In the Best Interests of the Child: From the Century of the Child to the Century of Sustainability

Liv Torunn Grindheim, Jorunn Spord Borgen and Elin Eriksen Ødegaard

Abstract

The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) established a milestone for the 20th century, which is often referred to as the 'century of the child'. Despite the UNCRC being accepted in most countries, suppression and injustices are still present in many children's lives. To gain more insight into how to come closer to achieving equitable conditions for generations living interconnected lives in their situated local, but globally entangled, nature and cultures, this study investigated how children's rights to protection, to be heard and to play and recreation are promoted, actualised and expended in the wake of the century of the child. We start by presenting significant voices and changes that occurred during the 20th and 21st centuries and point to paradoxes and ambivalences that researchers encounter when aiming to discover what is in the best interests of the child. Research that has enhanced our knowledge on children's protection, participation, play and recreation revealed that children's lives, historical voices and legal rights and changes in global and local societies, nature and research are entangled and offer both new and contradictive knowledge about children and childhood. The uncovered paradoxes and ambivalences call for transformative research designs that are problem-oriented and transdisciplinary, as we as experts, together with citizens and policymakers, seek to make the right choices in the best interests of the child.

Keywords

century of the child – sustainability – UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – transformative research designs

1 Introduction

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that the best interests of the child should be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children (United Nations, 1989, art. 3). The UNCRC has been accepted by most countries; however, crime, suppression and unjust decisions continue to exist in and impact the lives of many children: all in the name of the child's best interests. Even in the Nordic countries, which are recognised for their child-centred approach to children and families in matters of education, public services, child culture industries and art, children continue to be abused and neglected, and their voices continue to be too easily ignored, both in everyday life affairs as well as in more important life decisions, such as those that have a huge effect on their future.

Attitudes towards children are deeply culturally grounded. Positioning ourselves among researchers who study childhood, children and children's cultural formation and examine these attitudes, requires an awareness of the context within which we operate. We can start by pointing to Ellen Key's influential book *The Century of the Child* (2018) that was published in Sweden in 1900. This book influenced not only Swedish society but also the Nordic and European spirit of interest in children's agency and personhood. The establishment of the BIN-Norden Child Culture Research Network in 1970 and the 1989 UNCRC can both be traced back to Key's influence. The influence of *The Century of the Child*, reified as worries for the children of future generations, is also evident in the world's ecological awakening and the 1987 Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED], 1987) that pointed to sustainable development as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability for future generations to meet their own needs' (p. 29).

Since the 1980s, studies on childhood, child culture and developmental psychology have begun to establish common themes that have inspired other fields, such as education, philosophy, health and law. For many years, these fields have been less universalised and more contextualised (Borgen & Ødegaard, 2015). Children are understood as individuals who contribute to their own and others' cultural formation through interpersonal interactions in local communities but also through participation in the global sphere via travel, migration, television, the Internet and social media. As such, we see an increasing interest in developing policies based on universal solutions, legislation and efforts (Biesta, 2015). Both approaches attempt to meet the uncertainties of our rapidly changing and internationally interconnected contemporary society, where we must also face the enormous challenges presented by unsustainable

methods of distributing and managing natural, cultural and human resources. In some parts of our world, children still do not have access to childcare and education, and poverty among children exists in both developed and under-developed countries (Eriksen, 2018). Acknowledging these challenges, we are convinced that universal solutions based on research from 'yesterday' cannot adequately address contemporary and future challenges. Despite this, we also know that historical and cultural knowledge must be handed over to the next generation; not doing so would be a disservice to the next generation. Thus, we have a pressing need to understand and accurately depict the current conditions of children's lives, encompassing their play, learning, well-being and cultural formation. This chapter, therefore, is structured around the question: *How are children's rights to protection, participation and recreation promoted, actualised and expended in the wake of the century of the child?* By looking backwards to the century of the child to understand ways of viewing children and childhood, we aim not only to gain insight into how to re-establish what might have been left out of children's lives but also to determine how to come closer to realising equitable conditions for generations living interconnected lives in their situated local, but globally entangled, nature and culture.

We begin by presenting some significant voices and changes from the 20th century, especially those from the Nordic context in which we are embedded, and point to paradoxes and ambivalences researchers encounter when they seek to identify actions and ideas that are in the best interests of the child. We approach our examination through the lens of three central themes. The first considers departure from children's right to protection, the second from children's right to be heard and the third from children's right to play and recreation. We sum up by viewing the paradoxes and ambivalences identified as conditions for transformative research practices that promote sustainability and the involvement of a variety of stakeholders and disciplines.

