Preschool teachers' professional development through collaborative action research

Creating mutual understanding and professional language about values and values education

Ingibjörg Ósk Sigurðardóttir

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of a Ph.D.-degree

UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

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Abstract

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The study was collaborative action research (CAR) and lasted for 24 months. The overall aim was to create new knowledge on values education in early childhood education and on the methodology of CAR and, furthermore, to contribute to changes in the field. The author worked in close collaboration with seven preschool teachers in one Icelandic preschool, who focused on their own professional development in relation to values education. The main research question that guided the study was *How can collaborative action research support preschool teachers' professional development in relation to values education?* The thesis consists of four empirical studies that have been presented in four research papers, as journal articles and as a book chapter. The first paper focuses on what values the preschool teachers found important to teach the children in the preschool and why these values were seen as important. The focus was also on how the preschool teachers saw their own role as values educators. The second paper focuses on how the preschool teachers communicated the values they found important to the children. The third paper focuses on how the preschool teachers learned and developed professionally through participating in CAR and how they experienced the advantages and challenges of the process. The fourth paper focuses on how the researcher's role was constructed during the process.

Ontologically, a sociocultural perspective guided the study, where learning and development are believed to be inseparable from the social context in which they happen (Säljö, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). Furthermore, Habermas's theory of communicative action is used to study values education in more detail. Habermas believed that learning happens through communication and that education should be more about communication (Edgar, 2006). In the study, values are seen as intertwined in the minds and actions of individuals rather than only related to either of these two spheres (Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004; Tappan, 2006).

Epistemologically, the study builds on the methodology of CAR, which has proven to be beneficial to reach teachers in the field, to create new knowledge and to make changes in practice (Bruce, Flynn & Stagg-Peterson, 2011; Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014; Koshy, 2010).

The findings of the study show that the CAR methodology proved to be effective for professional development in relation to values education. The preschool teachers chose to focus on values related to social skills and found it important to make the children socially competent.

Ágrip

Samstarfsrannsókn um starfsþróun leikskólakennara

Að skapa sameiginlegan skilning og orðræðu um gildi sem leikskólamenntun er byggð á

Rannsóknin var samstarfsrannsókn (e. *collaborative action research*) og stóð yfir í tvö ár. Meginmarkmiðið var að skapa nýja þekkingu á þeim gildum sem leikskólamenntun er byggð á. Einnig var markmiðið að skapa þekkingu á aðferðafræði starfendarannsókna og stuðla að breytingum á leikskólastarfi. Höfundur var í nánu samstarfi við sjö leikskólakennara í einum leikskóla, sem lögðu áherslu á eigin starfsþróun í tengslum við verkefnið. Meginrannsóknarspurningin var þessi: Hvernig getur samstarfsrannsókn stutt starfsþróun leikskólakennara í tengslum við þau gildi sem leikskólamenntun byggist á? Doktorsritgerð þessi er byggð á fjórum rannsóknum sem hafa verið birtar sem þrjár tímaritsgreinar og bókarkafli. Í fyrstu greininni er fjallað um það hvaða lífsgildi leikskólakennurum fannst mikilvægt að kenna börnum í leikskólanum og hvers vegna þau gildi þóttu mikilvæg. Einnig er fjallað um það hvaða augum leikskólakennararnir litu eigið hlutverk í tengslum við gildin. Í annarri greininni er fjallað um það hvernig leikskólakennarar miðluðu þeim gildum sem þeim þóttu mikilvægust til barnanna. Þá var athugað í þriðju grein hvernig leikskólakennararnir þróuðu sig faglega með þátttöku sinni í samstarfsrannsókninni, og einnig hvernig þeir upplifðu kosti þess og galla að taka þátt. Loks var rýnt í það í fjórðu grein hvernig hlutverk rannsakanda mótaðist meðan á rannsóknarferlinu stóð.

Rannsóknin byggist á félagsmenningarlegu viðhorfi að því er varðar verufræði. Þar af leiðandi er litið svo á að nám og þroski séu alltaf háð félagslegu samhengi (Säljö, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). Jafnframt er kenning Habermas um samskipti (e. *communicative actions*) nýtt til að rannsaka gildi í leikskólamenntun af meiri nákvæmni. Habermas leit svo á að nám færi fram með samskiptum og þess vegna ætti menntun að fjalla meira um samskipti (Edgar, 2006). Í rannsókninni er gert ráð fyrir því að lífsgildi séu samtvinnuð í huga og athöfnum manna, en ekki aðeins tengd öðrum þættinum einvörðungu (Hitlin og Piliavin, 2004; Tappan, 2006).

Þekkingarfræðilega byggist rannsóknin á aðferðafræði samstarfs-rannsókna. Aðferðafræðin hefur reynst gagnleg til að ná til kennara á

vettvangi, skapa nýja þekkingu í skólasamfélaginu og til að gera breytingar á starfinu (Bruce, Flynn og Stagg-Peterson, 2011; Kemmis, McTaggart og Nixon, 2014; Koshy, 2010).

Niðurstöður rannsóknarinnar sýna að aðferðafræði samstarfsrannsókna reyndist hafa rík áhrif á starfsþróun leikskólakennara í tengslum við gildi. Leikskólakennararnir völdu að leggja áherslu á gildi sem þeir tengdu við félagsfærni og sömuleiðis fannst þeim mikilvægt að börnin yrðu félagslega sterkir einstaklingar.

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The process of this doctoral thesis has been a great journey for me. During the journey, I have met many people who have influenced me and my study. As I stand at the endpoint, I hope the study and the knowledge it created will be beneficial for preschool teachers, for preschool practice and, most importantly, for preschool children's learning and wellbeing.

To the seven preschool teachers who travelled with me throughout the whole journey: You welcomed me into your preschool and accepted me as your collaborator. We supported each other in different ways, and our collaboration was successful. Thank you all for allowing me such close proximity to you and your practice. The other staff members at Hill Park, the parents and the children also deserve great thanks.

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and hopefully some future research colleagues. Furthermore, the Nordic project also benefited from having my PhD study as a part of the project. I came into the preschool as an outside researcher and worked in close collaboration with the participating preschool teachers, facilitating a good connection between the field and the researchers.

In the beginning of my doctoral studies, I got an opportunity to visit University of Gothenburg as a guest student. I spent two years in Gothenburg, taking interesting courses, formulating my research proposal and, most importantly, meeting many talented researchers and doctoral students. My second supervisor, Pia Williams, was one of these researchers. It was important for me to go abroad and broaden my horizon, and I am grateful for that time.

My colleagues at the School of Education are the people I encountered almost daily. I thank them for showing interest in my study and reflecting on important issues with me when I needed it. I especially thank Hrönn, Bryndís, Kristín and Arna for their support during my first steps as a university teacher, which I took parallel to the doctoral study. I also thank the doctoral students that were on the same track as I was for their fruitful conversations, whether about serious research issues or a light-hearted chat to brighten up the day. I especially thank Sara Margrét, who has been on the same path as I these last years, walking our first steps as researchers together. Johanna Läärä also deserves special thanks for taking the first important steps with me on the journey. Other colleagues I have shared office space with also deserve thanks. It has been very important for me to have you around.

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1 Introduction: Starting the journey

This study is collaborative action research (CAR) conducted in one Icelandic preschool, in collaboration with seven preschool teachers who worked on their professional development by participating in an action research process, with regard to values education. The topic of values is fairly new in the early childhood education practice and as a research field. The topic proved to be relevant in relation to many situations in the preschool setting. It is worth initially reflecting on why it is important to study the subject of values in early education and why it is important to study how preschool teachers communicate values to children. As a new field in preschool research, values education is of major consequence for early childhood education and, indeed, for the future of society in general. Children are especially responsive at preschool age, and research has demonstrated that knowledge and experience acquired during this stage is crucial for future learning (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/-Eurostat, 2014; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004). This has led to an increased emphasis on a high level of quality in early childhood education (Ringmose & Krag Müller, 2017).

In this study, values are believed to be socially constructed and connected to the human mind and an individual's actions (Halstead, 1996), and therefore, it is crucial that preschool teachers communicate the values that they find desirable and good to the preschool children. Moreover, values that are emphasised in documents like curriculum guidelines and preschool laws need to be communicated to the children (Einarsdottir, Puroila, Johansson, Brostöm & Emilson, 2015). The Nordic research project, which this study was part of (explained below), endeavours to understand what kind of future citizens early childhood education and care (ECEC) fosters in order to build more cohesive, democratic and pluralistic societies in the Nordic countries (Values Education in Nordic Preschools, n.d.). Furthermore, a well-known Icelandic philosopher, Páll Skúlason (2008), has emphasised the significance of Icelanders thinking critically about their culture's dominant and desirable values and has pointed to a connection to the roots of the financial crash in Iceland in 2008. These notions lay the foundation for the importance of the study, which is to explore the manner in which preschool teachers communicate values to children – and what

values they choose to communicate – in order to find out whether we are indeed fostering the citizens we want for our future society.

The study contributes on both empirical and methodological levels. Firstly, research shows that there is a lack of knowledge about values education in preschools, which demands rectification. It seems that values education is often overlooked in favour of subject areas and academic learning: 'Although a value perspective is embedded in the core curricula and legislation regarding ECEC in all of the Nordic countries, values education remains one of the most neglected areas in educational practices and research' (Values Education in Nordic Preschools, n.d.). Thus, a compensatory highlighting of values education in early education is needed, and collaboration with preschool teachers constitutes an important start. This leads to the second reason for the significance of this study, namely, the importance of continual professional development for preschool teachers. The methodology of action research has proven be a good way to support such professional development (Gordon, 2008), and, therefore, the evolution of the methodology offers an important contribution to the field. The research material builds upon and extends the preschool teachers' own evaluations and experiences of the action research, which offers valuable insight into how the methodology functions as a tool for professional development. Moreover, such research will attract the attention of other preschool teachers who are interested in further professional development. Finally, this study contributes to the knowledge in the field by examining the role of the researcher in CAR and his/her collaboration with teachers, an area that has been under investigated.

