingman, 2000; Graff, 2008). The expectations for men demand physical strength, a great career or a well-paid job, more spare time, and economic rather than care- or housework-related duties in terms of family life. In Poland, gender-related values seem to correlate with level of education and age: the older and the less educated are more likely to value traditional positions connected to gender. This also means that the younger and more educated that people are, the higher the probability that they will have a more liberated attitude to gender roles (ISSP Research Group, 2016). However, this liberation is less likely if there is involvement with certain religious movements presenting traditional gender norms as correct (European Parliament, 2011). This correlation, detected in complex and representative statistical studies (ISSP Research Group, 2016), is the reason why this study presents detailed information on the parental level of education in the presentation of the research participants.

#### 4.6 The Heteronormative Matrix: Background to (Traditional) Gender Dualism

Within gender and queer theory, however, both prescribing certain social trajectories to certain sexes and dividing human beings into boys and girls (or men and women) are criticised (Barker, 2016; Butler, 1990; Jagose, 1997; Sullivan, 2003). Labelling certain people as men or women, which is accompanied by certain blue or pink products and practices (e.g., at the birth clinic and in the case of many children's products), is recognised by Butler (1990) as a sign of *heteronormativity*, which she sees as the uncritically assumed obviousness of heterosexuality. Butler describes the *heteronormative matrix* as a lingual pre-structure dividing human beings into two complementary types: boys and girls. On the one hand, this excludes people with an unclear biological sex from the natural order of things (Butler, 1990), while, on the other, it normalises heterosexuality. The norm of heterosexuality is thus what lies beneath the expectations for feminine females and masculine men (Butler, 1990). This suggests that Butler relates tensions between conceptualisations of gender in modern societies to the pre-assumption of heterosexuality that follows the foster's and human being's life, from the different types of talk used by parents when talking to the pregnant belly with a boy or girl inside to the limited trajectories of social careers as a result of gender.

Being socialised within the heteronormative matrix may result in specific understandings of how gender may be performed as two distinct opposites, as represented by a great part of Polish society (ISSP Research Group, 2016). These traditional gender-related norms may also result in social anxiety and moral panic (Jawor, 2014) when experiencing and/or witnessing unusual or untraditional gender performances, as these put the *natural* order of things in danger (Kopciewicz, 2005).

When it comes to the possibility of gender-liberated behaviours or unusual gender performances, the children's literature seems to allow *more*. However, this relates mostly to girls. The earlier heroines of children's books such as *Pippi Longstocking* (Lindgren, 1977) and *Ronia the Robber's Daughter* (Lindgren, 1983) are familiar in the ECE field as well as among (Polish) parents. This gender freedom is less visible in the case of boys. This is possibly mirrored in the institutional reality of many ECEs. In Tømmervåg (2017), the case of a boy who wanted to wear the colour pink is described. He wanted his outdoor overalls, underwear, clothes, rain gear and boots to be pink. The parents bought him everything in purple, and the kindergarten staff thought that this was a great solution (Tømmervåg, 2017, p. 3). This exemplifies the ways in which girls may enjoy greater acceptance of diverse gender enactments, while the gentle and soft boy who wears pink or a dress still worries ECE staff, parents and perhaps the wider society.

## 4.7 Methodology

The research data used in this article were gathered through a study based on a research question relating to Polish parents' perceptions of Norwegian ECE. The study was conducted among Polish migrant parents in Norway. Altogether, 30 parents (18 mothers and 12 fathers) whose children had been in Norwegian ECECs participated in interviews between October 2014 and April 2015. The participants were invited to individual one-time interviews, but as the subject of Norwegian childcare turned out to be so engaging, they asked to meet and discuss the subject with other Polish parents, preferably more than once. I followed up on this request, dividing the parents into six groups of five and meeting each of them six times during the same period of time.

As there was someone in each group who was not comfortable with the conversations being recorded, the quotations below were reconstructed and revised by the research participants. In total, 231 pages of reconstructed group discussions were generated in collaboration with the parental groups that participated in the study.

