

# Alex og det store treet (Alex and the Big Tree)

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## Summary

Alex og det store treet (Alex and the Big Tree) is a children's book designed to spark ideas between children and staff in kindergarten. The inspiration for the book comes from research undertaken in kindergartens and the pedagogical framework used in the intervention in the project [Move-play-explore in early childhood education \(MoveEarly\)](#). The purpose of the book is to find a way to communicate and share research directly with children and staff in kindergarten.

This text offers reflections on the inception and development of the book. It discusses the process of translating and disseminating research findings through a children's book, aiming to communicate complex pedagogical ideas in an accessible, engaging, and artistic manner, ultimately promoting rich dialogues and reflections around these ideas within Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings. It delves into how the book was created through rigorous processes involving video recordings of children's movement, play and exploration in kindergartens, as well as the theoretical underpinnings within the project. Furthermore, the discussion underscores the blend of arts-based communication and research dissemination, particularly with a focus on the ethical aspects of sharing research with those the research is about and intended for.

Keywords: Kindergarten, Dialogue reading, Movement, Play, Exploration, Children's book



## Foreword

Alex and the Big Tree is not just a children's book, it is an attempt to bridge academic research on the concepts of movement, play and exploration and everyday pedagogical practices in kindergarten through dialogue reading. Most Norwegian children spend a large amount of their days in ECEC. This means that their development and *danning* happens in the conditions created for and by them in their ECEC setting. Movement, play and exploration are inherent in children's way of being and meaning making in and as a part of their surroundings. We hope this book can contribute to enriched dialogue around movement, play and exploration amongst children and staff in ECEC.

The process of creating Alex and the Big Tree involved collaboration with PhD students (Maria Grindheim and Tracey Joyce), supervisors (Elin Eriksen Ødegaard and Eivind Aadland), a graphic designer (Karoline Ådnes) and an editorial reader (Julie Grindheim). All dedicated to developing a meaningful book where the ideas from our research are communicated in a sensible and accessible way. The book is financed by KINDknow - Kindergarten Knowledge Centre for Systemic Research on Diversity and Sustainable Futures (Research Council Norway project no. 275575) seeding funds and developed with support from the MoveEarly project (Research Council Norway project no. 325880). We are thankful for the financial, creative, and academic support in and beyond our research environment.

The further work on this reflection paper has been evaluated within the framework of Kunstfaglige forskningsformer (KFF) which is Western Norway University of Applied Sciences' system for peer reviewing arts-based research forms. We have written this text as a reflection on bridging academic research with arts-based dissemination. Working with this text has offered opportunities for elaborating on the pedagogical and artistic thinking around the making of the book. We are thankful to the reviewers of this text and for the opportunity to publish and share these ideas with others. We hope this work can offer new perspectives and inspiration on research dissemination and translation for children and staff.

Tracey Joyce and Maria Grindheim

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# Alex and the Big Tree

## Introduction

Alex og det store treet (Alex and the Big Tree) is the first book about Alex and his friends. Alex is four and a half years old and attends to kindergarten. A very big tree stands outside the kindergarten, but Alex has always been too scared to climb it. One day, two toy kittens get stuck in the tree. Can Alex and his friends save them?

The book aims to inspire ideas between children and kindergarten staff, based on research undertaken in kindergartens and the pedagogical framework developed for the intervention in the MoveEarly project (Move-play-explore in early childhood education) at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences. The book aims to communicate and share research findings directly with children and staff in kindergartens.

The story is written by Maria Grindheim and Tracey Joyce, PhD students in the research project MoveEarly. Karoline Ådnanes, from the consultant company Iterate, has illustrated the book. Elin Eriksen Ødegaard and Eivind Aadland have supervised the work, and Julie Grindheim has contributed with editorial reading. The book is financed by KINDknow - Kindergarten Knowledge Centre for Systemic Research on Diversity and Sustainable Futures (Research Council Norway project no. 275575) seeding funds and developed with support from the MoveEarly project (Research Council Norway project no. 325880).

This document reflects on the making of the book Alex and the Big Tree and discusses how it contributes to new ways of translating and disseminating research to children and staff in ECEC.