Ontologically, the study emanates from a sociocultural perspective and builds on ideas that humans' learning and development are intertwined with the context in which they live (Säljö, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). Habermas's theory of communicative action is applied to study and understand different levels of the preschool context and how values are communicated to the preschool children. The literature on values and values education is also used to understand the issue under study. Finally, the CAR methodology is applied in the study as theoretical background. The methodology's approach builds on learning through collaboration and is therefore well suited to the sociocultural perspective.

1.1 Aims and research questions

The overall aim of the study was to create new knowledge on values education in early childhood education and on the methodology of CAR and

to contribute to change in the field. The aims of the study are therefore on both the empirical and methodological levels. The aims of each research paper that the thesis builds on are more specific. The aim of the first paper was to study what values the participating preschool teachers found to be most important to communicate to preschool children and why they found these values important for the children to learn. The paper explains how the preschool teachers developed their ideas about values and values education and how they planned and implemented changes in their practice. The aim of the second paper was to study how the preschool teachers communicated the values they had chosen to focus on to the children. In the third paper, the aim was to deepen our understanding on how preschool teachers learned and developed professionally by participating in an action research and how they experienced the participation. The paper presents the preschool teachers' reflection on what they learned from taking part in the action research. Furthermore, they reflected on what was successful and what was challenging in process. Finally, the aim of the fourth paper was to analyse how the researcher's role in CAR developed throughout the whole process.

The main research question guiding the overall study, presented in this thesis, is *How can collaborative action research support preschool teachers' professional development in relation to values education?*

It is worth noting here, that this thesis presents the study from the researcher's point of view. Nevertheless, there was a close collaboration with the participating preschool teachers who had their own aims that were on practical level. These different aims intertwined throughout the process and were highly related in the collaboration. The participating preschool teachers' aims was to develop their profession and practice in relation to values education. The research question guiding the preschool teachers in the action research process was: *How can I improve my practice in relation to values education?* and, more specifically: *How can I improve my skills as a values educator and communicate important values to the children?*

1.2 Nordic research collaboration

This study is part of a larger Nordic research project conducted in five countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. Figure 1 illustrates how the study presented in this thesis complements the Icelandic portion of the Nordic project and the Nordic project as a whole. This is explained in detail below.

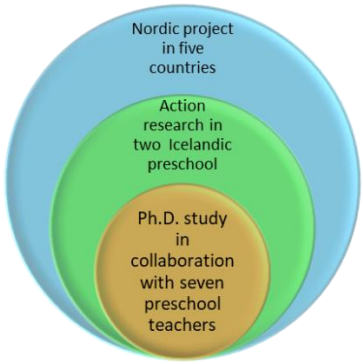

Figure 1. The research combination

Firstly, the blue circle represents the Nordic project, *Values education in Nordic preschools: Basis of education for tomorrow (ValuEd)*. The project focuses precisely on what its title suggests – values education in Nordic preschools. The project was supported by NordForsk, an organisation that provides funding for Nordic research cooperation and operates under the Nordic Council of Ministers (NordForsk, n.d.). The project aims to deepen our understanding of the institutionalised fostering of values in Nordic preschools at the theoretical, methodological and empirical levels. The project investigated how values are prioritised and communicated on different levels and in different settings – from Nordic and national policies to the preschool practice and individual practitioners. Approximately 481 adults and 1930 children between the ages of one and six from the above-mentioned countries participated in the project. Each country's research team organised the project according to their own unique context and circumstances. Though each country employed a different research structure, we shared the same main focus and worked from a common theoretical background and methodology: Habermas's theory of communicative action underlies the entire project as well as the methodology of action research (Values Education in Nordic Preschools, n.d.).

Secondly, the green circle represents the Icelandic part of the Nordic project. The Icelandic part was carried out at the Centre for Research on Early Childhood Education at the University of Iceland. The Icelandic research team consisted of two researchers from the University of Iceland, School of Education and two doctoral students from the same institution, of which I am one. The Icelandic research was undertaken in two Reykjavík preschools, with one doctoral student collaborating with preschool teachers in each. Approximately 18 practitioners, 3 preschool leaders and

120 children were involved in the Icelandic project as a whole (Values Education in Nordic Preschools, n.d.).

Thirdly, the brown circle represents the study presented in this thesis. That study was part of the Icelandic project and was conducted in one of the Icelandic preschools.

1.3 Design of the thesis

The process of the study has been like a journey for me, which can be recognised in the titles of each chapter. The thesis consists of eight chapters. Chapter 2 briefly describes the Icelandic preschool situation in order to give the readers insight into the context in which the research was conducted. Chapter 3 explains the theoretical and methodological framework and how these are relevant to the study. Chapter 4 gives an overview of the existing knowledge from former studies on the issue of values education and CAR. In Chapter 5, the study's method is explained and a detailed overview of the whole research process is given. Chapter 6 describes the four studies that this thesis builds on, presented in four different research papers. Chapter 7 gives an overview of the overall findings from the four studies and explains the main themes that arose from all of them. In Chapter 8 the findings are discussed in relation to the theoretical and methodological background as well as in relation to prior knowledge on the issue and what these findings mean for the future preschool context. Furthermore, in Chapter 8, conclusions that can be drawn from the study and ideas about future work will be presented.

2 The Icelandic preschool context: Explaining the scenery

The purpose of this chapter is to give an overview of the background of the Icelandic preschool education and the main ideology it builds on. Since the study is part of a larger Nordic research project, the idea behind the Nordic model will first be explained, including how it is related to values education. This is followed by a short historical overview of the background of the Icelandic preschool system, the introduction of the current National Curriculum Guide Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011) and how the preschool teachers' education in Iceland has developed through the years. At the end of the chapter, the main challenges concerning early childhood education and care faced in Iceland today are discussed.

2.1 The Nordic Model

Iceland is part of the Nordic countries, which are considered to have a shared ideology about children and childhood (Wagner & Einarsdottir, 2006, 2008). The shared ideology includes prioritising values such as democracy, equality, freedom, independence and solidarity. The Nordic model is known for an emphasis on the concept of a 'good childhood', where these values are at the core (Antikainen, 2006; Blossing, Imsen & Moos, 2014; Wagner, 2006). The model is known for its emphasis on social welfare and educational policies and how these are identified in the practice of early childhood education. Early childhood education in the Nordic countries is based on a holistic perspective in which play, care, learning and development form an integrated whole. Nordic preschools are influenced by values that are recognised in the Nordic cultures. In the Nordic countries, childhood is seen as important here and now rather than a period where individuals are only waiting to become adults. This is, for example, identified in the child-centeredness that the Nordic ideology builds on, where children's perspective is respected (Wagner & Einarsdottir, 2006, 2008).

2.2 The background of Icelandic preschools

In the 1920s the Women's Alliance in Reykjavík opened the first full-time day-care centre for poor children. This can be seen as the beginning of early childhood education in Iceland. Later, in the 1940s, part-time centres opened. These were called playschools and were open to all children. Full-

time centres were still only open to priority groups such as children from poor or single-parent homes. This arrangement continued until 1973, when the Ministry of Education took over and integrated both programmes. This change meant that the care and education of young children in Iceland was no longer part of social policy nor only for children from poor homes. Both preschool programmes, full-time and part-time, were now part of the educational policy in Iceland (Einarsdottir, 2006; Jónasson, 2006; Lög um hlutdeild ríkisins í byggingu og rekstri dagvistunarheimila nr. 43/1973).

Since 1991, the concept *playschool* has been used for all early educational programmes in Iceland. However, I have decided to use the concept preschool in this thesis since it is used more internationally. The development continued, and since 1994, preschools have been the first level of schooling in Iceland. However, the preschools are neither compulsory nor free of charge (Einarsdottir, 2006; Jónasson, 2006; Lög um leikskóla nr. 78/1994). Most children in Iceland today start their preschool education around the age of two years. Today, the municipalities that operate the preschools are increasingly focused on offering children as young as one year access to preschool. This is done to meet the needs of parents who want preschool to follow the nine-month period of maternity leave. Icelandic children then start formal compulsory schooling in the autumn of the year they turn six years old (Nefnarálit með breytingartillögu um tillögu til ályktunar um leikskóla að loknu fæðingarorlofi nr. 143, 2013–2014). Furthermore, a proposal about extending the maternity leave up to 12 months has been presented in parliament even though it has not been followed through (Lög um breytingu á lögum nr. 95/2000, um fæðingar-& og foreldraorlof, með síðari breytingum).

The number of children attending preschools in Iceland has been increasing over recent years. At the end of 2015 almost 86% of all children from one to five years old attended preschool, and that is the highest percentage that has ever been (Statistics Iceland, 2015). At the end of 2016 the percentage decreased by 1,4%, but that can be explained by smaller age groups. It is also worth mentioning that 12,5% of all preschool children in Iceland were of foreign nationality in 2016, a percentage that is also rising very fast. To compare, it was 5,8% two years prior (Statistics Iceland, 2017). According to the OECD (2017a), preschool children in Iceland have the longest preschool day compared to children in other OECD countries. However, there is a lack of educated preschool teachers working in preschools in Iceland. According to the law (Lög um leikskóla nr. 90/2008), at least two-thirds of all staff members in each preschool should be educated as preschool teachers. Nevertheless, the reality is that at the end

of 2016, only 31,9% of those who worked in preschools had been educated as preschool teachers; 13% had another university degree related to preschool teacher education, such as primary school teacher education or social education (Statistics Iceland, 2017).