### 4.7.1 *Content Analysis with a Focus on Outdoor Education*

For the sake of this study, the research material was read and analysed based on the category of outdoor activities. To do this, a qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2010) was used. Qualitative content analysis involves systematising the empirical material by looking at it through a certain category or category system. The starting categories are *filled* with relevant parts of the research material, which are categorised into subcategories of the empirical content. In the case of the analysis used in this article, *parental perceptions of outdoor activities* was the starting category. This was soon divided into two subcategories: *positive* and *negative*. However, a deeper reading of the content showed that parental gender-related values and attitudes (e.g., *gender-conservative* or *gender-liberal*) and being the parent of a girl or a boy were significant differentiating criteria. That is the reason for presenting the research material on the basis of *who is talking* (gender-conservative parents of girls, gender-liberal parents of girls, gender-conservative parents of boys and gender-liberal parents of boys). The content of each group's meanings is presented in a descriptive way in the results part of the text. As the parental responses direct their focus to the children's perspectives to different degrees, reflections on this are included in the presentation of the results as well as the discussion and conclusions.



**Table 4.1** Overview of the background information of the participants. Source: own elaboration

Characteristic of the research participants	Mothers	Fathers	Total
Vocational education	2	1	3
Technical secondary	3	4	7
Higher education	13	7	20
Declared conservative gender values	6	4	10
Declared liberal gender values	12	8	20
3–6 years in Norway	8	7	15
7 or more years in Norway	10	5	15
Total	<b>Mothers 18</b>	<b>Fathers 12</b>	30

### 4.7.2 Research Participants

The research participants presented a rich array of educational backgrounds, with a preponderance of highly educated mothers. The number of years that had passed since their arrival in Norway was also very different. Nevertheless, they had gender-related value positions that seemed to differentiate their perceptions of cultural formation through outdoor activities in Norwegian ECECs, which is why these are mentioned in Table 4.1.

### 4.7.3 Researcher

The researcher is herself a Polish migrant mother in Norway. During this project, she had one child in a Norwegian kindergarten and was pregnant with another child. Being a (pregnant) mother was experienced by the researcher as a trust-building factor for the participants. Being in the same situation seemed to facilitate potential participants' involvement in the project.

### 4.7.4 Ethics

The interviews with the parents were conducted as part of a bigger research project: *Polish female migrants in Norway: A study of care deficit*. This project is funded by EEA grants and coordinated by Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin. The project was undertaken in accordance with the General Guidelines for Research Ethics (The Norwegian National Committees for Research Ethics, 2014). In the case of the group interviews with the parents, all the research participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the wider research project. In each group, there was an individual who was suspicious of being recorded, so the discussions were written down by the researcher and sent to the participants after each interview had taken place. This was done to reconstruct certain utterances as soon

as possible following the interview. The written notes and reconstructions were anonymised. The key list with the codes of the parents and their first names (not surnames) was presented to the parents in the form of a handout, which they gave back during the same meeting. These handouts were shredded after the last reconstructed transcript was made (May 2015). Participation in the interviews was voluntary, and the participants were informed about the possibility of withdrawing at any stage of the interviews.

## 4.8 Results

As seen in the empirical quotations below, the parents operate with a general concept of *outdoor activities*; therefore, the presentation of the results starts with a list of the outdoor activities that were detected across the whole research material. These were as follows: whole-day trips, walking/hiking (also skiing and skating depending on the quality of winter), climbing, preparing food and eating outdoors (also in winter), carpeting, fishing, art-related activities performed outdoors, sleeping outside, ball games, and visits to various natural/cultural landscapes in the neighbourhood.

