

International Perspectives on  
Early Childhood Education and Development 5

Eva Johansson  
E. Jayne White *Editors*

# Educational Research with Our Youngest

Voices of Infants and Toddlers

 Springer

# Educational Research with Our Youngest

# International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development

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## Volume 5

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Early childhood education in many countries has been built upon a strong tradition of a materially rich and active play-based pedagogy and environment. Yet what has become visible within the profession, is essentially a Western view of childhood preschool education and school education.

It is timely that a series of books be published which present a broader view of early childhood education. This series, seeks to provide an international perspective on early childhood education. In particular, the books published in this series will:

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- Make visible a range of ways in which early childhood pedagogy is framed and enacted across countries, including the majority poor countries
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- Examine the theoretical informants driving pedagogy and practice, and seek to find alternative perspectives from those that dominate many Western heritage countries
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- Examine concept formation from within the context of country-specific pedagogy and learning outcomes

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Eva Johansson · E. Jayne White  
Editors

# Educational Research with Our Youngest

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*Editors*

Eva Johansson  
Department of Early Childhood Education  
University of Stavanger  
Stavanger  
Norway  
eva.johansson@uis.no

Dr. E. Jayne White  
Faculty of Education  
University of Waikato  
Hamilton  
New Zealand  
whiteej@waikato.ac.nz

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# Foreword

This book represents several years of research activity and scholarship for both ourselves and the contributors. It was first conceived by Jayne four years ago, following her unsuccessful quest for literature to guide her methodologically in her doctoral work with very young children. Joined by Eva two years later, the inspiration for the project is much grounded in an engagement in young children's lives and a shared devotion to defend and promote scholarly discussion and debate in research involving young children. This commitment is also evident in the chapters offered by all the contributors of this book who have given their knowledge, enthusiasm, and time for this project.

Being the editors of this book has been both an exciting and difficult challenge. Situated in different parts of the world, with different language constructions, in different educational contexts and universities, and living in different countries (New Zealand and Sweden) with different seasons and times, we have worked intensively together on this book over the past three years due to the wonders of Skype, e-mail, and, of course, our shared passion in the topic. This book is in no small way testimony to the belief and provocation of supportive, critical, and encouraging colleagues at the different universities each of us have had the privilege to work with during the past few years. Combined with the practical support offered by the University of Waikato, New Zealand, and the University of Stavanger, Norway, this book represents the efforts, commitment, and determination of many.

We invite readers to ask probing questions of the text as they read through the pages that follow. The questions below have been used by each of the authors of this book while writing their chapters and commenting on each other's text. We suspect that they may also be helpful for readers. We hope that the process of probing the text in this way will support readers to encounter the epistemological and ontological challenges faced by each of the researchers in their quest to gain insight into the lived worlds of our youngest.

How did this chapter "speak" to you?

What did you learn?

What surprises were there for you in this chapter?

What was interesting for you in this chapter? Any debates raised?

What dilemmas for infant-toddler research does this chapter illuminate?  
What opportunities for future infant-toddler research does this chapter inspire?

We wish to dedicate this book to our children, Alexander, Courtney, Karin, Lars, and Mitchell – now (almost) all grown up – who, with all children across the globe, provide us with a rich landscape of inspiration and hope for the future.

Eva Johansson  
E. Jayne White

# Prologue

Jean Rockel

“Who are you?” said the Caterpillar. This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, “I hardly know, sir, just at present . . .” (Lewis Carroll, 1907, p. 49)

Within the pages of this book a new dialogue has begun in relation to an area of educational research that is often overlooked. It begins and ends with scholarly conversations about the dilemmas and tensions of educational research with very young children, not unlike those experienced by Alice during her encounter with the Caterpillar in Lewis Carroll’s story. By raising important issues facing researchers who seek to explore the voices of infants and toddlers, this publication acts as a springboard for the examination of infants’ lived experiences from a variety of research perspectives. In the search for voice, in all its complexity, further insights about the first years of life become evident and new debates are inevitably raised. The notion of voice is thus expanded and explored from multiple positions involving the theoretical, the moral and the physical, with a revised positioning of infants and toddlers as research subjects with opportunities to contribute to their own experience.