2.3 The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Preschools

> The National Curriculum Guide contains the frame and conditions for learning and teaching based on the principles of existing laws, regulations and international conventions. Six fundamental pillars have been developed within this frame, and they form the essence of the educational policy. They include the working methods, content and the learning environment at every school level and form important continuity in the Icelandic educational system. These pillars are literacy, sustainability, health and welfare, democracy and human rights, equality and creativity (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011, p. 5).

This is a part of a preface from the Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Preschools of 2011, written by Katrín Jakobsdóttir, the Minister of Education, Science and Culture at that time and the Prime Minister at the time of writing this thesis. The Curriculum was published in 2011, and, for the first time, the main part of the curriculum and the main ideology behind it was the same for all school levels in Iceland besides education at the university level. Jakobsdóttir continues and states that it is important to focus on developing children's 'future ability to be critical, active and competent participants in a society based on equality and democracy' (p. 5). By this she emphasises that education should be aiming towards socially competent individuals rather than fostering merely formal academic skills.

The Curriculum Guide is based on Preschool Act No. 90/2008 (Lög um leikskóla nr. 90/2008). For the first time, there were six fundamental pillars that should underlie education at all three levels. These are literacy, sustainability, health and welfare, democracy and human rights, equality and creativity (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011). About education in general it is stated, in the common part of the curriculum for all school levels, that:

> At any given time, general education advances the capacity of the individual for meeting the challenges of everyday life.

> General education therefore contributes towards the individuals' understanding of their characteristics and abilities and consequently their capacity to fulfil their role in a complex society. It is at the same time both individually and socially oriented (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011, p. 13).

Here, the emphasis on foster children to become competent future citizens is recognised again. Therefore, it is easy to relate the focus in the Curriculum since 2011 to the issue of this thesis, values education, even though the concept is not used in the Curriculum.

2.4 Preschool teachers' education in Iceland

Preschool teachers' education in Iceland can be traced back to 1946 when the Pedagogical College of Sumargjöf (is. Uppeldisskóli Sumargjafar) opened. At that time, the education period was two nine-month periods. In 1973 the Ministry of Education took over the school, and the education period became three years. The school merged with The Teachers' University (is. Kennaraháskóli Íslands) in 1998, and the same year, the first preschool teachers graduated with a bachelor's degree. This change made the education more theoretical than before, even though the emphasis was still on the practice and to link theory with practice (Einarsdottir, 2012; Jónasson, 2006).

In 2008, with new laws about teachers' education and employment, it was stated that teachers at all school levels should have a master's degree, (Lög um menntun og ráðningu kennara og skólastjórnenda við leikskóla, grunnskóla og framhaldsskóla nr. 87/ 2008; Reglugerð um inntak menntunar leik-, grunn- og framhaldsskólakennara nr. 872/ 2009). This change has put Iceland at the forefront of the Nordic countries concerning preschool teachers' education. Iceland is the only Nordic country where a master's degree is needed to become licensed as a preschool teacher. In the other Nordic countries, the education is still at the bachelor's degree level at the university level or even college level. Preschool teachers' education in Iceland is now available at two universities, the University of Iceland and the University of Akureyri (Broström, Einarsdottir & Pramling Samuelsson, 2018; Einarsdottir, 2012).

2.5 Today's challenges faced in Icelandic preschools

The preschools in Iceland have always needed to deal with certain challenges over the years, on different levels. These can be related to political issues, practical issues or issues concerning the society as a whole. Einarsdottir (2017) discusses these challenges and says that they 'have the potential to become a threat to the Nordic tradition in early childhood education and care in Iceland' (p. 63). Today, the Icelandic early childhood education is facing the various challenges, discussed below.

Firstly, as mentioned, there is a lack of educated preschool teachers (Statistics Iceland, 2017). This dearth of educated preschool teachers is a challenge that needs to be taken seriously since research has shown that the professionalism and competence of preschool staff members is a crucial factor for quality in the preschool setting (Pramling Samuelsson, Sheridan & Williams, 2006; Williams, Sheridan & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2018).

Secondly, the gap between the period allotted for parental leave and when a child can begin preschool is a challenge faced in the Icelandic preschool system today (Einarsdottir, 2017). This is a political issue, and politicians today emphasise the need to open new preschools and to give younger children the opportunity to start preschool education (Beck, 2018). Nevertheless, this solution seems to promote a vicious cycle since it will require more educated preschool teachers – a problem that already exists.

Thirdly, a challenge faced in Icelandic preschools today is the enormous changes in society. In recent years, the population has become increasingly more multicultural. These changes affect the preschool practice and the profession of preschool teachers in that they need to reflect on how they engage with new Icelanders and how they encourage the participation of immigrant children. However, these changes also involve opportunities for professional development, among other things (Einarsdottir, 2017).

Finally, the preschools in Iceland face challenges concerning academic focus. In some municipalities in Iceland, five-year-olds have been moved from preschools to primary schools, a threat that Einarsdottir warned about around 2002. In Iceland, like in other Western countries, there is a tension between those who emphasise children's participation and influence and those who emphasise standardised assessments in early childhood education (Einarsdottir, 2017). Nevertheless, there still seems to be many who want to focus more on social skills rather than academic skills in Icelandic preschools (see for example the University of Stavanger on YouTube, n.d.).

Some of these challenges that the Icelandic preschools are facing today are also faced in other countries. For example, early childhood educators around the world need to rationalise their professionalism and protect it from demands centred on academic focus (see for example Osgood, 2010). Furthermore, globalisation is affecting early childhood education around the world, which gives reasons for revising the mainstream approaches in each country (Urban, 2012, 2015).

The focus of this study was on preschool teachers' professional development in relation to values education. Even though the goal of this study is not to meet the challenges faced in Icelandic preschools, it is worth mentioning that the findings of the study can be supportive in facing these challenges. Firstly, by focusing on professional development, the study contributes to knowledge on the foundational issue for quality in preschool practice. More knowledge on the profession will hopefully bring in more preschool teacher students, which will result in more preschool teachers. It is important to introduce the study to policymakers and other stakeholders. More knowledge on the preschool teachers' profession will increase their understanding on the preschool practice so that they will make their decisions in accordance with the profession's emphasis and, for example, not demand an academic focus in preschools. Secondly, the focus on values education is relevant in relation to these challenges. More knowledge on values education and understanding on how to work with it in preschools in highly important in modern society as preschools become increasingly more multicultural. As Johansson, Emilson and Puroila (2018b) state, 'In a globalizing world, and especially in an age of pluralism, the acknowledgement of values has become increasingly important' (p. 1). This make preschool teachers more qualified to understand and address the different needs of families with varied backgrounds. This will also result in greater understanding on different cultural values among children and lead to more tolerance for diversity.

3 Theoretical and methodological framework: The tools in the backpack

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the theoretical and methodological framework of the study. The overall aim of the study was to create new knowledge on values education in early childhood education and on the methodology of CAR and to contribute to change in the field. Therefore, the study's contribution is on both the empirical and methodological levels.

Ontologically, the study emanates from a sociocultural perspective and assumes that human learning and development are culturally and historically situated and inseparable from the context in which individuals live. In collaboration with others, children learn to communicate in different ways, including rules of acting and behaving, play competencies and other skills important in the specific preschool context (Säljö, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). This is seen as the perspective that guided the study overall. The theories and knowledge that were used in the study are affected by and can be related to the sociocultural view on learning and development as well as critical perspective. For example, the sociocultural perspective was the foundation for how values education was understood in the study. This is explained in more detail below. In the study, knowledge and learning are regarded as manifested in and emerging from participation in social practices (Säljö, 2005), where social interaction is seen as a driving force in children's and teachers' learning and development. Learning and development is a dynamic process, constructed relationally in interactions within a cultural context. One part of the study, which is presented in paper II, is directed towards how preschool teachers communicated values to children. From a sociocultural perspective, cultural beliefs and attitudes impact learning, and children learn values through the environment in which they live (Keskin, 2012; Rogoff, 2003).

To go deeper into the nature of values education, Habermas's theory of communicative action was used in the study. His theory falls under critical theory; he rejected explanations grounded in developmental psychology holding that development is a natural process. Habermas believed that we learn from communication, and therefore education should be more about communication. This relates his ideas to values education since values are understood to be socially constructed and context-related in this study. A holistic perspective on values education is applied in the study, which

means that values are seen as intertwined in individuals' minds and actions rather than being solely in either of these two spheres (Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004; Tappan, 2006).

The epistemology behind the study builds on the methodology of collaborative action research (CAR). The methodology has proven to be effective for reaching teachers in schools and for working in collaboration with them to create new knowledge and contribute to change (Bruce, Flynn & Stagg-Peterson, 2011; Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014; Koshy, 2010). This approach offered an opportunity to create new knowledge on values education in preschool and on preschool teachers' professional development. The main focus of the methodology can be related to the sociocultural perspective since the main emphasis is that learning and development happen through collaboration and are context-related.

Below, the theoretical and methodological framework of the study is explained in more detail. Since the sociocultural perspective is seen as the foundation of the theories and the methodology used in the study, it will not be explained in depth in the thesis. However, the ontology will be in the background and connected to the theories and methodology used. First, Habermas's theory of communication will be explained as well as how it was used to support the analysis process of the study. Second, the main characteristics of values education are explained as well as how values education is relevant in modern educational systems and how important the teachers' role is when children learn and adopt values. Finally, this chapter explains the methodology of collaborative action research and how the approach supported the preschool teachers who participated in the study in terms of professional development. Moreover, the chapter will explain how the approach was supportive for creating new knowledge and understanding about the advantages and challenges of CAR and about the researcher's role in CAR.