2 The Century of the Child

Taking a historical route, the perceptions of both women and children have been significantly impacted by the fact that references to a 'human' have traditionally been perceived as references to a grown man. Many voices have suggested opposition to this main discourse on man and instead have emphasised the resources that children have and bring to society. These historical thoughts and actions are manifold, but a common thread is the radical thought of children as humans in their own rights. Ellen Key (1849–1926), a Swedish intellectual, is one of the first strong Scandinavian voices to advocate principles

concerning the rights of children. In her famous book, which she titles with her designation of the 20th century, *The Century of the Child* (Key, 2018),¹ Key writes about the neglect of children and advocates making children the focal point for political reform and education, promoting child-centred approaches to teaching and learning. Her ideas were embraced and further developed in Germany and the United States and were disseminated back to the Nordic countries in anonymous intertextualities by Elsa Köhler² and Charlotte Bühler³ (Hauglund, Key, & Thorbjørnsen, 2001).

Key was familiar with the philosophies of both Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche and oriented herself politically toward social democracy. She fueled the process of the social inclusion of children and the full membership of boys and girls in the human structure (Hällström, Jansson, & Pironi, 2016). The child-centred focus in Key's writings and the close relation to Rousseau's beliefs are exemplified by what she opined about education:

To suppress the real personality of the child, and to supplant it with another personality continues to be a pedagogical crime common to those who announce loudly that education should only develop the real individual nature of the child. (Key, 2018, p. 108)

She referred to the 'soul murders in school' (p. 203) and to kindergartens as 'canned education', meaning that kindergartens were like factories where children learned to model others rather than to express themselves. She argued that the Froebel dictum, 'Let us live for the children', must be changed into a more significant phrase, 'Let us allow the children to live' (p. 242). Accordingly, she was very critical of corporal punishment. She wrote that one should never beat a child, because beating seldom makes children realise what error they made; it only awakens feelings of revenge. Furthermore, bodily punishment appeals primarily to the 'beast in man', the beast that one otherwise strives so diligently to obliterate in the child (Ambjörnsson, 2014). Even though her visions were close to those of Rousseau (and argued against some of Fröbel's didactics on modelling patterns), philosophical ideas from the 17th and 18th centuries, what she proclaimed was radical and not set into the juridical system until much later.

We trace the heritage of the establishment of children's rights to Key. One such effort to establish children's rights was the Norwegian parliament's passage of the Castbergian Child Laws⁴ in 1915, which granted children born outside of marriage the rights to inheritances and to bear their fathers' surnames. These laws also ensured financial support for unmarried mothers by expanding the maintenance obligation. Thus, these rights were strengthened through legal protection (Andersland, 2015).

The 1924 Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child (League of Nations, 1924), recommended by the League of Nations, is another early document that specifically addressed children's rights. Then in 1948, the UN General Assembly approved the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a revised and expanded version of the Geneva Declaration that states that all humans should be protected, as outlined in article 1: 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights'. This document formed the basis of the 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child approved by the UN General Assembly (Smith, 2008), which represents a milestone in the establishment of legal rights for children. The 1959 Declaration, which specifically focused on the rights of children, was seen as necessary in spite of the passage of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights that had been approved in 1948, establishing the rights of all human beings. Each of these laws legitimised voices like Key's that argued that children are vulnerable and should have their own rights.

The first effort to establish the 1989 UNCRC was initiated in Poland in 1978. The original plan was to finalise the draft by the end of 1979, which was the International Year of the Child. The first suggested work from Poland was close to a confirmation of the principles in the declaration from 1959, upon which most states had agreed. Since the period from 1959 to 1978 saw a change in the ways both human rights and children were understood, several nations wanted a more radical declaration (Smith, 2008). After ten years of work and negotiations, the nations agreed upon a convention that represented a radical view of children's capabilities and rights; in addition to giving primary consideration to the best interests of the child and children's protection, it also stated that children had radical rights, like the right to express their views freely in 'all matters affecting the child' and for those views to be given due weight (arts. 12–13); children's rights to play and to engage in cultural life (art. 31) were also established. On 20 November 1989, the UNCRC was finally established and was put into practice on 2 September 1990.

In the wake of the century of the child and despite the UNCRC being accepted in most countries, issues such as crime, suppression and unjust decisions are still affecting the lives of many children. Regarding children's right to protection, it is uncomfortable to realise that corporal punishment remains an issue in child rearing practices. In 2019, Japan became the last reported country to prohibit all corporal punishment of children (Crowly, 2020). We see a growing awareness of violence against children as a fundamental human rights issue. Many countries face multiple serious and challenging issues like war, corruption and poverty. Thus, children are often not prioritised, and their right to protection is not fulfilled.