The fundamental question about knowing self and “other” is at the heart of these research journeys, and, in a deeper philosophical sense, life itself. The metaphor of *Alice in Wonderland* alludes to the complexities facing the researcher in this task. The researchers may have felt at times that they were, like Alice, helplessly chasing an elusive character—constantly querying their position or experiencing the frustration of how to cross the threshold and fit through a door that is too small for them to squeeze through. Yet, as this book reveals, each researcher sought alternate routes through summoning various philosophical approaches that, to some extent or other, satisfied his or her quest. The search for such routes opens up the opportunity for us to question, challenge the status quo and gain new ontological and epistemological insights.

In researching the life-world of a very young person that is outside the researcher’s current understanding, consideration has been given by these researchers as to whether there is a “fit” with the methodology in gathering data. Drawing upon a range of theoretical paradigms the researchers in this book demonstrate the integrity and veracity of intent to investigate diverse and sometimes even new methodologies in order to explore dimensions of infant experience that



have been hitherto deemed ungraspable. It is interesting, in this regard, to note the prevalence of visual ethnographies used by the researchers throughout. In this sense alone, the book provides a range of alternative approaches to investigation by foregrounding the visual as well as the aural which is typically so privileged in notions of “voice”.

The switch in vision from investigating what should be “done” to very young children to that of learning more about what the children are “doing” in a variety of contexts, represents a new paradigm of power relations between researcher and the researched. The researcher is alongside the child with the camera; in some cases the child herself bears the camera, recognising children as powerful and resourceful learners who exercise agency in their own learning, whilst at the same time paying attention to their vulnerabilities.

In the process of redefining this research platform, the book opens up interpretive space without being constrained and limited by the “adult” gaze for this arena of the unknown with such very young children. As these researchers are defining the landscape, the resolution of the various dilemmas they faced will be of great interest to the reader, in terms of both pedagogy and building on the research.

In conjunction with the literary metaphor of *Alice in Wonderland*, the researchers are encountering the strange (and yet strangely familiar) world in which very young children learn about themselves as “other”. The notion of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, contributes to the complexities of researching voice as researchers venture into new philosophical and methodological territories which are uncertain and unfamiliar. While drawing on familiar theories and methods that are well understood, the researchers grapple with innovative measures and approaches to new research questions. This struggle indicates the significance of such a book in which the researchers foreground the tensions and issues that they have had to face and, in doing so, provide new insights into the way young children can be seen and heard. Ethical decisions are made in relation to when to avert the adult gaze; other decisions are involved in whether to continue interacting with the child as researcher, echoing images of both capability and vulnerability.

Research with very young children requires a range of ethical considerations in challenging stereotypical views of infants and toddlers. The contemporary global background to children’s lives more often involves long hours outside the home, which provides additional challenges for researchers and teachers. The socio-political nature of service provision is a backdrop to these challenges. Therefore, reflexivity is a critical process for researchers and teachers in order to gain knowledge or interpretations of children’s lived experience and to question assumptions and beliefs.

The researchers in this book are therefore exploring new ways of thinking about very young children. With that a new discourse is emerging which reflects the dynamic nature of how a young child approaches the world and those in it. It is indeed about seeing infants with “new eyes”, recognising a different life-world and therefore seeing teachers and researchers afresh as well. This discourse brings new provocations forward and provides new and exciting research directions. In recognising the agency of the children in the data and information gathered by the

researchers here, there is evidence to debate as well as opportunities to explore the adults' relationship with those children.

Such recognition is significant not only for researchers but also for teachers who are concerned to engage in pedagogical practices that encounter the young child as agentic. The policy focus on care for young children who are identified as disadvantaged, or in non-parental care due to the effects of the labour market, or the knowledge economy, is evident in many places around the world. Tensions with market-led provision have been to the fore in many early childhood contexts, along with the focus on preparing children for academic tasks, school and, ultimately, work skills. As more research emerges based on diverse epistemological and ontological paradigms, there are implications and opportunities for new pedagogical practices in early childhood provision to support teachers to resist the drive towards more control that pays little or no attention to issues of participation.