3.1 Different level of society – Habermas's theory of communicative action

Habermas's theory of communicative action provided the main theoretical framework for this study. Born in 1929 near Dusseldorf, Germany, Jürgen Habermas was a professor in sociology and philosophy in Frankfurt until 1993 but has continued ever since to publish extensively. In the 1970s and 1980s he began to develop his theory of communicative action, which addresses how people use their communicative skills to create and maintain social relationships (Edgar, 2006). In this study, only part of this

complicated theory was utilised, the part that is well-suited to this study's aims, but other aspects of the theory are beyond the aim of this study.

3.1.1 Different types of actions

To understand Habermas's theory of communicative action, it is useful to begin with his distinction between different actions. For Habermas, action is an intentional and meaningful activity. He distinguished action from behaviour because one intends to perform an action and the action is therefore goal-oriented, while behaviour is characteristically more spontaneous. Habermas distinguished between various types of actions in a few ways. Firstly, he distinguishes between *social* and *non-social* actions depending on whether or not the action involves other individuals. Then he distinguishes between those actions that are oriented towards success and those that are oriented towards mutual understanding. Finally, Habermas makes the distinction between actions that are performed with a goal or purpose in mind and those that are not (Edgar, 2006; Fultner, 2011). Figure 2 illustrates the different types of actions and their connection to *life-world* and *system*, two central concepts of Habermas's theory that will be explained later in this chapter.

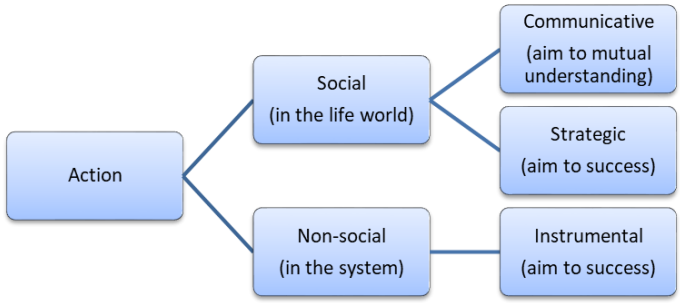

Figure 2. Actions in the theory of communicative actions by Habermas.

Social action involves some form of action coordination between individuals. Social action is the form of action on which this study is focused. According to Habermas, because individuals can take different attitudes towards one another, social actions can be of two types: *communicative* action or *strategic* action (Brand, 1990; Edgar, 2006; Fultner, 2011; Kemmis, 2011; Thomassen, 2010).

Communicative action consists of meaningful interaction between persons in which they orient themselves towards mutual understanding rather than trying to realise their own individual purposive goal. If the

interaction fails, one of the persons involved will attempt to make sense of what is going on. Therefore, communicative action forges social bonds and functions as a means of social integration. Interpersonal relationships maintained through communicative action are characterised by openness, reciprocity and mutual understanding. It involves, at its core, the recognition of other participants. Such a relationship is founded on the equal worth of all people understood by way of an inter-subjectivity. Emilson and Johansson (2009) note that 'communicative action between teachers and young children requires special qualities, which are described in terms of closeness to the child's perspective, emotional presence and playfulness' (p. 63). The perspective of the life-world motivates and sustains communicative actions, thereby maintaining the social relationships in the social world (see explanation of life-world below) (Brand, 1990; Edgar, 2006; Fultner, 2011; Kemmis, 2011; Thomassen, 2010). The concept of communicative action has been linked to what is called a *holistic* or *overall understanding of education* in which 'the teacher and the school emphasize and are conscious of an overall understanding of the pupil's daily school life' (Lillemyr, 2009, p. 67). Lillemyr (2009) notes, 'There may be a greater need in modern society than ever before to emphasize the holistic or overall perspective as a fundamental attitude in delivering education' (p. 67). He continues and emphasises that as a result of society's overwhelming complexity, children may very well require opportunities for holistic communication (Lillemyr, 2009; Lövelie, 1984).

By contrast, *strategic action*, though also social, is oriented towards success rather than mutual understanding. A person who acts strategically seeks to manipulate another and adopts an instrumental attitude towards a person who does not necessarily understand what is going on. In strategic action, persons are treated more as objects than as fellow human beings (Brand, 1990; Edgar, 2006; Fultner, 2011; Kemmis, 2011; Thomassen, 2010).

The other type of action that Habermas employs is that of *non-social* action, which does not involve any coordination between individuals and which Habermas terms *instrumental* action. Though this study will not focus on instrumental action, a brief explanation will prove important. Like strategic actions, instrumental actions are oriented towards success, but, unlike strategic actions, which are oriented towards humans, instrumental actions are oriented towards objects. Instrumental actions intend to manipulate the physical world, are controlled by instrumental or purposive reason and occur in the system (explained below). Habermas argues that instrumental actions only become problematic when they are applied inappropriately to the social world and therefore become strategic actions

(Brand, 1990; Edgar, 2006; Fultner, 2011). Though strategic actions are definitively social and instrumental actions are not, the two are often confused because they are both success-oriented. Indeed, some researchers, such as Finlayson (2005), do not distinguish between these two concepts even though they may recognise the difference between them. Finlayson sees both varieties of action as parasitic towards communicative action, which is itself basic and free-standing.

In the study presented here, Habermas's theory of different actions was used to understand and analyse the manner in which preschool teachers communicated values to children (see Sigurdardottir, Williams & Einarsdottir, manuscript).

Table 1 shows how Habermas distinguishes between different actions depending on situation and orientation. Actions oriented to success are instrumental or strategic, depending on whether they are social or non-social. Actions oriented to reach understanding are communicative, and these kinds of actions are always social since they involve communication (Thomassen, 2010).

Table 1. Actions in Habermas' theory of communication action

Action orientation / Action Situation	**Oriented to success**	**Oriented to reaching understanding**
Non-social	Instrumental action	----------
Social	Strategic action	Communicative action

(Thomassen, 2010).

3.1.2 The system and the life-world – different perspectives on society

The foundational insight of Habermas's theory of communicative action is his doubling of society, or his realisation that society can be analysed from two different perspectives: as *the system* and as *the life-world*. According to Kemmis (2011), 'The theory of system and life-world provides a theoretical discourse clarifying a significant shift in the social conditions of late modernity' (p. 282). Indeed, this theory can be employed to identify the divergent perspectives expressed by any modern social institution (Ingram,

2010). The life-world and the system are counterparts and the homes of communicative and instrumental actions, respectively. The life-world and the system each possess their own distinctive rules, institutions and patterns of behaviour (Brand, 1990; Emilson, 2007; Finlayson, 2005).

Habermas distinguishes between the perspectives of life-world and system in a few different ways. Firstly, from the perspective of action, the life-world is, as mentioned, the domain of communicative actions and the system that of instrumental actions. Secondly, Habermas makes a distinction on the level of order; order is achieved in the life-world through the coordination of action orientations, while order in the system is achieved through the coordination of action consequences. Finally, Habermas distinguishes between life-world and system in terms of the media that are used to generate integration – natural language in the case of the life-world and steering media in the case of the system (Heath, 2011). Figure 3 summarises these three central distinctions Habermas made.

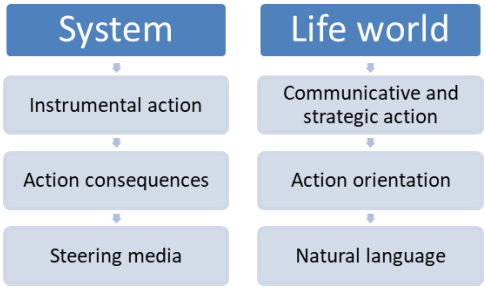

Figure 3. Difference between system and life–world.

Habermas adopted the concept of *life-world* from the German phenomenologist Edmund Husserl and Husserl's pupil, Alfred Schutz, who developed the concept in sociology (Edgar, 2006). Representing the everyday social world that we share with others, the life-world is a meaningful context that helps individuals understand and interpret their environments. In Habermas's view, life-world becomes the name for the informal and unspecified domains of social life in which social actions (communicative and strategic) occur. Social actions complement the life-world in the sense that the life-world can only be reproduced by such action. It is maintained through the ordinary communication of people making use of their competence, skills and knowledge (Edgar, 2006; Finlayson, 2005; Heath, 2011; Ingram, 2010; Thomassen, 2010). Habermas

divides the life-world into three components: society, culture and personality. The more these three components differ, the more actions depend on rationally motivated shared understanding. Culture, social order and individual identity are therefore secured within the life-world (Brand, 1990; Kemmis, 2011). In this study, the everyday life in preschool is the life-world from Habermas's theory, and social actions are characteristic of the daily preschool practice.

The *system* refers to that aspect of society that is principally responsible for the material reproduction of life. It refers to the society that confronts the individual as a meaningless, seemingly natural force. It is the domain of instrumental actions oriented towards success and goals or that of instrumental forces and rules. This function of the system is fulfilled by an economic system grounded in a legal system (Edgar, 2006; Heath, 2011; Ingram, 2010; Kemmis, 2011). According to Edgar (2006), when the rules of the system displace communicative rationality, people can no longer understand the rules that govern their actions. From the system perspective, modern society encompasses organisational and institutional structures (Kemmis, 2011). The National Curriculum, Preschool Law and the preschool operator are examples of the system in this study. All those factors affect the preschool practice without social actions.