## Aim and research question

Alex and the Big Tree is a children's book that came to life through a desire to convey research results involving children and staff in ECEC directly with them. When analysing the material from an empirical research project, the researchers

felt it was important that the "subjects" of research were not only involved within it, but that the results were effectively shared with them. This aspect of research dissemination is not often accounted for. Using our past experiences working in kindergarten settings and with kindergarten teachers, we felt an effective method of disseminating research findings and prompting dialogues within the kindergartens, would be to create a children's book.

Research shows that carefully considered use of literature and culture dissemination in kindergartens can lead to excitement and joy for children when they are involved in reading, as well as create meaning for their personal development (Spurkland, 2014). As dialogue reading allows for meaning making and negotiation for children (and staff) (Solstad, 2015), we decided to make a children's book focusing on dialogue reading inspired by the "stories" we found in our data material.

Traditionally, children's books can entertain and teach. However, children's literature can also be considered as a unique form of art. This book serves as an exploration of how one can balance arts-based communication and research dissemination. Inspired by our research on movement, play, and exploration, the book and this reflection paper shed light on the research question: How can pedagogical ideas about movement, play, and exploration discovered through research be shared with and made more accessible to children and staff in kindergarten?

## **The different parts of the project and its place in the field of pedagogy**

### **Background**

The research, which the book builds on, is a sub-project within the larger project Move, Play, Explore in Early Childhood Education and Care (MoveEarly), a large transdisciplinary and multimethodological research project funded by the Norwegian Research Council. MoveEarly aims to develop knowledge about

facilitating and enriching ECEC pedagogy sensitive to children's movement, play and exploration to improve practices (Stodden, et.al., 2021; Ødegaard, 2021; Sanderud, 2020). This sub-project aims to conceptualise and theorise the move-play-explore nexus to inform further development of pedagogy that promotes the concepts of movement, play, and exploration and the interconnectedness between them. In this study, an investigation into children's and teachers' situated understanding of the move-play-explore nexus was conducted. These investigations were conducted simultaneously with the analysis of theories concerning movement, play and exploration. As part of the field work, kindergarten staff were asked to record videos of moments they perceived as containing movement, play and exploration. These videos were analysed, using microanalysis (Rogoff, 2014) by staff and researcher(s), and inspired the making of the book.

The rationale behind the sub-project was to capture what the MoveEarly project identifies as natural behaviours and ways of being for young children, and how these concepts connect (the move-play-explore nexus). Through videos of everyday activities and behaviours in kindergarten, we aimed at understanding the move-play-explore interconnectedness from a situated perspective. This informed the further development of pedagogy in the larger MoveEarly project, a pedagogy meant to counterbalance an increased focus on supporting children's verbal and cognitive skills, which is shown to lead towards a schoolification of ECEC practices (Bennet, 2010). Such approaches overshadow holistic approaches (Bennet, 2010) accounting for, and appreciating, young children's natural inclination to move, play and explore. Using an arts-based dissemination method, we aim to engage and inspire children and staff's move-play-explore experiences, and we believe this method is more effective than traditional dissemination methods in the academic field.

## **Building on pedagogical ideas**

Alex and the Big Tree emerged from dialogues between researchers about the data material. After reflecting on and analysing the videos recorded within the kindergartens, we saw connections between the situated understanding and the



ideas developed based on theory. MoveEarly aim to develop a pedagogical framework promoting movement, play and exploration as interconnected. An abductive process of traveling between theory and the research data material led to a pedagogical framework focusing on how to understand, value and promote movement, play and exploration through enriched physical environments with a focus on creating opportunities for meaningful participation, good balance between challenge and support, and good dialogue. Particularly two cases in the video material exemplified the essence of these pedagogical ideas: showing how to balance challenge and support through dialogue. We wanted to share these examples within the field of research, and more importantly not only staff, but also children in ECEC. As such, we decided to explore the idea of making a book directed towards children and their staff in kindergarten.

## **Dialogue reading**

We decided to translate the ideas into a story that could be communicated through a children's book, to engage both children and staff. Dialogue reading, where children and staff share their reading experience, can serve as a reflective practise around the pedagogy we aimed to encourage. This approach aligns MoveEarly's vision of developing a pedagogy that can be adapted to each ECEC's pedagogical niche.

Dialogue, a key element in Vygotsky's theories of cognitive development, places social interaction at the centre of learning and development processes (Vygotsky, 1978). Even though our book is not designed for teaching as such, we believe that this dialogue is valuable for children's way of seeing themselves and others. Movement, play and exploration are often of a pre-reflective character and understood as children's fundamental way of navigating the world. As stated by Sheets-Johnstone (2019), "Movement is indeed our mother tongue" (p. 1). However, research has shown that language can support young children's experiences and meaning making, and we suggest that children's movement, play and explorative behaviour and experiences can be enhanced through verbal reflection with others.