Hence the need for a book such as this that enables conversations to take place in the context of critical pedagogy, philosophy and new research initiatives. This book invites the reader to consider these perspectives as dialogic opportunities to debate the new ideas rather than binary or polarised positions. Research of this nature is never undertaken in a vacuum since the contexts of early childhood care and education services offer varied and complex worlds for young children's lived experiences and those of their families. The introduction of varied theoretical perspectives and research paradigms therefore opens up dialogue in these spaces in relation to pedagogy and the ethics of care.

In order to go through the metaphorical small door to discover infant and toddler voice, researchers seek a range of strategies—not unlike the potions and cakes eaten by Alice in her search for the key—so that they may enter into a space which enables them to see more of that world. At heart, this book is about ways of reconceptualising and foregrounding voices that have been constrained or are typically unknown or unheard. The new knowledge that is revealed does not claim to speak on their behalf but, instead, raises significant insight and provocation that leaves the reader with further questions and provocation. The book is therefore an invitation for researchers, teachers and policymakers alike to dialogue about how they might seek to encounter the voices of children in their first years of life as a central means of understanding.

## Reference

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# Contents

<b>1 Introduction: Giving Words to Children’s Voices in Research . . . .</b>	<b>1</b>
Eva Johansson	
<b>2 Two Steps Back: Exploring Identity and Presence While Observing Infants in the Nursery . . . . .</b>	<b>15</b>
Sheila Degotardi	
<b>3 Investigating Morality in Toddler’s Life-Worlds . . . . .</b>	<b>39</b>
Eva Johansson	
<b>4 ‘Seeing’ the Toddler: Voices or Voiceless? . . . . .</b>	<b>63</b>
E. Jayne White	
<b>5 Embodied Voices and Voicing Embodied Knowing: Accessing and Developing Young Children’s Aesthetic Movement Skills . . . . .</b>	<b>87</b>
Cecilia Wallerstedt, Niklas Pramling, and Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson	
<b>6 “Visual Vivencias”: A Cultural-Historical Tool for Understanding the Lived Experiences of Young Children’s Everyday Lives . . . . .</b>	<b>107</b>
Gloria Quiñones and Marilyn Fleer	
<b>7 Taking a “Generous” Approach in Research with Young Children . . . . .</b>	<b>135</b>
Alison Stephenson	
<b>8 Lived Experience as an Observer Among Toddlers . . . . .</b>	<b>161</b>
Gunvor Løkken	
<b>9 Summary: Lessons Learnt and Future Provocations . . . . .</b>	<b>185</b>
E. Jayne White	
<b>Index . . . . .</b>	<b>203</b>

# Contributors

**Sheila Degotardi** Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University, Sydney, NSW, Australia, sheila.degotardi@mq.edu.au

**Marilyn Fleer** Faculty of Education, Department of Early Childhood Education, Monash University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia, marilyn.fleer@monash.edu

**Eva Johansson** Department of Early Childhood Education, University of Stavanger, Stavanger, Norway, eva.johansson@uis.no

**Gunvor Løkken** Faculty of Humaniora and Educational Science, Vestfold University College, Vestfold, Norway, Gunvor.Lokken@hive.no

**Niklas Pramling** Department of Education, Communication, and Learning, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden, niklas.pramling@ped.gu.se

**Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson** Department of Education, Communication, and Learning, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden, ingid.pramling@ped.gu.se

**Gloria Quiñones** Faculty of Education, Monash University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia, gloria.quinones@monash.edu

**Jean Rockel** Faculty of Education, University of Auckland, New Zealand, j.rockel@auckland.ac.nz

**Alison Stephenson** School of Education Policy and Implementation, College of Education, Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand, Alison.Stephenson@vuw.ac.nz

**Cecilia Wallerstedt** Department of Education, Communication and Learning, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden, cecilia.wallerstedt@gu.se

**E. Jayne White** Faculty of Education, University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand, whiteej@waikato.ac.nz