### 4.8.1 *Gender-Traditional Parents of Boys*

#### 4.8.1.1 “Manning the Boys Up”: Outdoor Activities Safeguarding Heteronorm

Those parents who declared themselves to be gender-traditional and who were parents of boys perceived the outdoor activities in the ECE as “good for the boys” (Father 4, technical secondary education, 9 years in Norway). The benefits for boys were understood in relation to the consideration that outdoor activities are good for developing the masculine features of boys. However, when comparing the outdoor activities in the Norwegian ECE to their own backgrounds in Poland, the parents tended to comment that “it’s unusual how much time they spend outdoors” (Mother 3, vocational education, 4 years in Norway). Nevertheless, the outdoor activities were generally perceived as good for “their boys” as they “man them up.”

It’s strange that they spend so much time outdoors, but maybe it’s good, actually. He [our son] will at least not differ so much from his cousins in Poland ... this gender is here overall, but I hope this outdoor stuff will man him up, so that he is not like the ... mayor of Slupsk.<sup>1</sup> (Mother 7, higher education, 6 years in Norway)

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<sup>1</sup>Referring to the first officially declared gay in Polish politics, who was elected to the mayoral position of a little town: <https://www.economist.com/europe/2018/09/20/can-a-young-gay-mayor-change-poland>

“Manning the boys up” was important for this group of parents, as it was seen as preventing homosexuality in the future. In the quotation above, there is a direct reference to the mayor of the Polish town Slupsk. Robert Biedron is internationally known as the first gay mayor in Poland. Other parents did not refer to other well-known gay people but rather described the outdoor activities as preventing the boys from being “a sissy” (and other such formulations unmasking homophobic parental attitudes rooted in a deeply internalised heteronormativity).

The outdoor activities thereby seemed to relieve the fear of “what if my boy ends up gay?” What the parents did not appear to acknowledge was not only the child's agency in this process but also that the ECE staff mediated the outdoor activities to the children. However, the sociocultural acceptance of homosexuality in Norwegian society was both noticeable and worrying to them.

I'm worried when I think in what kind of society my son is growing up, with gays on every level and a total acceptance for that. I hope that the harsh outdoor activities in the kindergarten will wake up his inner man and that he will not be influenced by the popular culture.  
(Mother 1, secondary education, 7 years in Norway)

Even though the culture and society worried them, they did not mention the staff who, from a sociocultural perspective, represent society in the children's daily institutional life. They also did not seem to realise that the child was an actor or subject who, operating in the borderline between home and the ECE setting, was in the process of creating their self in dialogue with the encountered demands, expectations and value positions. This suggests that in these parents' responses, the cultural formation did not exist as a dialectical process but rather as a one-way influence on children, who *soak up* all the content that was presented to them. These parents, however, referred only to the content presented in the ECE setting, while the values present at home were not mentioned as having any influence.

## 4.8.2 Gender-Liberal Parents of Boys

### 4.8.2.1 Creating One's Self in Respectful Dialogue with the Staff, Who Impose Activities But Not Attitudes

In contrast, this group of parents was focused on how the kindergarten staff presented, explained and supported children in the outdoor activities. Equally important were the children themselves, including their personalities, motives and meanings. This suggests that in the utterances of these parents, the *specific plane* (Hedegaard, 2012) of the persons involved in the activities was highlighted. The parents of boys who were referred to as “more gentle” pointed to the importance of the quality of interactions between the adult and the child in outdoor activities. The parents of the “gentle boys” were very glad to hear and observe that the ECEC staff did not force “their boys” to become “tough men” but that they showed respect and helped the child to “be himself” in the process of the structured activity.

What we like is that our son is not being forced to be the “hard man.” He is rather delicate, and I know that he is crying a lot on such a long trip when it’s raining or the hail falls, but I also know that his feelings are recognised, that he hears that they understand his experience and they show him ways to get warm again. This recognition of the child’s emotional reactions is great here. (Mother 16, higher education, 7 years in Norway)

Directing the attention of the institution and its activities to the child’s perspective had, according to this group of parents, other positive, long-term consequences.

#### **4.8.2.2 Outdoor Activities as Meeting the Child’s Interests and Preventing “Drop-Out”**

The other gender-liberal parents of boys pointed at outdoor activities as being in line with their sons’ interests and thereby good. They said that they helped the boys to know what they were good at, thereby building their self-esteem. This emphasis on meeting the children’s interests could be interpreted as another way of parents approaching the children’s perspectives on institutional activities.