Another important issue in the wake of the century of the child is ensuring that more countries prioritise children's rights in every respect in order

to achieve sustainable futures. By giving children individual rights, we indicate awareness of children's unique experiences, capabilities and vulnerabilities as a group that needs protection. At the same time, by establishing these rights for children, we also forward an individualistic approach that can overlook notions of humans as interrelated and dependent across generations, structural power-relations, economies and cultural and natural contexts and artefacts. Taking these paradoxes and ambivalences on board, along with the ecological awareness prevalent in part of the 20th century and in the 21st century, we see a surge towards sustainability. A strong voice that contributed to drawing attention to the interdependence of economy, poverty and natural resources and to the huge impact that our management of these resources will have on future generations is the 1987 Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987). In the report, reducing poverty and distributing resources more evenly are central to addressing both present and future needs, together with acknowledging the importance of our ability to live rewarding lives, which are dependent on human relationships and cultural belonging. Therefore, in the best interests of the child, it seems necessary to move from the century of the child to the century of sustainability.

3 Paradoxes and Ambivalence When Approaching the Best Interests of the Child

What it means to be a child and what childhood entails are concepts repeatedly negotiated when dealing with issues impacting children's lives and in cultural, historical, natural and institutional discourses (Cunningham, 2005; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2013). Voices like Key's and the establishment and worldwide acceptance of the UNCRC have, on one hand, established children and childhood as important both here and now and for future sustainability. On the other hand, these voices and rights are rooted in the global North and are easily construed as opposite to the concept of childhood in the global South (Nieuwenhuys, 2013). This can be exemplified by the Nordic welfare model. The Nordic welfare model that was established after the second world war was founded on ideals with the aim of establishing social welfare, health care and social security for all citizens, including children, as a public responsibility (Satka & Eydal, 2004). The Nordic welfare states have an explicit goal of regulating spaces and relations for children in 'the best interest' of the child. The core ideal is equal opportunities for all children (Korsvold, 2012). At an institutional level, the Nordic countries often serve as role models for good social practices. However, forwarding the Nordic welfare state as a role model

forms a paradox to our conviction that universal solutions cannot form the answer for contemporary and future problems.

From the 1990s to the present, both international and Nordic political and structural changes have greatly impacted the Nordic welfare states and children's lives in geographically and culturally similar, but politically different, neighbouring countries (Juncker & BIN-Norden, 2013; Korsvold, 2012). Nordic childhoods are multicultural, intermediated and digitalised. The emphasis on children's agency and their legal UNCRC rights have given them a position in society-at-large, and therefore, childhood can no longer be viewed as a special kind of life-world; rather, children are, at all levels, participants in society across sectors (Juncker & BIN-Norden, 2013). Children's participatory potential, along with their need for protection and recreation, have been and continue to be explained and researched.

For the last 25–50 years, researchers in the fields of child culture, educational science, sociology and media have focused on studying and viewing young people in their own rights in order to grasp their perspectives. This research both critiques and analyses the child culture industry, child culture professions and the instrumentalisation of childhood (Borgen & Ødegaard, 2015). To reject the idea of modern childhood as a Western discovery or invention, postcolonial perspectives, in their broadest sense, are concerned with challenging the unquestioned, routine 'us vs. them' approach (Nieuwenhuys, 2013, p. 5). Postcolonial perspectives offer an abolition of this contradiction and instead present a conceptualisation of childhood(s) as the unstable and contingent result of a contextual encounter (Nieuwenhuys, 2013, p. 5). Furthermore, research about materiality as an actor in children's cultural formation, often departing from theories presented by Deleuze and Guattari (1988), is brought to the table. Emerging research points to sustainability raising awareness of how children and humans are entangled through nature, culture, materiality and economy and how their contexts are governed (Grindheim, Bakken, Hauge, & Heggen, 2019). How to meet the paradoxes and ambiguities in these entanglements are core issues in research seeking to identify the best interests of the child.

In the following, we point to three themes that we see as emerging and characterised by paradoxes and ambivalence concerning children's protection, participation and recreation in the wake of the century of the child – all with the overall aim of being in the best interests of the child (United Nations, 1989, art. 2). The first theme takes departure from children's right to protection, which is an overall aim of the UNCRC. We find the concepts of protect or protection referenced in articles 2, 3, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 22, 25, 31 and 38. The second theme is children's right to be heard (United Nations, 1989, arts. 12–13) and the third is children's right to play and recreation (United Nations, 1989, art. 31).