## About the Editors

**Eva Johansson** (PhD) is Professor in Early Childhood Education at University of Stavanger, Norway. She is the Editor in Chief of *International Journal of Early Childhood* and is also running a research program *Learning Cultures in Early Childhood Education* at the University of Stavanger. Eva Johansson is engaged in questions on moral learning in early childhood education, including national and international studies on how children experience and develop morality and how teachers approach such issues in their work. Her research also includes studies on young children's learning as well as quality aspects of preschool and the relation between play and learning. She can be contacted at [eva.johansson@uis.no](mailto:eva.johansson@uis.no)

**E. Jayne White** (PhD, MA, B.Ed) is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education at the University of Waikato. Jayne's interests lie within the pedagogical and psychological domain of the early years. Following the completion of her PhD in 2009 through Monash University, she has co-edited a book about Bakhtin's contributions to education called *Bakhtinian Pedagogy: Opportunities and challenges for research, policy and practice in education across the globe*—recently released by Blackwell. In this book and her other recent publications in various scholarly journals, she brings dialogic philosophy to bear on wider educational issues such as assessment. Her previous work has been associated with self-review, evaluation and play pedagogies—all aspects of Bakhtinian philosophy that are keenly explored in her scholarship. She can be contacted at [whiteej@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:whiteej@waikato.ac.nz)

## About the Authors

**Sheila Degotardi** (PhD) is a Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Education at the Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University, Australia. She worked for some years as an early childhood teacher in a range of prior-to-school settings before commencing an academic career investigating and teaching about young children's play and development. She has a particular interest in infant learning and teaching, and her recent research projects have explored infant, adult and contextual factors which contribute towards the establishment of interpersonal relatedness and relationships in both home and early childhood settings. She can be contacted at [sheila.degotardi@mq.edu.au](mailto:sheila.degotardi@mq.edu.au)

**Professor Marilyn Fleer** (PhD, MEd, MA, BEd) holds the Foundation Chair of Early Childhood Education at Monash University, Australia, and is the President of the International Society for Cultural Activity Research (ISCAR). Her research interests focus on early years learning and development, with special attention on pedagogy, culture, science and technology. More recently she has investigated child development in the contexts of home and school. Professor Fleer has published over 150 works, including 3 books which have been shortlisted for the Australian awards for Excellence in educational publishing. She recently received a commendation for outstanding postgraduate supervision from the Vice Chancellor of Monash University. She can be contacted at [marilyn.fleer@monash.edu](mailto:marilyn.fleer@monash.edu)

**Gunvor Løkken** (PhD) is Professor in Early Childhood Education at Vestfold University College, Norway. Her research interests are the *professional* preschool teacher, the construction of *toddler* in early childhood pedagogy and affiliated research methodologies. Of particular present interest is the *doing* of pedagogy recognized as qualified improvisation in response to preschool children's democratic *Bildung* as young citizens. She can be contacted at [Gunvor.Lokken@hive.no](mailto:Gunvor.Lokken@hive.no)

**Niklas Pramling** (PhD) is Associate Professor at the Department of Education, Communication, and Learning at the University of Gothenburg. He wrote his PhD thesis on the role of metaphor in learning and knowledge formation. His recent research concerns metaphorical speech in early childhood science education and children's learning in the arts. His work can be found in journals such as

*European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, and *British Journal of Music Education*. He can be contacted at [niklas.pramling@ped.gu.se](mailto:niklas.pramling@ped.gu.se)

**Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson** (PhD) is Professor of Early Childhood Education at the Department of Education, Communication and Learning, University of Gothenburg, Sweden. She has a background as a preschool teacher. In 1996 she was the first Swedish Chair in early childhood education. Her research mainly deals with how children in preschool make sense of different aspects of their surrounding world. Another research interest is teachers' professional development. She is World president of OMEP (Organisation Mondiale pour l'Éducation Préscolaire), and holds a UNESCO Chair in Early Childhood Education and Sustainable Development. She can be contacted at [ingid.pramling@ped.gu.se](mailto:ingid.pramling@ped.gu.se)