What makes me so happy about the outdoor activities is that they are exactly what my son’s like. I know him, and I know that he would have problems sitting and listening. In such a case, he would only be told that he is doing something wrong: don’t run, sit down, don’t get up and so on. And in a kindergarten with so much outdoor activity, he is not a problematic naughty boy; he can be himself and learn that he can manage a lot of things. (Father 6, higher education, 7 years in Norway)

These parents saw the outdoor activities—activities that matched the boys’ interests—as demands that the boys found easy to respond to as a result of their motives and competences. Thereby, they were able to become more involved in the institutional life in positive rather than just *problematic* ways. This suggests that the parents perceived the outdoor activities as an institutional way of taking the children’s perspective.

#### **4.8.2.3 Witnessing Girls as Equally Strong: Facilitating Gender Equality in the Future**

All the boys’ parents who declared themselves to be gender-liberal pointed to the importance of the fact that “their boys” were witnessing girls participating in all the—perceived as masculine—outdoor activities. That was described as good for the development of gender-equal societies. Because of the normative content, in the utterances below, the child’s perspective appeared not in terms of what the child *liked* but in terms of what the child got access to. Watching peers of different genders performing the same outdoor activities was seen by this group of parents as beneficial for their sons.

I’m so glad Piotr sees girls sawing wood, skiing and so on. (Father 6, higher education, 4 years in Norway)

This is what is necessary for the boys to see ... so that it's natural for them that we are equal. I'm happy for my daughter-in-law—for the equal division of domestic work ... if my son decides to marry a woman [laughter]. (Mother 16, higher education, 7 years in Norway)

The last response offered a reflection on the heteronormativity that the mother was aware of but did not want her son to feel forced to reproduce. She perceived, therefore, the outdoor activities as an arena that could be taken differently by individuals regardless of gender. That was, in her eyes, beneficial for general equality between genders not only in terms of equal division of domestic work but also in terms of various life choices, including life-partner choice.

### ***4.8.3 Gender-Traditional Parents of Girls***

#### **4.8.3.1 Outdoor Activities as a Tool of Normative Disaster**

The gender-traditional parents of girls were aware that the kindergartens were structured to promote gender equality, but they saw the promotion of this, including through outdoor activities, as a normative disaster. They seemed to be worried about the values on which the upbringing of “their girls” was based in the ECEC setting, including the kinds of effects this might have on their futures. Many of the conservative parents mentioned the eventual possibility of returning to Poland to save their daughters.

I'm afraid that she will lose her girlhood—and the possibility of being happy within the role that women have in society ... and that she will become a strange something girl-boy who doesn't know who she is ... It's against nature and not healthy. (Mother 3, secondary education, 8 years in Norway)

This perception seemed to be rooted in heteronormative values, and it acknowledged neither the staff, who could present the activities in different ways, nor the children and their subjectivity during the process. The cultural formation through outdoor activities was seen as a definitely one-way influence. The parental focus was not directed to how the child might experience or respond to this; instead, it was attached to the parent's own fear of what the child might become (“a strange something”). Focusing on the unfulfilled heteronormative norm did not allow the parents to recognise individuals who had a significant role in the child's becoming.

#### **4.8.3.2 It's Not for the Girls, But It's Good for My Relationship with My Daughter**

Even though the parents representing traditional gender norms generally agreed on the negative influence of outdoor activities on their daughters' future gender performance, some of the fathers revealed that they were happy that their daughters were introduced to the outdoor activities. The reason primarily given was that they, the

fathers, also liked the outdoor activities very much. The vision of future outdoor trips together with their daughters was much more tempting to the fathers than accompanying them on typical *girly* activities. Moreover, sharing in an activity that they both liked seemed to them to be a better base for building a relationship.