3.1 *The Right to Protection*

Quite recently, the COVID-19 pandemic revitalised the ambivalence of children's right to health protection (United Nations, 1989, arts. 3, 24). Although the virus hits and harms worldwide, the ways countries regulated children's lives during this situation differed, although the various regulations are legitimate in reference to the best interests of children and to inter-generational solidarity. Building upon the same situation and arguments, some countries closed early childhood education institutions and schools, while other kept them open (Drageseth, Berg, & Odland, 2020). Paradoxes and ambivalence on how to protect children in their best interests challenge ways to distribute responsibilities among generations, structures, cultures and established knowledge.

Adults' expectations regarding children seem to be constantly removed from structures established in the best interests of the child and are, instead, projected onto the individual child (Spyrou, 2018). This forms a contract with the web of structural and relational factors and interrelated dynamics that regulates children's spaces for relative autonomy and agency. 'Agency' has been a key concept in the social studies of children and childhood since the 1980s, where studies have been occupied with the relation between social structure and the individual social actor (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Qvortrup, 1999). Agency in the sociology of childhood is understood as individual capacities, competences and activities that persons use to navigate within their given context (Robson, Bell, & Klover, 2007). In child and childhood (or child-related) research, this awareness of children's agency from the 1980s is often referred to as 'children as beings', rather than 'children as becomings' as future adults and citizens, which indicates that children's lives here and now are of interest and importance (Bae, 2009; James & James, 2004). In contemporary research, it is acknowledged that both children and adults are in a constant state of movement and must learn more throughout their lives than was previously necessary. In that sense, no human being possesses all the knowledge that is needed to live his or her life; all of us are engaged in the continuous act of becoming (Holloway, Holt, & Mills, 2019; Uprichard, 2008). In addition, the view of children as agents with competences also creates some ambivalence; in more modern times, close connections have been made between competences and responsibilities (Lee, 2001). This way of understanding responsibilities, which is taken for granted, is also challenged when children come forward as competent. Even if competent, children also need protection and are not to be responsible in the same ways as adults. Indeed, the views of the child are to be 'given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child' (United Nations, 1989, art. 12.1). The issue of responsibility also forms an ambivalence towards children's involvement for sustainability; although children can

exercise agency and contribute with fresh points of view, the responsibility for pollution is a heritage from the older generation and is first and foremost the responsibility of the adult generation. Article 24(c) states that children have the right to a healthy environment with no dangers and risks of environmental pollution. The ambivalence of children's involvement, responsibility and right to protection must be balanced and future oriented (cf. Brundtland Report, WCED, 1987).

How to balance the paradoxes and uncertainties when children are experts in the experiences of their own lives and are entitled to protection is a continuous challenge in research aimed at understanding the conditions in which children live. Children are enmeshed with other people, materials, cultures and nature, living within or on the edge of systems that govern their lives. Furthermore, these paradoxes and ambivalences challenge our thinking about what we can know, and about research methodology, and indicate that research about children's participation needs to be viewed in terms of time, context and relations (Mannion, 2009); this also applies to studying children's culture and cultural participation (Borgen, 2011). A singular emphasis on children's 'own' culture can leave the political, societal, institutional and social structures that form conditions for children's participation and protection in the shadows.

We have traced an overall ambiguity related to children's right to protection and distribution of responsibility. Even if children are accepted as being persons here and now (and not only as future adults) who have agency to influence both their own and their peers', teachers', parents' and cultural workers' lives in their given material, cultural, economic and natural contexts, they also have an overall right to protection from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury, abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of their parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person responsible for the care of the child (United Nations, 1989, art. 19). In addition, they have the right to the protection of their 'child culture' (United Nations, 1989, art. 31), protection from pollution (art. 24) and protection from the heavy burden of earlier generations' uneven distribution of resources. This calls for considering ethical concerns in childhood research far above national guidelines.

3.2 *The Right to Be Heard*

Research reveals that while children are given the right to be heard (United Nations, 1989, art. 12) through freedom of expression (United Nations, 1989, art. 13), freedom of expression is often conceptualised as participation, meaning ongoing processes of information-sharing and dialogue, which involves children experiencing their own contributions and participation, together