Alex and the Big Tree emphasise creating opportunities for meaningful participation, creating good balance between challenge and support, through dialogue involving action and words. Inspired by Siraj-Blatchford et al.'s (2022) notions of sustained shared thinking, the book encompasses explorative and playful dialogue, with characters brainstorming how Alex can tackle the challenge of climbing the big tree to save a toy kitten. The book holds modelling thinking, open-ended questions and suggestions that do not hold specific or "correct" answers, sparking ideas and helping children formulate their own questions and solutions. These ideas resemble Mercer's (2000) notion of exploratory talk, which facilitates collaboration and interthinking. At the end of the book one can find reflective questions promoting staff-children and staff-staff dialogue around different ways of overcoming challenges for young children through play and exploration.

The story is inspired by the data material, particularly one teacher's method of supporting a child through playful and explorative dialogue. While co-analysing recorded videos, the teacher described his idea of finding the way together with the children (in Norwegian: *veileter*) rather than being someone who leads the way (in Norwegian: *veileder*). Furthermore, the story is inspired by episodes in the data material where the children are looking for ways to solve a challenge. In both cases they are trying to climb something tall and «dangerous» while they also engage in serious playful situations and dialogue. We believe the story is relatable for many children; to want to do something that seems a bit scary. We aim to promote ways of supporting children in trying new experiences, through explorative and playful dialogue. Rather than asking leading questions to the children the teacher poses playful and explorative questions, encouraging children to think in new ways. The book communicates this way of approaching a challenge through the question "how do we solve this?". This mindset is inspired by a child in one of the videos, and we believe it is crucial to encourage young children and future adults to think this way.

## **The making of the book**

In the time between August – December 2023, we worked towards finishing the book to include it as a part of the pilot study of the larger intervention in MoveEarly. The illustrator developed the visual design of the book in dialogue with the main authors, enhancing the communication of the pedagogical ideas behind the book. The artful expression found in the book is not only bringing it to life but also helps contextualise the situation for the children and staff. The illustrations were considered playful and relevant for this age group and were designed to communicate the ideas most effectively to the children. This approach has served as an artful translation of the research results. The book was received positively, and the staff were eager to use it in their everyday practises.

### **The rights of the child**

Despite our opinion that it is important to disseminate research to kindergarten staff, there is to our knowledge limited knowledge about how research is disseminated to them as well as to the children who are often the “subjects” of the research. There is hence little knowledge about how to discuss research findings with children. It is vital to respect the rights of the child, such as the right for children to share their thoughts freely (UNCRC Article 12) and their right to freedom of expression (UNCRC Article 13). We believe that a book like this can support their communicative skills about various aspects of their lives, as it is shown that dialogue reading can support language development and expression of thoughts and opinions. The book is written in Nynorsk, which makes it appropriate and relevant to the area of Norway the project is taking place in, Western Norway. Nynorsk is the written language most similar to many of the dialects spoken in this in this area, therefore through the use of Nynorsk we are respecting and valuing local language and dialects.

Disseminating research in an artistic and engaging manner for children and staff enables merging of research dissemination, meaningful dialogue and art and culture. Within the context of this project, it helps to engage staff and children into the pedagogical ideas we have developed. The dissemination of the research

findings in this manner is significant in respecting children's rights for inclusion; inclusion in research not simply as "subjects" to be observed and judged but as equal and respected participants. Such an approach can expand the view of research and who it is made accessible to.

### **Pedagogical and artistic considerations**

The making of Alex and the Big Tree required important pedagogical and artistic considerations. Several people contributed with valuable ideas concerning both content, style and the reflective questions at the end of the book.

The first consideration that had to be made was what we wanted to communicate through the book. One challenge was to decide if we wanted to disseminate directly what we found in the data material or to communicate the pedagogical ideas that we wanted to promote for children. Should we stay true to what happens in the videos, as one traditionally does in analysis of case studies in research? Should we focus on making it (more) fun for children, by i.e. building on popular aspects of contemporary children's culture? Or should we focus on everyday happenings in ECEC children's lives? Several discussions on this were held between the authors, their supervisors, the illustrator and the editorial reader. Considering the main goal of the overall project; to enrich opportunities for movement, play and exploration and to promote ways of doing so through dialogue between staff and children, and that the book would have a story with copyrights etc., we decided to use the videos as inspiration, but to make the story our own.