Ingram (2010) points out that 'Habermas distinguishes between institutions whose members relate to one another through the normative medium of communicative action and institutions whose members relate to one another through the "norm-free sociality" of strategic action' (p. 347). Habermas contends that society consists of a series of subsystems, each with its own social function. These subsystems can be roughly divided into three distinct spheres or institutions: the state, the market and civil society. Different spheres generate different actions: the state includes the public sector, and actions are controlled by power; the market includes the economy, and actions are controlled by money; and civil society includes various communities, and actions are controlled by values, norms and people's expectations of each other. The state and the market account for goal-and-success-oriented actions and are therefore components of the system perspective, but civil society accounts for actions oriented towards mutual understanding and is therefore part of the life-world perspective (Ingram, 2010). Finlayson (2005) argues that, according to Habermas, the life-world can operate without a connection to the system. The system, on the other hand, is dependent on the life-world because it can only operate on the basis of resources of meaning from the life-world. Moreover, Finlayson states, 'Since the life-world embodies patterns of communicative

action, and the system embodies patterns of instrumental action, and since communicative action is prior to instrumental action, the life-world must be prior to the system' (p. 56). Figure 4 illustrates Habermas's division of society into these two perspectives and presents examples of the spheres that belong to each.

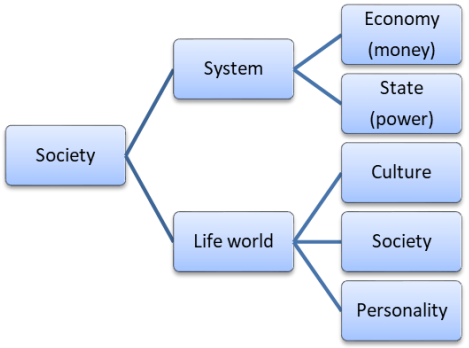

Figure 4. Two perspectives of society, the system and life world.

Habermas's idea of analysing society from two different perspectives, *the life-world* and *the system*, was supportive in this study for better understanding the different levels of the preschool context. Since the focus of this study is on social actions in preschool settings, Habermas's life-world perspective was mainly used. However, knowledge of the system perspective and understanding the difference between these two perspectives proved to be useful during the analysis of the data. Indeed, like Habermas pointed out, the system can have an enormous impact on the life-world. In relation to this, it is important to understand Habermas's identification of the colonisation of the life-world since this was identified in the study (Sigurdardottir & Einarsdottir, 2016).

3.1.3 Colonisation of the life–world

Habermas contends that the larger the society, the more problematic it becomes. *Colonisation of the life-world* occurs when the system takes over the life-world, the steering media take over communicative approaches to problem-solving and social relations become instrumentalised. One example is money's (steering media) overtaking and control of culture (natural language). As the system actually depends upon the life-world, this process gives rise to instabilities and crises in the system. Finlayson (2005) cautions that Habermas is not necessarily 'anti-market, or anti-system, but

he is only well aware of the potentially harmful effects that the system can have on social life and on individual members of society…although the system is embedded in and depending on the life-world, the former tends to encroach upon, to displace and even destroy, the latter' (pp. 56–57). But it is important to note that the system can never wholly overtake the life-world as a result of the life-world's enormous fund of taken-for-granted shared expectations (Edgar, 2006; Finlayson, 2005; Heath, 2011; Kemmis, 2011).

3.1.3.1 Colonisation in relation to education

In Habermas's theory, education according to the life-world perspective is oriented towards individuals' understanding and meaning-making through communicative action. By contrast, according to the system perspective, education is directed towards success and the achievement of goals in the overall society (Fleming & Murphy, 2010). Given Habermas's concept of the colonisation of the life-world, it is important to be aware of the danger that strategic action poses for communicative action in schools and preschools. Habermas himself notes how the steering media of the system – like power and money, for instance – can place demands on schooling and eventually undermine the conditions necessary for education. The result of such colonisation could well be the instrumentalisation of communication in schools, which itself will lead to unreasonable demands for results-oriented and spoon-feeding teaching methods at the expense of discussions and active learning (Edgar, 2006; Kemmis, 2011).

According to Kemmis (2011),

> the more schooling is pressed to perform in terms of economic and administrative goals, and the more learners are pressed to perform in terms of system-determined objectives and process, the more difficult it becomes for the teacher and learners to find the time and resources necessary to interrupt the functional rationality of schooling in order to engage in communicative action oriented towards mutual understanding and consensus (p. 296).

Emilson (2007) addresses this problem in relation to preschools and suggests that the tension between system and life-world provides us ample reason to improve preschool practice as both perspectives are necessary for effective practice. Kemmis (2011) also admits that even though schools are under pressure from economic and political-legal systems, they still

remain places where learning and knowledge are highly valued, and communicative actions can be learned, exercised and developed. Habermas himself believes that education should work to incorporate ethics of care, of justice and the foregrounding of learning necessary for effective citizenship. In the view of Fleming and Murphy (2010), Habermas's theory gives priority to the learning required for active citizenship, and the competence that is required for communicative action is more valuable.

3.2 Mediating principles of living

Values education was the issue in focus in the action research project that this thesis builds on; the preschool teachers were concentrating on their professional development in relation to values education. The theoretical foundations of the study have been explained above, and before the methodological foundation will be explained, the concept of values will be conceptualised and the main characteristics of values education will be discussed in this chapter.

3.2.1 Values

There is no single, universal understanding of the concept of *values*. Values remains a vague concept, even though different scholars have discussed and used it. Various definitions of the concept show that 'values are connected both to the human mind and action, and they emerge at the levels of individuals, cultural groups, and societies' (Johansson, Emilson & Puroila, 2018a, p. 14). Therefore, how the concept of values is understood depends on what emphasis each scholar builds upon: the human mind and action, individuals and cultural groups or context-related and universal values. How the concept is understood in this study will be explained in relation to these different emphases.

First, concerning values as connected to the human mind and action, the study builds on a holistic view on values. Values are therefore seen as intertwined in the individual's mind and actions and not just one of these spheres (Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004; Tappan, 2006). In accordance with Johansson et al. (2018a), this means that the study explores what values are communicated in the preschool setting and how they are communicated. The study adopts the definition by Halstead and Taylor (2000), who say that values are 'principles and fundamental convictions which act as general guides to behaviour' and those 'standards by which particular actions are judged to be good or desirable' (p. 169). Although focusing mainly on the mind, they emphasise the interplay of the mind and actions as values are

recognised both in the mind and the action. Early childhood education researchers Emilson and Johansson (2013) state that values are the 'qualities in social actions that teachers and children experience, express and negotiate and which can be framed as positive and negative, good and bad' (p. 57). In agreement with these definitions, Aðalbjarnardóttir (2007) argues that values are the criteria we use to evaluate our thoughts and behaviour and that one's values reflect one's view of life. Finally, values are closely connected to personal integrity and identity with respect to decision-making and the evaluation of beliefs and action (Halstead, 1996).

Secondly, values are understood as emerging at both the individual and group levels, which seems to come out of various definitions on the concept (Johansson et al., 2018a). This means that individuals have adopted personal values that they live according to but also follow the values of the groups they belong to. This is discussed further in next section on values education.

Thirdly, this study takes a pluralistic view concerning whether values are context related or universal. The pluralistic view lies between the objectivist view and the subjectivist view. In this study, values are understood as socially constructed. Furthermore, values are not seen as constant and universal but rather as context-related. Values can therefore emerge differently in different situations (Halstead, 1996; Johansson et al., 2018a).

3.2.2 Values education

In the study, *values education* is understood in accordance with Halstead's and Taylor's (2000) explanation. They say that values education refers to 'a particular emphasis on education in civic and moral values' (p. 169). Values education can refer to any educational practice where children's understanding is supported and challenged (Halstead & Taylor, 2000; Johansson, et al., 2018a; Thornberg, 2008; Zbar, Brown, Bereznicki & Hooper, 2003). This understanding on values education builds on a progressive or constructivist paradigm where the emphasis is on interaction and understanding. Moreover, children are seen as active in the creation of the understanding (Johansson et al., 2018a). Accordingly, Johansson (2018) emphasises that the focus of values education in preschools ought to be on the present lives of the children, not only on their future. This is important because the preschool is a community that builds on values, and children learn values expressed in the preschool practice.

3.2.2.1 Different manifestations of values education

Values education can be both implicit and explicit. *Implicit* values education denotes what has elsewhere been termed the hidden curriculum, namely, that which is embedded in the practice and escapes direct attention (Halstead, 1996). Halstead and Xiao (2010) define values education by way of the hidden curriculum as 'all the learning which occurs through the experience of attending school but which is neither authorised by the school nor intended as a means to specified educational ends' (p. 307). By contrast, *explicit* values education refers to the school's curriculum and the teacher's explicit intentions and educational practice (Halstead, 1996).

Values are central to education, both its theory and its practical activities. The nature of the school and its individual teachers entails key factors influencing the development of children's values. However, the school itself also reflects the values of the society to which it belongs. Moreover, the existence of different groups in the society with divergent values can sometimes lead to conflict regarding which values should be communicated to children. In these cases, the school can 'become the battleground where groups with different value priorities vie for influence and domination' (Halstead, 1996, p. 3). Thus, schools must take societal diversity into account when deciding which values are worthy of focus (Halstead, 1996). This explanation of implicit and explicit values education proved helpful for me to understand and analyse how values were communicated to the preschool children (see Sigurdardottir et al., manuscript).