with those of others, in their daily lives (Bae, 2018, p. 50). However, these rights are restricted compared to those held by adults (Qvortrup, 2009). Children's spaces for participation are often held apart from those held by adults, and consequently, children do not necessarily have control over their structural conditions. Thus, in childhood studies, identity is generally framed in the context of adult–child relationships (de Castro, 2004). This can lead to their being subtly controlled by their parents and other guardians (Hennum, 2010) through the practices of welfare professions and institutions (Cockburn, 2010; James, 2011), justified as being in the best interests of the child. However, research also depicts how children can make room and space for themselves in contexts that are not governed in the best interests of the child (Mannion, 2007), like children living in the streets in Bolivia who negotiate control over specific areas (James, 2011). Also, in Estonia, children had implicit influence due to changing political regimes that differed radically as it came to family and childcare politics (Vihalemm & Müürsepp, 2007). Children's participation and use of media is a topic of concern; however, these concerns also lead to children's cultural and societal participation becoming visible and debated in public (Gaini, 2006). The ways in which children raise their voices – by being a nuisance (on the streets) (James, 2011), by not being as physically active as adults want them to be (Borgen, Rugseth, & Bjorbækmo, 2021), by being aesthetically resistant (Ylönen, 2021) or by expressing anger (Grindheim, 2014) may also cause concerns. Although children's rights to participate are restricted, children are heard in a variety of ways and contexts that are not limited to spaces structured for democratic participation by adult generations. Thus, the entanglements between culture and generations can both empower and disempower children.

Children's right to be heard is also of relevance for research methods and ethics in child-related research. The historical perspectives and changes in child-related studies reflect how both vertical and horizontal processes interact in this research field. This can be exemplified by the way a report about children's humour (Bregenhøj & Johnson, 1988) was met in the 1980s. This report was recognised and debated in public newspapers regarding issues of children's burlesque language culture and researchers' ethical responsibility towards visibility of such language-specific humour. The debate revealed a contradictive view between the public and researchers related to children and children's culture. The debate revealed that in the public view, children's culture happened among children when they were on their own and could only be scientifically examined by looking 'through the keyhole into children's "rooms"' (Ekrem, Tingstad, & Johnsen, 2001, p. 158). Thus, children should be understood from the adult perspective, and no interest was left for children's

perspectives or for children's participation in society-at-large. This view was contrary to childhood research designed to capture children's perspectives.

In the wake of the century of the child, researchers continued to discuss and explore children's perspectives. For instance, in her meta study of child culture research, Marianne Gullestad (1991) discussed the idea of capturing children's perspectives and how it is a challenge for researchers that requires imagination as well as insight into children's everyday routines. The discussion centred on the idea that children's perspectives are not perspectives on children but are perspectives from children's position in society and culture (Johansson, 2003). An awareness is emerging in contemporary research of the need to focus on children and childhood in spaces for transitions in intergenerational childhoods (Oropilla, 2021) and in the embodied interplay and communication between multiple disabilities and the sensitive significant other, techniques, contexts and objective medical knowledge (Evensen, 2021). There are also suggestions concerning an existential approach in the understanding of both the infant and the involved adult in more reflective ways, emphasising reciprocal models, and more than cognitive capacities and infant's ability to imitate (von Bonsdorff, 2021). Children are resources in iterative research design processes as users of software (Povlsen, Krogager, Leer, & Højlund, 2021). Research seems to come closer to emphasising entanglements between humans, non-humans, objects and different phenomena (Grindheim, 2021), and between cross- and transdisciplinary designs (Borgen & Ødegaard, 2015; Karlsson, 2021). This awareness is of specific relevance when aiming to capture children's perspectives in order to meet the intertwined challenges of children's position and participation when approaching sustainability (Grindheim et al., 2019).

3.3 *Right to Play and Recreation*

Research reveals that many childhood-related topics circulate around the twin poles of fear and pleasure (Borgen, Ødegaard, & BIN-Norden, 2016). A childhood suffused with an awareness of risks and dangers is a phenomenon in contemporary Nordic society. For example, in our rapidly changing society, globalisation, commercialisation and digitalisation are all factors that might cause both pleasure and danger. Children are, both implicitly and explicitly, exposed to cultural artefacts, certain kinds of physical spaces and places, certain types of human age communities and certain varieties of timeframes, all of which are embedded with more or less incongruous signs and shifting modes of how to act, relate and think, open for children to take up, conserve and transform (Ødegaard, 2011). These norms and paradoxes for children's participation in society provide grounds for new understandings of the transformation of childhood in a globalised era. This creates an uncertainty as to how

children might exercise their rights to play and recreation (United Nations, 1989, art. 31), since what is considered 'good' for children is difficult to know: what are the fears and what are the pleasures, and for whom?