**Gloria Quiñones** is a Lecturer in the Faculty of Education, Monash University, Australia, and teaches with both undergraduate and post-graduate students. She has researched children's play, science and technology in early childhood and primary education settings. Her PhD research focuses on understanding academic and play activities and the role of emotions from a cultural-historical perspective. This research has used dialectical visual methodologies in the context of rural and city early childhood centres and families in Mexico and Australia. She can be contacted at [gloria.quinones@monash.edu](mailto:gloria.quinones@monash.edu)

**Jean Rockel** is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Teaching, Learning and Development at the Faculty of Education, University of Auckland, New Zealand. Jean is the inaugural editor of *The First Years Nga Tau Tuatahi New Zealand Journal of Infant and Toddler Education*, which has published national and international research and dialogue on professional issues for over a decade. She has a strong interest in collaborative research. Recent projects she has contributed to have included an international project on play and learning with children under three years, a national two-year project on "Pedagogy in the first years", a literature review on quality early childhood education for under-two-year-olds and an advisory role for several other national projects regarding care and education in the first years. She can be contacted at [j.rockel@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:j.rockel@auckland.ac.nz)

**Alison Stephenson** (PhD) has taught in both primary school and early childhood settings, and is currently a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education Policy and Implementation, College of Education, Victoria University, New Zealand, working with both pre-service and post-graduate students. Her teaching and research interests focus on broader issues of early childhood curriculum, including children's perspectives about their curriculum experiences. Young children's outdoor play was the topic of her master's thesis (Stephenson, 1998), and her more recent doctoral thesis considered how the scope and boundaries of curriculum are defined in one early childhood care and education setting (Stephenson, 2009). She can be contacted at [Alison.Stephenson@vuw.ac.nz](mailto:Alison.Stephenson@vuw.ac.nz)

**Cecilia Wallerstedt** (PhD) was awarded her PhD from the Academy of Music and Drama at the University of Gothenburg. She has a background as a teacher in music

and mathematics in upper-secondary school. While working on her PhD education she was also a member of a three-year trans-disciplinary research project on young children's aesthetics learning in pre- and primary school. The project has generated a number of publications in scholarly journals, such as *International Journal of Early Years Education* and *Music Education Research*. Central to Wallerstedt's current work is a theoretical elaboration of a notion of aesthetic knowledge as "informed perception" (e.g., in music, listening), a notion inspired by, among others, the work of Alexander Luria. She can be contacted at [cecilia.wallerstedt@gu.se](mailto:cecilia.wallerstedt@gu.se)



# Chapter 1

## Introduction: Giving Words to Children's Voices in Research

Eva Johansson

This book concerns research with infants and toddlers—the youngest children in early education. The idea behind the book is to explore ways of engaging with voices of very young children as researchers in the field of early childhood education. The aim is to contribute to this field of knowledge by scrutinizing ontological, epistemological and methodological approaches that assist us in trying to understand and visualize, in a broad sense, the multiple voices of young persons. The book itself represents a chorus of voices (researchers, children, teachers and parents), all adding to a discussion about various circumstances, dilemmas and possibilities involved in doing research with our youngest. The authors offer, in various ways, their thoughts and experiences regarding how to approach, understand and interpret the multiple voices of toddlers and infants. Each explores the kinds of ethical considerations and dilemmas that may arise in this process. This is a complex and exciting journey!

A constant question asked in this book is, if and how the multiple voices of children can be captured and fully understood by the researcher. There are always parts of children's experiences that are impossible for them to express and/or for the researcher to understand. In addition children's voices are never pure and authentic in an essential way. They are always voices located in a specific time, society and culture. This is also true for the authors of this book—who speak to us from Australia, New Zealand, Sweden and Norway. The specific context of their investigations, however, is in one way or another similar in the respect that all the contributors are connected to early childhood education. The manners in which these contexts are created differ according to historical and economical circumstances as well as the prescribed purposes of education for young children. These taken-for-granted expectations and values are all associated with societal images of the child and childhood. The way children and childhood are conceptualised, as a result, impacts on the methodological and ethical considerations

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E. Johansson (✉)

Department of Early Childhood Education, University of Stavanger, Stavanger, Norway  
e-mail: [eva.johansson@uis.no](mailto:eva.johansson@uis.no)

facing early childhood researchers in contemporary societies across the world (Berthelsen, 2010; Moss, 2008; Rau & Pearson, 2008).