In the response below, a gender-traditional father approached the *specific plane* (Hedegaard, 2012) of interpersonal interactions, realising that slipping from the norm of the feminine female was in the long run better for both the daughter, himself and the relationship between them.

I agree that it's maybe not for girls, all the wild stuff here ... and the outdoors. It definitely wasn't for my little princess, as I imagined her before. But when I think about it, the more I like it, because ... I'm glad that instead of running around the shopping centres and beauty salons with my teenage daughter, in the future, of course, I'll be able to take her for a tent trip, with a big chance that she'd really enjoy it. (Father 12, vocational education, 9 years in Norway)

However, as in the utterances of other gender-traditional parents, neither the child's agency in cultural formation nor the home were mentioned as important value-related contextual factors. The daughter appeared here in her *future—outdoor enjoying—version*, formed by the ECE setting. As this matched the father's interests and thus could strengthen the relationship between the two of them, the father was willing to distance himself from the cultural gender norm (of keeping girls away from outdoor activities). In other words, through looking at the outdoor activities through the lens of an interpersonal plan, he challenged the necessity of implementing the traditional gender norm in the case of his own child. It was also important that the future “big chance that she'd really enjoy” the outdoor activities took as its point of departure the fact that the girl already showed interest in these activities. This case showed that the child's perspective was taken into consideration when emancipating oneself from traditional gender norms.

#### **4.8.4 Gender-Liberated Parents of Girls**

##### **4.8.4.1 Outdoor Activities as an Institutional Way of Meeting the Girls' Diverse Interests**

Pippi Longstocking appeared in the responses of gender-liberated parents, most often as a descriptive and friendly *label* they put on their own daughters. When Pippi Longstocking was mentioned by one parent during one of the interviews, many others said, “yeah, my daughter is also a Pippi Longstocking” or “I also have the honour to be a father of Pippi.” The *label* worked, on the one hand, as a recognition of the child's perspective and a description of the daughter's movement- and outdoor-related interests, while, on the other hand, signalling parental approval of the daughter's process of overcoming the artificial borders that have traditionally been put on girls (Graff, 2005). Moreover, the children's perspectives and

experience of outdoor activities as well as other aspects of the ECE content were highly valued and served as very basic criteria for discussing the ECE activities.

This is just so great, that she can be a girl in so many different ways here ... and that she can explore and choose herself what kind of girl she actually wants to be. I like that she can explore, search, get dirty, but also be a princess and have fun with it. Especially because she is rather a Pippi Longstocking type. (Mother 11, higher education, 12 years in Norway)

For the parents of those labelled Pippis, the outdoor activities offered by the kindergartens were of crucial importance. They represented an institutional way of not only taking the children's interests seriously but also opening them up for diverse performances of the female gender. The outdoor activities were, in this sense, an institutional demand in which the daughters were supposed to get involved through their motives and activities. However, the developed motives and activities were up to the children. No particular child's response to the educational offer was seen by the parents as expected by the ECE staff. This indicates that the parents recognised the ECE as facilitating the children's cultural formation, with a focus on the children's self-creation through access to different kinds of content. When talking about self-creation, the parents focused on the gender aspect; however, they were open to very different ways of performing this, as both Pippi and Princess were welcome to appear. As they generally saw their daughters as already emancipating from traditional gender norms by being Pippis, they also underlined the institutional openness brought about by the outdoor offer, which allowed their daughters to respond without disturbing the institutional order. "It's important for me that she is not criticised or in any way punished for being so 'wild' but that she gets an offer to which she can respond by being herself" (Father 4, higher education, 4 years in Norway).

#### 4.8.4.2 Outdoor Activity and Interaction with Staff as Creating Children's Subjectivity

The staff's openness to children's experiences and dialogical engagement with the institutional content were also noticed by the gender-liberated parents of girls who did not possess outdoor interests and dispositions.