In many cases, these changes and the pleasures connected to children are also sources of fear and anxiety. The image of childhood as a refuge from the horrors of the world is challenged in the global, digitalised media by images of refugee children, alone or with their families, living hand to mouth in camps or en route to asylum, struggling to survive the nearly insurmountable challenges of endless war, cynical profiteering, hostile or fearful citizens of European countries and forces of nature that can take their lives in a moment. Several of the UNCRC rights of these children are not met, such as their rights of protection as refugees (United Nations, 1989, art. 22); they lack food, shelter and medical supplies (United Nations, 1989, art. 24), and they have been stripped of central aspects of childhood: the creation of child culture through play, fun, fantasy and youthful control of space and material (United Nations, 1989, art. 31). In the Nordic countries we are stuck on the idea that we are protecting 'our' children, limited to Nordic youth. This forms a paradox for those who have concerns about sustainability and who press for more even distribution of resources, who advocate for children's right to life, play and recreation globally and who fight politically for solidarity by forcing Scandinavian governments to give shelter to children from the Moria camp of refugees before they are all affected by COVID-19 (Save the Children Campaign, 2020).

Even when children are not subject to any threats, many adults feel that they must be protected by teaching them how to manage risks later in life (Lyså, 2021). Vulnerability and risk go hand in hand with protection and care and what is perceived as appropriate play and recreation. The presumed romantic innocence of children may be an attractive idea to adults; however, this romanticism can manifest itself as anxiety about the eventual, inevitable loss of innocence. Again, here, we trace paradoxes and ambivalence; on one hand, childhood can be seen as a temporary idyll, full of pleasures to be romanticised, forgotten or deemed 'childish' later in life. On the other hand, children themselves can be perceived by adults as sources of pleasure and hope for the future, for example, by performing at high levels and developing some sort of unique or extraordinary talent (Lyså, 2018). Ideas linking children and childhood with pleasure are supported by cultural imagery from high art to advertisements: a mother cradling her child is one of the most iconic images of domestic bliss.

The concepts of risk and risk prevention are brought into early childhood education by political documents and white papers, by several professional knowledge bases, by general cultural discourses, by parents and by children

themselves. An example is the debate about risk and play. Competing discourses on children's play and recreation debate how to balance guarding children's safety with allowing children to play in physically and emotionally stimulating and challenging environments, which in Scandinavian research is often synonymous with being outdoors in nature (Sandseter, 2007; Sandseter & Sando, 2016). Indeed, Little, Wyver, and Gibson (2011) argued that regulatory factors and requirements for playground safety can be identified as having 'a detrimental impact' on the quality of play. Also, Gill (2007) pointed to the paradoxes and ambiguities that a societal misreading of risk can result in when children face a myriad of restrictions that are intended to support them. If children are restricted from activities that involve taking risks, they will not learn how to assess and respond to risk. From our point of view, we might, thereby, also restrict children from developing extended abilities to cope and to contribute to a higher degree of sustainability by having the courage and competencies needed to face the risk of challenging the status quo of unsustainability.

Emphasising fears and pleasures as they relate to recreation and play might form a contesting approach to children's lifeworld and what is in the best interests of the child. It involves more than facing the ambivalence of safeguarding and challenge; once more, we depict the overall tendency to look to explanations within the individual child. Gurholt and Sanderud (2016) outlined how 'risky play' might be closer to explorative play, where children seek challenges when natural environments invite them into forms of play that may involve risk of physical injury, than to an understanding that children innately seek physical danger and that risk is essential for children's growth (p. 318). We need ways to come closer to understanding children's perspectives, which can provide more insight into relational, situated and contextual play activities, play tools and moods of play practices that are sliding, shifting, displaying and exceeding areas of interest, as, for instance, outlined by Karoff (2013). Finding ways to perform research in order to understand and depict the conditions of children's lives and play and, thereby, support their rights to play and recreation is an ongoing challenge.

3.4 *Summing up – Paradoxes and Ambivalence in Child-Related Research in the Nordic Context*

From this (rather short and superficial) mapping of research in the wake of the century of the child – all aiming at what is in the best interests of the child – we point to several paradoxes and areas of ambivalence when investigating how children's protection, participation and recreation are promoted, actualised and expended. It is depicted that children's protection, participation and recreation are enclosed by paradoxes and ambiguity that supply the grounds for

gaining new understandings of the transformation of childhood in a globalised era. This underlines that, in research involving children, it is crucial to reflect upon procedural, methodological and conceptual matters. In all areas where children are in focus, ethical considerations are also of vital importance; ethical dilemmas, aspects and deliberations comprise methodological issues. We find that these challenges are difficult to manage in a single research tradition. Therefore, these paradoxes and areas of ambivalence can be seen as conditions for transformative research practices that foster sustainability and the involvement of a variety of stakeholders and that take a more future-oriented and imaginative strand to research designs.