The reasons for approaching voices of young children are several. First of all, infant and toddler research has been frequently overlooked and misappropriated over time (Christensen & James, 2000; Corsaro, 2005; Johansson, 2003; Løkken, 2000; White, 2009). When we look upon previous and recent research with the youngest citizens in early childhood education, the amount of research presented internationally is restricted and mainly related to psychology. During the last two decades, research within the field of education has significantly increased—yet there is still a deep need for research on the youngest children in early childhood education (Berthelsen, 2010; Johansson & Emilson, 2010; Spodek & Saracho, 2006). As a result, there remains little knowledge on methods and approaches available for researchers working with children of this age.

Of key importance in this book is also the idea that infants and toddlers will contribute significantly to the knowledge formation in the field of early childhood education. Up till now we knew very little about young children's experiences in their everyday life in early childhood education and the impact that these institutions might have on children's development and well-being. In spite of a gradually growing amount of educational research with young children, their voices still appear to be marginalised (Greve & Solheim, 2010; also Johansson & Emilson, 2010). One can also ask whether infants' and toddlers' intersubjective implicit and embodied knowledge is appreciated compared to more measurable academic knowledge communicated by words—especially in a time when measurements seem to be a growing issue in several parts of the educational and political debate all over the world (Biesta, 2008; Greve & Solheim, 2010; Johansson, 2010). This marginalised position of young children appears challenging since, as recent research in neurology suggests, this is the most important age in the lifespan in relation to brain development, to learning and to emotional well-being (Bennett, 2008).

To conclude, the research tradition with an interest in voices of very young children is limited and the methodological knowledge from where researchers can learn and be inspired is also restricted. With this book we would like to support further research dialogue with a view to increased methodologically and ethically appropriate approaches in the future. As the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) reminds us, young citizens have a right to be heard and to participate in issues that concern them (UNCROC, 1989). This means that children have a right to participate in research and to do so on their own premises (Bogden & Bilklen, 2007; Christensen & James, 2000; Coffey, Renold, Dicks, Soyinka, & Mason, 2006; Corsaro, 2005; Greig, Taylor, & MacKay, 2007; Johansson, 2005; Lahman, 2008; Pramling Samuelsson & Pramling, 2009; Woodhead, 2005). This book is an opportunity to begin important dialogues to scrutinize if and how infants and toddlers can be constructed as “participants in research”. This ambition is both complex and full of tensions that have been variously addressed by the authors of this book.

## Discourses and Conceptualisations of Infants and Toddlers

Let us shortly have a look at some discourses and conceptualisations of infants and toddlers in previous research. Research involving this group of young children has previously and to a large extent been studied within the field of psychology (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000), contributing to a discourse of the *universal and psychological child* (Berthelsen, 2009; Sommer, 2005). The cognitive child has been (and still is) an object of research and development has been described in “linear and universal stages”, writes Donna Berthelsen (2009, p. 1). Ontology, epistemology and methodology within these traditions have been criticized as neglecting the perspectives of young children and ignoring children as persons and participants in their own life and in a culture (Greene, 1998). Martin Woodhead and Dorothy Faulkner (2000), for example, illustrate how research interest within this field has to a large extent focussed on measurements, experimental studies and methods related to animal research rather than taken into account the child's own voices and everyday life. The dominant paradigm in research of this nature has very much been related to an idea of objective science (Shaffer, 1993) where “reality” is investigated and captured by objective and universal methods. Associated ethical issues are concerned with the impacts research might have on children's well-being. Such impacts have been ignored and taken for granted in many studies, for example in those where children have been placed in strange situations (for example Belsky, 1988).