My daughter likes very much all the things that I as a feminist simply reject, but I allow her to find her way. And this is what I like about the staff: that they know that my daughter would rather stay inside and play being a princess, but the plan of the day is that everybody goes out to run in the mud, and then they don't expect that she will be happy about it. They allow her to be unhappy by getting dirty, wet and cold. She is respected at the level of her reactions to this. (Mother 17, higher education, 6 years in Norway)

This utterance shed light on another way of cultural formation taking place through the outdoor activities, whereby the girl was allowed to dialogically engage in a relationship with the activity and the staff, creating herself as a subject resisting the outdoor-life culture. She became involved with the institutional demands by developing *stay-inside* motives and resistance. The mother, who was able to take the

perspective of the child, allowed her daughter to do this, even if it contradicted value positions that she chose herself as an adult woman.

## 4.9 Discussion

The results showed that the parental experience of the cultural formation taking place through outdoor activities was framed by the parents' value positions related to gender as well as their ability to acknowledge the interpersonal plane and thereby the child's agency in the process of *becoming*. The liberal parents were more capable of including the child's perspective as well as realising the complexity of the interpersonal interactions directing in various ways both the processes of cultural formation and the institutional life of the ECE setting. The traditional parents seemed not to realise the institution's *specific plane* (Hedegaard, 2012), nor did they see their own children as subjects in ongoing cultural formation. This reflected how they did not perceive cultural formation in the way that it is defined in this paper but rather as a one-way stimulus (conflicting with their own values). Paradoxically, they also did not recognise their own home-based and value-related influence on the process.

This is why it was particularly interesting when a parent declaring traditional values touched the *specific plane* of interacting individuals. This was a moment when one-way influence transformed into cultural formation in which the child was a subject. Father 12, when taking his daughter's perspective, challenged his conservative vision of her. Even though he limited the child's perspective to what his daughter liked and what "she with a big chance will enjoy," this involved a transformation of his traditional norms with their potential consequences for his daughter's future life. Even if his response might be interpreted as having his own enjoyment in focus (he liked outdoor activities very much), this showed that looking at outdoor activities from the *specific plane* of interacting individuals could challenge his own value positions and change his perception of institutional demands. Getting down to the *specific plane* makes individuals important, thereby also making the children's perspectives significant.

Following the child's individual needs and agency while in contact with a gendered phenomenon such as outdoor activity allows the heteronormative matrix to be challenged. Challenging and eventually overcoming the matrix is possible for children because they are not yet completely programmed by it (Butler, 1990), and so many actions not in line with the heteronormative gender division of activities are likely to occur. However, taking the perspective of the child may also be about allowing the child to follow the heteronormative matrix, even if this is against our own gender values. That happened in the utterance of the feminist mother (Mother 17) who, by taking her daughter's perspective, accepted her way of resisting the outdoor artefacts and activities, even though the mother herself would have loved her daughter to be a wild outdoor Pippi. Taking the child's perspective allowed her



to see her own feminism as the result of a free individual choice, which again enabled her to accept her daughter's quite different choice.

## 4.10 Conclusions

Hedegaard (2012) claims that research focused on the sociocultural conditions of children's development should aim to improve the conditions of children's development. If we approach this objective through the results presented in this chapter, we can point to the importance of enhancing the child's perspective and the *specific plane* of interpersonal interactions in ECE's cooperation with parents.

The children's perspectives were conceptualised by the interviewed parents as the individual children's preferences (activities they liked and enjoyed) and individual features (e.g., delicate, sensitive, and not calm). However, they were also perceived in terms of institutional adjustments involving the creation of activity settings that demanded from the children motives and competences that were in line with the children's interests and personalities. The main conclusion of this paper in terms of the research-based development of institutional practices is the importance of ECE parental collaborations that not only extend our understanding of the child's perspective but also reflect on the ECE institutional context from this perspective.

These two aspects may become interesting starting points for early childhood institutions and educators seeking to encourage dialogue with parents and caregivers to facilitate the transformation of parents' values and agency in relation to the cultural formation of the child as well as the development of the child as a self-creating subject. Ideally, this dialogue between families and ECEs could form the focus of participatory and action research in order to develop complex, yet applicable and locally sensitive, knowledge.

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