4 Facing Paradoxes and Ambivalence in Research through a Transformative Research Approach

The complexities, contradictions, paradoxes and uncertainties in childhood contexts call for a variety of perspectives to gain insight into how to facilitate sustainable living. In the BIN-Norden network that began in the 1970s, researchers from different disciplines, such as ethnography, sociology, art and history, as well as those who took an interdisciplinary approach, began to question the way in which children were understood. BIN-Norden has emerged as a robust and active children's culture research network, where the subject of research – children and young people and their culture – is shared across disciplines, classifications and sectors. During this period, the sociology of science has problematised the notions of dense disciplinary boundaries versus the knowledge migration of researchers between the disciplines (Sandström, Friberg, Hyenstrand, Larsson, & Wadskog, 2004). A disciplinary specialisation has become an overly narrow box for exploring many of the issues that are relevant in our time, something the BIN-Norden network exemplifies through child culture research.

A key event (Taylor, Flanagan, Cheney, & Seibold, 2001) that is explicitly recounted as spawning the terms 'interdisciplinarity' and 'transdisciplinarity' is the first international conference on interdisciplinary research and teaching in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development member countries (OECD) in 1970 (Apostel, Berger, Briggs, & Michaud, 1972; Klein, 2013). Cross-disciplinary science is, according to Sandström et al. (2004, pp. 15–16), an 'umbrella term' for multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research. These different approaches can be taken by collaborating researchers who represent different disciplines or by researchers seeking to acquire a knowledge base from another field in addition to their own. A multi (multiple) disciplinary

research design may involve different researchers with different competencies working side by side, often through separate work packages and an agreed division of labor. Each discipline helps to illuminate one aspect of the topic or problem being investigated, and no direct contact is established between the various knowledge bases, such as the disciplines, represented by the researchers. Nevertheless, the collaboration is characterised by the addition of new knowledge about the topic or problem. Multidisciplinarity is a condition for both interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity. In interdisciplinary scientific work, the approach is to integrate the knowledge that the researchers possess with the aim of elucidating a topic, problem or area of knowledge together. The different fields of knowledge agree on a common conceptual apparatus and actively exchange theory and method (Sandström et al., 2004, p. 16). This requires professional interaction and close communication between those working in collaboration. Whether the research can be characterised as multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary depends on what forms it takes and what consequences it will have (Nicolescu, 2014). According to Klein (2013), debates about the definition of interdisciplinarity are related to concepts such as interrogation, critique, transgression and transformation, as well as to the quest for reconfiguring, reformulating and resituating, and they can be linked to struggles for social change that began in the 1960s and 1970s (p. 196). The struggles for social changes emphasised are close to the struggles for children's rights in the 20th century.

The sociology of science deals with how concepts and working methods change over time and how new concepts become valid. 'Trans' means transgression, and transdisciplinary research may be the current term of choice when trying to tackle a complex problem where there is disagreement as to what the problem is. Transdisciplinarity contains possibilities for syntheses or compositions that appear as new content. For example, a research team may develop a research design and conduct research through a division of work that distributes roles and responsibilities between multiple members, where the team comprises researchers as well as members who are not researchers.

The integration in transdisciplinary research can, thus, consist of both horizontal and vertical elements: collaboration between researchers in different disciplines and people who know the problem area, for example, through their professional practices or from being affected by it in other ways. Augsburg (2014) referred to two 'main schools' of transdisciplinarity. In the first main school, represented by Nicolescu's ontological notion of reality as plastic and simultaneously outside and inside us, a subject/object interaction (2008, p. 12), 'We are part of this Reality that changes due to our thoughts, feelings and actions. This means that we are fully responsible for what Reality is' (Nicolescu,

2014, p. 25). In the second main school, the 'widely recognized current (frequently referred to as either the Swiss, Zurich, or German school) focuses on transdisciplinarity as a research approach to addressing complex societal problems such as those related to sustainability' (Augsburg, 2014, p. 235). Here, 'transdisciplinarity is conceptualized as problem-focused with an emphasis on joint problem solving at the science, technology, and society interface that goes beyond the confines of academia' (Augsburg, 2014, p. 235).

The paradoxes and ambivalences we trace in the wake of the century of the child appear to go beyond the confines of academia. Several considerations required examination, like political fights for children's rights. Childhood is political and cannot be identified and discussed from one perspective alone. Meetings between disciplinary perspectives, and between research-based knowledge and general understandings in society, contribute to changes in understandings and concepts about children's culture and childhood. Therefore, the transdisciplinary approach appears to be of high relevance for childhood research in the century of sustainability.