During more recent years, however, another discourse has emerged, which takes on a different position—that of *the participating contextual child*. In political, practical and educational contexts we can find a frequent tendency to refer to “children's perspectives” (Halldén, 2003) as well as UNCROC's emphasis on children's participatory rights (UNCROC, 1989). Sociologists, psychologists and pedagogues have highlighted the importance of doing research on the premises of children (Corsaro, 2005; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Sommer, 2005; Woodhead, 2005). There is an increasing interest in gaining knowledge about young children's life and learning in the educational institutions. Many researchers of today, within several disciplines, aspire to do research based on the children's premises and related to context and culture. Research of this nature focuses both on children's living conditions and on giving words to the children's voices (Bae, 2009; Berthelsen, Brownlee, & Johansson, 2009; Halldén, 2003; Smith, Taylor, & Gollop, 2000; Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson, & Hundeide, 2010). The child is now viewed as a subject and positioned by many as a participant in research (Dokket & Perry 2007; Farrell, 2005; Greene & Hogan, 2006; Nyland, 2009). The idea of the sociological contextual child has been placed in the forefront of many researchers' interest all over the world (Brownlee, 2009).

Ontology, epistemology and methodology now position the child and the researcher as subjects intertwined in time, history and culture. Epistemological understandings implied in metaphors such as “collecting data”, for example, have been replaced by notions of subjectivity and metaphors such as “constructions of lived experiences” (see, for example, Greene & Hogan, 2006). Ontological

issues implied in the idea of doing research “on children” have been replaced by doing research “with children”, indicating that conditions for children’s voices and participation are constructed in sociocultural contexts by the researcher and the child together (see, for example, Einarsdottir, 2007). Reflexivity and proximity are viewed as important methodological resources. The cognitive child is also emotionally and bodily constituted and expressed through the child’s very existence. Language is therefore viewed in a broad sense where intersubjectivity and communication are put forward as fundamental to understanding.

At the same time another discussion is also taking place, scrutinizing the conditions necessary for children to take part in investigations and how researchers might be able to represent children’s perspectives, their development and learning (Kjørholt, 2001; also Johansson & Emilson, 2010; Sommer et al., 2010). Eva Johansson and Anette Emilson (2010), for example, ask if the discourse of children’s perspectives and children’s participation has become ideology and rhetoric. They argue that there is a risk that researchers and educators contribute to a new (western) universal construction of a strong active participating child where vulnerability, ambiguity and complexity are overlooked and developmental dimensions of a child’s life are ignored. Without reflexivity researchers might “hide” behind the ideology of “involving children” without taking into account the complexity and contextual relatedness of this issue (also Penn, 2009).

There are lots of limitations for a researcher when claiming to speak in terms of children (Davis, 1998). As researchers we are both close to and far from children’s life-worlds. Besides, children’s perspectives are multiple simply because the child’s worlds are multiple (Johansson, 2003). It is all too easy to underestimate various conflicts of interests in the voices of children. Paying attention to these complexities calls upon the representing voices of the researcher to ask whose voice is being represented and whose voice is being marginalized in research. Kjørholt (2011) maintains that represented voices of children are always part of the “adult discourses” of society. The voices of young children are therefore also voices of various interests, conflicts, values and political preferences. It is also a danger, says Kjørholt, that this discourse of children’s voices might turn into hegemony of power and become a political and ideological strategy in research. Kjørholt (2011) calls researchers to respond to the provoking question, “do right discourses have an unintended effect of contributing to and even accelerating processes of marginalisation, of making invisible children’s many roles in social production and reproduction in the many different societies and localities of the world?” (p. 3).

These thoughts are both critical and challenging for researchers aiming to give room for children’s voices in research. But what is our response? To be able to approach and understand the various perspectives of children, it seems critical for researchers to develop knowledge about the children’s goals, meanings and experiences in various social and cultural contexts involving various ontological and methodological considerations (Dunn, 2006; Christensen & James, 2000; Sommer et al., 2010). The challenge to an approach that privileges children’s perspectives also places onus on the researcher to question their own taken-for-granted values. Helen Penn (2009) reminds us how understandings about children are deeply rooted

in cultural contexts and that generalisations about rights and responsibilities for children can be conflicting. Penn describes how values developed in the “rich world” (p. 12) contribute to the idea of the active participating consuming child being able to make choices. From a perspective of “poor countries” (p. 12) these ideals and values are not at all self-evident, says the author. In certain African cultures, for example, divinity and passivity are values of importance in the upbringing of children. Consideration of such perspectives encourages researchers to step back and reflect on taken-for-granted ideas in the research and education of young children. Reflexivity is thus deemed crucial to protect research from turning the striving for children's voices and participation into a political entity and little more than empty words.