Preschools are settings where values are expressed and learned through daily practice, often unconsciously, because teachers seem not to be able to conceptualise the values they want to teach children (Johansson, 2018; Johansson et al., 2018b). However, researchers have emphasised the importance of making values education explicit (Jensen & Broström, 2018; Johansson, 2018; Thornberg, 2016). Johansson (2018), for example, points out that preschool teachers need to improve their analytical skills, through various reflective methods, to make the values education more explicit. To develop as values educators, teachers must be prepared for self-reflection.

3.2.2.2 Relevance of values education

The changing world increases the need for more knowledge on values education (Johansson et al., 2018b). According to Toomey (2010), values education at all school levels should aim at increased participation of children and a more positive learning experience. It should also aim to

increase cooperation in the school setting, characterised by trust and safety, permitting teachers to let go of control and actually listen to the children. Values education can occur at any time, but since children are especially responsive at preschool age, this particular time is critical for values education (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/-Eurostat, 2014; Keskin, 2012; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004). Keskin (2012) takes a sociocultural perspective and points out that a child's values acquisition is affected by the context in which they live: what values are important in the family, what values are important in the society and what values are presented in the available media and technologies. According to Keskin, these constitute informal forms of values education. Tappan (2006) says that when looking for answers to questions related to 'what is the right thing to do in this situation?' values education provides cultural tools and resources acquired by living in the culture (Tappan, 2006).

Páll Skúlason (2008), a well-known philosopher in Iceland, discussed values in Icelandic society in his radio speech on Christmas Day 2008, relating his discussion to the economic crisis the nation suffered earlier that same year. According to Skúlason, it is important that the Icelandic nation reconsider and expressly define those values that it believes should dominate society. The fault may lie with the Icelandic educational system, which he argues has put more emphasis on teaching than it has on education. Since 'the preschool constitutes the first level of education in the school system and is intended for children below the compulsory school age' (Lög um leikskóla nr. 90/2008), preschool education is included in Skúlason's concerns about the educational system. He says that teaching focuses on technical things, but education centres on developing critical thinking skills and coming to understand the values that are required by society. Skúlason believes that Icelanders have forgotten that education should be concerned with strengthening the ability to make judgements about values in our lives. What Skúlason is talking about here is the same as what is referred to as values education in this thesis, even though he does not use that term.

Furthermore, Skúlason (2008) argues that the Icelandic nation should focus on strengthening the real values that are the foundations for our mental life and make time to take care for this mental life and the values that are at stake. For example, he argues that we focus too exclusively on the economy, and as a consequence, we seek relaxation from forms of consumption such as games, the gym, TV, and even drugs, but not from the challenging personal communication that requires us to think about what really matters. Skúlason concludes by stating that it is important to

systematically foster the values important to economics, politics and mental life and to make these values support each other rather than one dominating the others. The values variously associated with economics, politics and the mental life are all essential, but they fulfil different needs and therefore cannot be mixed or understood to replace each other. Skúlason wants Icelanders to put their mental values first and only then look at how economics and politics line-up with these values.

3.2.2.3 Teachers as values educators

In accordance with the sociocultural ontology of the study (Säljö, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978), it is believed that the teachers play a crucial role in values education, as Gray (2010) has stated. As teachers collaborate with the society and parents, these three parties together contribute to the child's values education. Brady (2011) agrees and states that one often forgets to take into account the teacher's own personal values and the expression of these values when discussing values education.

Johansson (2018) claims that 'there is no single method to address values education in preschools; rather, values education ought to be regarded as an issue of plurality' (p. 12). Children learn values through dealing with peer conflicts and resistance, and therefore it is important that preschool teachers allow children to solve conflicts themselves (Pálmadóttir, 2018; University of Stavanger on YouTube, n.d.). Furthermore, children learn values from teachers' responses to their learning and behaviour and from the setting's atmosphere, which itself reflects the teachers' values; however, since these values are deeply embedded in the teacher's taken-for-granted perspective of the world, they can be difficult to analyse (Halstead, 1996). According to the progressive/constructivist paradigm, the preschool teacher's role in values education is to challenge and support children's understanding of values. Values education has been described as a difficult and abstract area since values are hard to conceptualise (Johansson et al., 2018a). Moreover, Lovat, Dally, Clement and Toomey (2011) claim that because teachers' education does not focus on values education, they are unprepared to emphasise values education when needed to do so. Similarly, Halstead (1996) argues that teachers are not sufficiently equipped to reflect on the values at play in their work. These concerns apply to primary school teacher education; however, it is worth wondering if they might also apply to preschool teacher education. At least they should be taken as a warning or a lesson from which to learn.

In their research on values education in Swedish preschools, Emilson and Johansson (2009) contend that the values that preschool teachers

choose to focus on in their practice reflect the kind of persons they want the children to become. These findings are especially interesting in relation to recent changes in regard to how children are seen, that is, as beings here and now rather than only 'becomings' in the future and as competent citizens of the society in which they live (see e.g. James & Prout, 1997). According to Emilson and Johansson (2009), it is also important to discuss how values are emphasised in preschools. Preschool teachers may not necessarily focus on values that are dominant in the children's social context. According to this, preschool teachers should endeavour to learn which values are highlighted in children's social context and place emphasis on communicating them to the children.

Teachers employ different communication forms when they communicate values to children. In the terms of Habermas's theory, these can either take the form of communicative or strategic actions: 'how teachers communicate influences and sometimes changes the communicated value' (Emilson & Johansson, 2009, p. 22). Various communication forms generate different values, and depending on the teacher's action, the value that is communicated can in fact contrast with the value the teacher intended to communicate. Emilson and Johansson (2009) note the importance of being aware of the consequences that follow communicative action on one hand and strategic action on the other. Halstead and Xiao (2010) agree and point out that while children learn rules by way of the hidden curriculum, they do not necessarily learn what the teacher intended. For instance, a teacher might believe that her methods of discipline are guiding the children's behaviour and shaping their values, but the children might more likely be learning other values, like tolerance, by reflecting on the teacher's actions.

3.3 Collaborating for professional development – the methodology of collaborative action research

Action research is an umbrella term for different types of research that are conducted with or by practitioners. In action research, practitioners study their own practice and professionalism. The aim of action research is always to improve practice by making changes or even implementing new ideas. Many researchers have defined the methodology of action research, and the key words of these various definitions include 'better understanding, improvements, reform, problem-solving, step-by-step process and modification' (Koshy, 2008, p. 9). Action research is highly personal, as the participants themselves may undergo changes. Though the research is

indeed a form of personal self-evaluation, it also creates the context for critical conversations in which all participants can learn as equals. The aim is always to improve teachers' practice and to create new knowledge for the benefit of teachers and others. The methodology also mobilises against professional stagnation, whereby teachers simply perpetuate old habits. The aim is not to identify certain final results or answers; rather, the findings of action research should always lead to new questions, which makes it a powerful and practical mechanism for improvement (Einarsdóttir, 2013; Gordon, 2008; Guðjónsdóttir, 2011; Guðjónsson, 2011; Koshy, 2008; McNiff, 2010). According to McNiff (2010), action research consists of 'taking action to improve practice' (p. 20), and for Guðjónsson (2011), the aim of action research is to 'struggle against isolation and for collaboration' (p. 3). Koshy (2008) understands action research as 'a continuous learning process in which the researcher learns and also shares the newly generated knowledge with those who may benefit from it' (p. 9).

This study is the type of action research that is called *collaborative action research* (CAR). In CAR, experts from the outside – university professors and their graduate students, for instance – assist teachers with each phase of the action research (Gordon, 2008). CAR has therefore proven to be a good approach to narrow the traditional gap between research and practice for the benefit of both parties (Bruce et al., 2011). The author of this thesis was the researcher in this CAR study, and the participating preschool teachers were the practitioners. By choosing this methodology, I got an opportunity to work in close collaboration with the participating preschool teachers, as a researcher, while they went through the transformation process and the creation of new knowledge in relation to values education. The methodology also gave me access to the preschool teachers' own experiences and perspectives on the process they went through during the action research since one of the main advantages of CAR is the learning and the professional development that happens through the collaboration (Kemmis et al., 2014).

It is worth explaining how professional development is understood in the study. Richter, Kunter, Klusmann, Lüdtke and Baumert (2011) define professional development as the 'uptake of formal and informal learning opportunities that deepen and extend teachers' competence, including knowledge, beliefs, motivation and self-regulatory skills' (p. 116). They emphasise that it should be compulsory for teachers to complete a minimum of training hours to develop their professionalism. Furthermore, the council for the professional development of teachers in Iceland (is. fagráð um starfsþróun kennara) (Starfsþróun kennara. Vefur samstarfsráðs

um starfsþróun kennara og skólastjórnenda, n.d.), emphasises the practical level and states that the professional development of teachers at all school levels is highly related to their daily practice, with clear goals. The council states that professional development often happens in the professional learning community and, by that, promotes more job satisfaction, supports successful work and decreases the likelihood of teacher burnout and turnover. The term 'learning community' refers to a group of teachers who learn together and from each other, where the aim is to have mutual understanding and professional language (Sigurðardóttir, 2013). Professional language is 'language that helps professionals reflect on their practice and make predictions and theoretical descriptions and explanations regarding their practice' (Thornberg, 2016, p. 244).

Furthermore, I had an opportunity to reflect deeply on my role as a researcher in the CAR and how it was created and developed through the process, which was one of the aims of this study. Kemmis et al. (2014) talk about critical participatory action research and state that it 'offers an opportunity to create forums in which people can join one another as co-participants in the struggle to remake the practice' (p. 20), and this can be transferred to collaborative action research such as this study. They also emphasise the social learning that happens through the collaboration. Moreover, in CAR, research and action are integrated in several ways: problems are integrated with problem-solving, the researcher is also the action-taker and, finally, research and actions take place in the same context. Collaborative action research also integrates reflection and action in the sense that teachers are invited to reflect on each phase of the research (Gordon, 2008). Researchers have employed various terms to describe methodologies similar to collaborative action research. Formosinho and Formosinho (2012) have, for example, used the terms *praxeology* and *praxeological research* describing a similar methodology. Furthermore, Sandberg and Wallo (2013) have employed the term *interactive research* for a research approach similar to CAR.