In accordance with the paradoxes and ambivalences we find in the wake of the century of the child, when taking departure from the UNCRC, we find Klein's (2015) conceptualisation of transdisciplinary research to be of specific relevance. Klein (2013) argued that 'calls for transdisciplinarity arrived at a moment of wider crisis in the discourse of human rights accountability' (p. 197). Klein (2015) offered perspectives on how problems in the world can be met and solved and argued that, since the future is unpredictable, we will also need several conceptualisations of transdisciplinarity.

As an epistemological project, transdisciplinarity will be aligned more closely with the discourse of transcendence. As a method of knowledge production, it will be linked with utilitarian objectives [problem solving], although they range from manufacturing new products to new protocols for health care and environmental sustainability. As a form of critique, it will continue to interrogate the structure and logic of the university and its role in society. (Klein, 2015, p. 15)

Augsburg (2014) departed from Klein's (2015) hypothesis that transdisciplinary individuals can contribute to the evolution of transdisciplinarity's discourse, and the question of how one becomes a transdisciplinary individual and how to take a transdisciplinary approach in research. Becoming a transdisciplinary researcher requires being an intellectual risk taker and institutional transgressor, as well as transdisciplinary practices and virtues, creative inquiry and cultural relativism. Augsburg (2014) argued that the 'transdisciplinary attitude'

has paved the way for considerations of transdisciplinary skills, characteristics and traits, along with individual transdisciplinary virtues and practices, and that these can be trained (p. 244). While heterogeneity can be viewed as transdisciplinarity's biggest threat to success, it is also its fundamental characteristic. Thus, transdisciplinarity presupposes an ethic of shared knowledge that differs from traditional academic norms and structures (p. 234).

From our point of view, this can be a way to gain new insight into a variety of understandings, including how to facilitate the best interests of the child in the century of sustainability. In line with Augsburg (2014), who stated that transdisciplinarity presupposes a moral philosophy of shared knowledge (p. 234), we see that the paradoxes and ambivalences that we trace also call for a methodological ethic, which must be expanded and trained to identify conditions that change, interfere and contradict. These arguments serve as motivation for more insight and research practices that can face the contemporary uncertainties by undertaking transdisciplinary research methods and more imaginative strands to research.

5 Summary

Conducting research in the best interests of the children presents challenges. Investigating how children's protection, participation and recreation is promoted, actualised and expended in the wake of the century of the child reveals that children's lives, historical voices and legal rights, and changes in global and local societies, nature and research are entangled and offer both new and contradictory knowledge about children and childhood. From our outline, where the 1989 UNCRC is seen as a milestone for ensuring children's protection, position and well-being, we face some of the same challenges referenced in the arguments for establishing the UNCRC. Children are still being neglected in several parts of the world, and corporal punishment is still an issue. In addition, we see that by giving children individual rights, we not only increase awareness of both children's vulnerable position and their unique capabilities, but we also forward an individualistic approach that can leave notions of humans as dependent across generations, structural power-relations, economies, cultural and natural contexts, and materials in the shadows. Taking a closer look at how the rights to protection, participation, and play and recreation are promoted, actualised and expended in the wake of the century of the child seems to lead us to what Klein (2013) pointed to as the crisis of human rights accountability. It calls for avoiding universal solutions and colonialisation and for fostering sustainability in ways of organising our human, cultural

and natural resources. Seeing the paradoxes and uncertainties as conditions for change and transformations in research as well as in practices, this chapter argues for future-oriented and sustainable transdisciplinary approaches to research designs and practices as we, as experts, together with citizens and policymakers, try to make the right choices in the best interests of the child.

Notes

- 1 Soon after it was published in 1900, the book was translated into 13 languages.
- 2 Elsa Köhler (1879–1940) was a Swedish psychologist and educationalist whose legacy was the creation of links between German Froebelian ideologies and Swedish pragmatism. She was an early advocate for the acknowledgment of children's self-activity and learning through play (Tallberg Broman, 1995).
- 3 Charlotte Bühler (1883–1974) was a pioneer child-oriented psychologist who is known for the contributions her research on early ages made to the understanding of human beings' tendency to strive for personal satisfaction in sex, love and ego recognition, their tendency for self-limiting adaptation for the purpose of fitting in, belonging and gaining security, and their tendencies toward self-expression and creative accomplishments and toward integration or order-upholding (Woodward, 2012).
- 4 The law was named after Johan Castberg, a member of the radical wing of the Liberal Party, who became a politician and head of the Labour Democrats. Throughout his political life, Castberg was a proponent of women's and children's rights and of bringing social differences into balance.

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