The second consideration was which aspects of the videos we wanted to highlight. Should it be purely from the adults or children's perspectives, or should we try to include both? We analysed the videos and asked ourselves what we found most interesting to communicate. As such we landed on focusing on the playful and explorative dialogue, as well as the child's mindset of "how do we solve this challenge?". The focus of the story landed on the explorative dialogue, whilst the illustrator worked on capturing the children's perspectives.

A third consideration arose whilst writing the story, as we realised that this was an opportunity not only for explorative dialogue, but also to communicate to

children about bodily sensations and what it can be like to climb a tree. This became particularly relevant because preliminary findings of research within similar projects have shown that dialogue between staff and children about their movement experiences do not seem to be very much present in the everyday life of ECEC in Norway (Aadland et al, 2023). We wanted to communicate that there are no "correct" solutions to the various bodily challenges that we face, and that the adaptation of body movement can provide a variety of successful or unsuccessful solutions. We believe this is important to communicate to young children as a way of supporting their creativity, adaptability, autonomy and resilience. The mindset of "how do we solve this?" as well as a description of what bodily sensations can be like, is hence worth communicating and modelling for young children. In addition, we want to stress the importance of taking time to ask and reflect on these questions with children, as a pedagogical approach towards encouraging and supporting exploration of themselves in relation to their surroundings.

An overall consideration throughout the making of the book was the visual style of the book. The aim was to make a clear and engaging story, communicated through drawings and text. Many rounds of discussions with supervisors, colleagues and the editorial reader were done to provide a product that communicated what we wanted and also 1) was gender neutral both in the storyline and visual appearance, and 2) held a childish and engaging style. The aim was to see it from a child's perspective. This could have included other things happening in the kindergarten in the background of the story. However, focusing on the main story helped focusing our, and the children's attention to the challenges and the pedagogical approach taken by the teacher.

## **Blurring boundaries: transforming research into children's literature**

Dissemination of research findings to children and staff together is an aspect of research often ignored within the field. Most research findings focus on being shared in academic literature and articles which children cannot access, and

kindergarten staff have limited access to. Interpreting, translating and adapting our findings to enable children and staff to easily access the core concepts we have found and are promoting, is a unique method used to involve and include them in our research. We believe this is an important aspect of research where the people involved are not regarded as «subjects» but as active and respected participants. Promoting reflection on practice is a method which is encouraged throughout kindergarten teacher education and within kindergarten practice (Bassot, 2016). Including this in a children's book, however, is not common. Linking the pedagogical idea of reflection directly to the children's resource connects theory to practice.

## **Reflections around ethical aspects**

Several ethical aspects were considered throughout the process of conducting the field work that led to the book. The design of the study and the collection of the data material were approved by the ethical board of Western Norway University of Applied Sciences. The ethical considerations were particularly connected to consent and assent in relation to video recordings of children and staff. Parental and staff consent forms had been signed, and cases wherein the children seemed more vulnerable, such as nudity or escalating conflicts, were encouraged not to be recorded or deleted if accidentally recorded. Furthermore, ethical considerations around involving young children in research were discussed in the planning of the research.

The making of the book also led to several ethical considerations. Firstly, the idea of the book, came about when analysing the videos. Due to restricted consent and ethical considerations, we did not want to share the videos. However, we found the content so interesting that we wanted to share the ideas we found in the material. This was when we started discussing how we, in an ethically sensible way, could share the ideas we gained from the stories in an accessible way for staff and children. As such, a second ethical consideration in the process of creating the book arose from ethical considerations around who can access research findings. It is our opinion that making such a book can support ethical

considerations extending to the dissemination and translation of findings and the impact on participants. As researchers, we must ensure that the knowledge generated from the research is used ethically and responsibly considering the potential implications for participants and the broader ECEC community. As mentioned previously this can also be tied to principles on the rights of the child.

In conclusion, we believe that Alex and The Big Tree can serve as a way of crossing boundaries between research and the receiver (here children and staff in kindergarten) by disseminating research and pedagogical ideas directly to them. We hope that this can contribute to new ways of thinking about how to make research accessible for more people, as well as contribute to ethical considerations on who research should be for.

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