Mills (2007) has noted that teachers in the field are often sceptical of research and feel that research fails to connect to practice and to the real-life experiences of teachers and students. Furthermore, Curry (2012) has criticised traditional educational research, pointing out that the benefits are often one-way; that is, the participating teachers do not benefit from the research, only the researcher from outside the school does. In such cases, the teachers can be regarded as victims and thus often express anger and resentment towards the researchers, he says. Curry (2012) believes that the answer can be a close collaboration between the researchers and the

participants and the sharing of accounts of this collaboration, leading to a mutually beneficial relationship, for example through CAR. This has been the case in this study. Gordon (2008) agrees and claims that CAR 'can empower educators, transform school cultures, and most importantly, dramatically improve student learning' (p. 1). In this study, a great emphasis was put on collaboration between researcher and practitioners in order to work on the professional development of the preschool teachers and by that improve their knowledge and skills as values educators.

3.3.1 Evolvement of action research

Discussions on and critiques of action research over recent years have focused mainly on the importance of further developing the methodology. Kemmis (2006), for example, has raised the issue that the development of educational action research is not always concerned with educational critique. He argues that action research should be critical and transformative and that the researcher should be willing to tell unwelcome truths, however uncomfortable they may for others. Furthermore, Kemmis says that action research should contribute to the evolution of the professional practice rather than simply protect old practices from changing times (Kemmis, 2010). The aim of such research, he claims, should be to achieve a better world, not simply to achieve mere knowledge of the world. He says:

> In my view, this 'better world' is simply a world in which each person can be happy in the sense that they have lived their life wisely and well, in a community with others who also aim, despite our diversity and differences, to live wisely and well (Kemmis, 2010, p. 419).

Pascal and Bertram (2012), also have raised crucial questions regarding action research and suggested that, in actuality, there is often a lack of action and reflection in educational action research. They argue that research should be 'immersed within a much more astute awareness about power (politics) and a sharpened focus on values (ethics) in all of our thinking and actions' (p. 480). By emphasising power and ethics in research, they hope to be more effective in the early education context and craft an approach that leads to more open, inclusive, democratic research in pursuit of deeper questions regarding practice (Pascal & Bertram, 2012).

The aim of one of the sub-studies, presented in paper III, was to deepen understanding on how preschool teachers learned and developed

professionally by participating in collaborative action research and how they experienced the participation. Through the process of action research, changes were supported by implementing new ways of thinking and reflecting. Kemmis's (2006, 2010) ideas about being more critical and dealing with the 'unwelcome truth' provided inspiration through the process of this study. His ideas supported the researcher in challenging the practitioners, which encouraged their learning and professional development.

4 Previous studies: What former explorers saw

In this chapter I will review the existing research associated with this study. First, I will discuss research in the field of values education, especially in early childhood settings. Some important findings from research on values education in primary schools will also be discussed as well as what former studies tell us about the teacher's role in values education. Second, the chapter focuses on findings from action research, especially from collaborative action research, and what studies have shown to be the main advantages and challenges collaborating.

4.1 Previous research on values education in early childhood education

Besides the study presented here, no research has been conducted on values education in Icelandic preschools. Furthermore, the Nordic ValuEd project is one of the first research projects in the field of values education in early childhood education. Previous knowledge on values education in preschools is therefore mostly related to the Nordic project that this study is part of in addition to a few other studies conducted in Nordic preschools (Values Education in Nordic Preschools, n.d.). One study from the project showed that in the national curricula in the Nordic countries, values related to social skills are emphasised over academic skills (Einarsdottir et al., 2015). Other recent studies show that participation and social skills are emphasised in the Nordic preschool practice (Emilson & Johansson, 2013; Fugelsnes, Röthle & Johansson, 2013; Juutinen & Viljamaa, 2016; Puroila & Haho, 2017; Williams, Sheridan, Harju-Luukkainen & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2015). Individual rights also seem to be emphasised in Nordic preschools; however, there is often tension between individual rights and collective rules (Johansson et al., 2016). Further findings show that disciplinary values are communicated in Nordic preschool settings (Emilson & Johansson, 2009; Fugelsnes et al., 2013), and in Finnish preschools rules were seen as important for managing the complex preschool context and for maintaining order (Puroila & Haho, 2017). In Swedish preschools, discipline was emphasised as a desirable value to teach children as well as care and democracy (Emilson & Johansson, 2009).

The sub-studies in the Nordic research project, showed that values education in preschools is more implicit than explicit (see e.g. Johansson,

2018; Juutinen & Viljamaa, 2016). However, as Johansson (2018) points out, it is important to make values education more explicit and conscious, otherwise, 'values education in the early years runs the risk of being built on coincidences' (p. 11). Preschool teachers seem to find it difficult to verbalise and identify values on the conceptual level, and therefore, Puroila et al. (2016) say it is important to create forums for discussions about daily practices in preschool settings. Others have also concluded that there is a need for more professional language through which teachers can discuss how their values are expressed in teaching. This may enable teachers to become more explicit in how they work with values in preschool programmes. Through professional discussions, preschool teachers can become more conscious and elaborative in their language as values educators (Juutinen & Viljamaa, 2016; Thornberg, 2016).

4.1.1 Research on values education in primary schools

Research on values education seems to be more common in primary schools than in preschools. Thornberg and Oğuz (2013), for instance, studied primary school teachers' perspectives on values education in Sweden and Turkey and found that the teachers focused mainly on the treatment of others, including the values of respect and care, self-responsibility, following rules, self-discipline and self-control. Thornberg (2008) achieved similar findings in an earlier study in Sweden in which he examined primary school teachers' perceptions of values education practice. The teachers in that case focused primarily on values related to behaviour, or how to behave, and on values related to personality, or how to be. The teachers wanted to instruct their students in proper behaviour.

Aðalbjarnardóttir (2007) conducted research with 15 teachers in Icelandic primary schools, in which the aim was to promote students' respect for themselves and others and to promote the care of others. The findings clearly demonstrated that students who were encouraged to think about communication with their classmates were more likely to view things from others' perspectives, to discuss rather than argue and to ask rather than command. However, other research gives reason to question the effectiveness of values education. For example, Keskin (2012) found that some values such as self-confidence and self-regulation were not correctly interpreted by elementary school students, although more eighth graders seemed to understand them than sixth graders. Other values isolated by Keskin, including benevolence, good health and responsibility, were interpreted correctly by the students.

4.1.2 Research on the teachers' role in values education

It seems that professional knowledge regarding values education is lacking among teachers because, as studies have shown, when asked about their approaches or methods, teachers cannot relate their practice to any theories or research in the field (Johansson, 2018; Thornberg, 2008; Thornberg & Oğuz, 2013). Thornberg and Oğuz (2013) partly explain this phenomenon by pointing to a lack of teacher preparation in values education. Other research has similarly noted this lack in teaching preparation and even suggested that universities should attempt to reconceive those assumptions and foundational theories that underpin teacher education. In short, teacher candidates need education about values and more training and practice (Lovat, et al., 2011; Oğuz, 2012). According to Dasoo (2010), who has studied values education in South Africa schools, 'Teachers that are guided to think about values and to develop a language of values education are likely to be more aware of their role as caregivers and models of care' (p. 373). Research also indicates that undertaking a values programme can actually aid the teacher in his or her role as an educator. Other research findings have demonstrated that teachers find it uniquely difficult to articulate their own practice in relation to values education and that they often refer to 'common sense' or 'the making of wise decisions guided by social norms' (Thornberg & Oğuz, 2013, p. 53). Indeed, because they lacked sufficient information themselves about values, teacher candidates in Oğuz´s (2012) study could not say how values are gained in primary and secondary schools. Similarly, preschool teachers in Johansson's (2018) study could not conceptualise the values they wanted to communicate to the children.

Research findings from primary schools in general indicate that the main method that teachers use to mediate values is to be a good role model in everyday interaction with and reactions to students and to intervene strategically when necessary (Mergler & Spooner-Lane, 2012; Thornberg, 2008; Thornberg & Oğuz, 2013). It seems that values education is often reactive and unplanned. It is embedded in everyday school life with a focus on students' everyday behaviour and performed mostly unconsciously or as part of the informal curriculum. Values education seems to be fused with the maintaining of order in the class, and the focus is often on getting students to behave appropriately (Mergler & Spooner-Lane, 2012; Thornberg, 2008; Thornberg & Oğuz, 2013).

Primary school teachers in an Australian study mentioned the ability to respond sensitively and compassionately to students' behaviour and

reflective practice as significant traits. Excellent questioning and listening skills were also deemed important in the case of values education as was the teacher's ability to recognise and respond to student diversity. Finally, the teachers stressed the importance of simple time and experience (Mergler & Spooner-Lane, 2012). Research on primary schools in Australia, Sweden and Turkey has shown that teachers seem to focus mostly on instructing their students regarding proper behaviour when it comes to values education (Lovat et al., 2011; Mergler & Spooner-Lane, 2012; Oğus, 2012; Thornberg, 2008; Thornberg & Oğus 2013). Even though these studies apply to primary schools, they can imply how values education might be in preschools.