Parallel with the emphasis on giving voice to the contextual child, a new tendency of applying assessments and measurements to the field emerges from political and educational debate (Biesta, 2008). Requests for methods investigating “outcomes” of schooling or early childhood education (see, for example, NZ Ministry of Education, 2006; Norwegian Ministry of Education, 2006) are frequently expressed in educational and political agendas. Hence an academic discourse seems to be intruding also on early childhood education (OECD, 2006). The idea of investment in human capital is in accordance with the “rates of return curve”, writes Jan Erik Johansson (2010, pp. 77–78). This implies that the task of early childhood education is to deliver returns that can be measured in terms of lifelong benefits and higher scholastic skills. It is therefore critical for researchers to reconstruct values in education and educational research, argues Gert Biesta (2008). Researchers need to raise questions such as, “what is good educational research within an era of measurement and accountability?” We must also ask ourselves, “Do we really measure what we value or do we value what we measure?” A language of economy seems also to be involved in new political documents and research announcements where, for example, effect studies are high up on the agenda in many countries (Biesta, 2008). One can ask if there is an emerging risk of turning back to previous discourses, where measurements and searching for effective learning and educational outcomes might force the idea of giving voice to children to the background again. Another risk is that the striving for children's voices and participation turns into hegemonic discourses rather than encouraging various voices of children to become visible in research.

This complex picture indicates a huge challenge for researchers with an interest in the youngest participants in the educational system to respond to the question—how and in what way can very young children's voices be heard and adequately interpreted in research?

## Addressed Issues

This book addresses the scientific society and, in doing so, contributes new knowledge regarding challenges and possibilities for how very young children's voices can be heard in research. The book comprises a series of chapters by

researchers from different parts of the world who have grappled with various methodological issues around research with infants and toddlers, that is, young children under three years of age. Doing research of this nature is a huge ontological challenge for researchers and is addressed from different angles in this book. The researchers' conceptualisations of infancy and toddlerhood differ according to cultural and philosophical spheres from which these research findings derive. Yet, as we follow through the chapters in this book, common to these authors is an underlying ambition to address and problematize research questions through methodologies that seek to understand the perspectives of these young children and, in doing so, to give voice to their experiences in their worlds. The issues dealt with concern the following interrelated questions:

1. What kind of methodological perspectives will allow for (or hinder) research on the premises of the youngest children in early childhood education?
2. What kind of methodological and ethical dilemmas might come to the surface doing research with these young citizens?
3. Is it possible for a researcher to address the children's voices at all? How can researchers involve the voices of children unable to verbal communication?
4. How can researchers approach young children when trying to uncover their perspectives on different phenomena?
5. How can researchers show respect for the children while trying to understand and encounter their life-worlds?

Each chapter concludes with a commentary by one of the other contributors in response to the approaches taken by each author. The responses have been structured as a narrative that coherently links the chapter and continues the discussion. Each author was encouraged to frame his or her commentary around the following key questions:

- (i) How did this chapter "speak" to you?
- (ii) What did you learn?
- (iii) What surprises were there for you in this chapter?
- (iv) What was interesting for you in this chapter? Any debates raised?
- (v) What dilemmas for infant-toddler research does this chapter illuminate?
- (vi) What opportunities for future infant-toddler research does this chapter inspire?

The task was also to offer the reader some provocation around the ideas and highlight dilemmas, challenges and possibilities for doing research with the infants and toddlers in early childhood education. The commentaries displayed in this book reflect both personal, cultural and scientific issues and concerns based on the themes of the various chapters *and* the various cultural and disciplinary experiences and fields of belongings of these researchers.