Emilson and Johansson (2009) focused on how values are communicated in preschool settings. They found that caring values were being communicated both communicatively and strategically. Democratic values, however, were based solely on communicative action, and they noted that if the preschool teacher attempted to communicate democratic values strategically, a different and contrasting value was in effect communicated. Moreover, democratic values offered opportunities for specific action and gave the child a chance to engage on his/her own terms. Disciplinary value was always communicated strategically in such a way that the preschool teacher's goals led the actions. The disciplinary value was in evidence, for example, when the children were instructed to do as they were told, without question or negotiation. The value of obeying adults is derived wholly from the teacher's perspective in this situation and may be used to maintain control. There is no room for negotiation, and objections are ineffective.

Emilson and Johansson (2013) noticed that in communicating with children the teachers used communicative action most of the time but would sometimes employ strategic action. According to Emilson and Johansson, the preschool teachers used strategic action when they wanted to maintain control over the communication, namely, in cases of disciplinary values education.

Aðalbjarnardóttir's (2007) findings reveal that the teacher himself or herself is a crucial factor when it comes to values education. Teachers that were considered to be a good teacher were respectful, reasonable and caring in their communications with students. Furthermore, Einarsdóttir's and Pálmadóttir's (2018) study shows that the youngest preschool children wanted the teachers to see them as competent individuals. Their findings also showed that the children valued the preschool teachers' reactions to

their play and that the children found it important to be able to enjoy support from the preschool teachers if there were conflicts in their play situation.

4.2 Previous research on action research

The prevalence of action research in educational research has been growing rapidly in recent years. Dick (2009) suggests that more action research studies can be expected in the near future as well as even more methodological flexibility and variety in purpose. Such increased interest might be attributable to teachers finding action research more interesting than educational research that is simply conducted by university researchers alone. Furthermore, in action research, the teachers have the opportunity to establish the methods themselves, and their own participation has meaning in terms of their own professional development.

Action research projects undertaken at all school levels in Iceland have given a successful result. In these cases, teachers reported developing themselves professionally and greatly impacting students' learning (see for example Einarsdóttir, 2013; Einarsdóttir & Garðarsdóttir, 2013; Jónsson, 2008). Teachers in Iceland have also reported that participation in CAR gave them opportunities to develop their own practical theory. They state that the participation was a challenge that involved reflection and evaluation. Collaboration with other teachers and with external researchers proved to be valuable for teachers' professional development. Finally, findings have shown that CAR proved to be effective for professional development for the entire school's practice even though the teachers found it difficult to find time for collaboration both with teachers inside the school and with teachers or researchers outside the school (Eiðsdóttir, 2013; Einarsdóttir, 2014; Norðdahl & Eiðsdóttir, 2013; Sigurðardóttir, 2013).

Research from other countries has also demonstrated that CAR supports teachers' professional development. Some preschool teachers have, for example, mentioned that participation in CAR strengthened their professional identity, their sense of professional competence and their personal self-worth (Araújo, 2012; Banegas, Pavese, Velázquez & Vélez, 2013; Webb & Scoular, 2013).

Research findings show that collaboration and teamwork are crucial factors for successful professional development. Furthermore, existing studies display the signal importance of reflections and discussions with other teachers and researchers. For example, the teachers in Webb and Scoular's (2013) research reported that meetings and lively conversations

sustained their collaboration and that over time their own reflections developed as their discussions became more complex (Ado, 2013; Araújo, 2012; Banegas et al., 2013; Goodnough, 2010; Walton, 2011; Webb & Scoular, 2013). The sub-studies in the ValuEd project show the importance of reflections and discussions for professional development, which is one of the main emphases in CAR. Moreover, many of these studies show that narratives have proven to be an effective method for reflection (Einarsdottir & Pálmadóttir, 2018; Johansson & Röthle, 2018; Juutinen & Viljamaa, 2016; Puroila, Estola, Juutinen & Viljamaa, 2018).

Existing research has also demonstrated a substantial evolution in the children's wellbeing and involvement as a result of CAR. The methodology has the potential to motivate the learning and development of students as well as promoting teachers' professional development (Araújo, 2012; Banegas et al., 2013).

The main challenge that previous research on CAR has demonstrated is educators to find time to conduct the action research and to make it a part of the daily practice and internalise this method of working (Gillberg, 2011; Postholm, 2009; Rönnerman & Salo. 2011). Postholm (2009), for instance, notes that teachers have to constantly ask themselves how they can improve their work if action research is to be professionally useful. Educators have even worried that the time spent on the action research, would take time from their time with the children (Angelide, Georgiou & Kyriakous, 2008). Further results have shown that teachers employ different approaches to action research (Cain & Harris, 2013). Indeed, teachers have mentioned the phenomenon of learning from others with different strengths as one of the most effective factors in collaborative action research (Webb & Scoular, 2013), however, it can be challenging to find time for such collaboration (Eiðsdóttir, 2013; Einarsdóttir, 2014; Norðdahl & Eiðsdóttir, 2013; Sigurðardóttir, 2013). Another challenge, often faced in CAR is related to the process itself, since it is not a linear process. That often makes the participating educators uncertain about the process and if they are doing things correctly (McNiff, 2010; 2013). The third challenge that previous CAR studies have identified is when the study is not conducted in the school as a whole. Educators find it challenging to influence non-participating collagues to make the project effective for the whole school community (Þorgeirsdóttir, 2016).

Other research has similarly suggested that both parties – the teachers in the schools and university researchers – gain in collaboration. The teachers report that they appreciate the attention their work gets from the

university as much as the advice about conducting research, and the university researchers say they gain more insight into teachers' practice and the capacities of teachers as researchers (Bruce et al., 2011). There is a lack of studies on researcher's role in CAR. However, there have been useful studies on the researcher's role in other studies over the past decades. For example, in ethnography (see for example Myerhoff, 1980 and Peshkin, 1988). These studies illustrate how emotional the relationship with the participants can be. The researcher's role in CAR can however be especially challenging because of close collaboration with participants who also are co-researchers.

The advantages and challenges of the CAR methodology are discussed further in the paper presenting study III (see Sigurdardottir & Einarsdottir, 2018).

4.3 Summary of existing knowledge on the issue under study

In summary, social skills seem to be emphasised over academic skills both in Nordic preschool curriculums and in the practice (Einardottir et al., 2015; Emilson & Johansson, 2013; Fugelsnes, Röthle & Johansson, 2013; Juutinen & Viljamaa, 2016; Puroila & Haho, 2017; Williams, Sheridan, Harju-Luukkainen & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2015). Discipline and rules are recognised in the preschool practice as important to keep control in the setting even though such emphasis is not in the curriculums (Emilson & Johansson, 2009; Fugelsnes et al., 2013; Puroila & Haho, 2017). Furthermore, there seem to be conflicts between individual and collective rights in the preschool settings (Johansson et al., 2016).

Secondly, previous research shows that values education is more implicit than explicit (Johansson, 2018; Juutinen & Viljamaa, 2016), but researchers have emphasised the importance of making values education rather explicit because it would be more effective (Johansson, 2018; Thornberg, 2016). This can be done by giving preschool teachers time and a forum for discussions and reflections, which would support them in creating mutual understanding and professional language (Puroila et al., 2016; Thornberg, 2016).

Thirdly, what previous researchers have shown is that teachers seem to lack knowledge on values education and that the focus in primary schools often seems to be on instructions to change students' behaviour (Thornberg, 2008; Thornberg & Oğuz, 2013). However, students want teachers to be respectful, reasonable and caring (Aðalbjarnadóttir, 2007),

and preschool children want to be able to get support from their teachers when they need it (Einarsdóttir & Pálmadóttir, 2018).

As mentioned, when working with values education, it is important for teachers to have time for reflection and discussion about the practice. Therefore, the CAR methodology is well-suited to working with values education. Previous research shows that the methodology has proven to be good for work on professional development (see for example Araújo, 2012; Benegas et al., 2013; Eiðsdóttir, 2013; Sigurðardóttir, 2013). Collaboration seems to be a crucial factor for successful outcomes, where reflections and discussions are the most important factors (see e.g. Araújo, 2012; Benegas et al., 2013). Furthermore, previous research shows that action research can have a positive effect on children's wellbeing and learning (Araújo, 2012; Benegas et al., 2013).

5 Process of the study: The journey

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the design and the process of the study. I begin by briefly introducing the field of the study and the participating preschool teachers. Next I discuss my own role as a researcher in the process. Thereafter, the process is described in detail, followed by an explanation of the analysis process of the research material. Finally, ethical issues and the limitations of the study will be discussed. The chapter will give insight into and an understanding of the process and how the findings were determined.

5.1 Context and participants

The study was conducted in one preschool in Iceland. I gave the preschool the pseudonym *Hill Park* in the process. Hill Park was chosen as the participating preschool after a recommendation from the City of Reykjavík preschool authorities. The criteria behind the selection was based on the high rate of preschool teachers employed in the preschool, staff stability, the fact that the preschool was not participating in other projects concurrent with this one and that the preschool teachers were interested in participating in the action research to study their own work in relation to values education and to develop their profession.

There are 51 children at Hill Park divided into three different units. The preschool teachers and the children from two of these three units participated in the study in addition to the preschool director. In the first group, which I call *Butterflies* in this study, are 21 children, aged 5 to 6, and in the second group, called *Flowers*, are 16 children, aged 3 to 4. Altogether, this includes 7 preschool teachers and 37 children, ages 3 to 6. The units are explained in table 2.

Table 2. Units at the preschool

	Beetles	**Flowers***	**Butterflies***
Number of children	14	**16**	**21**
Age of children	2-3 years	**3-4 years**	**5-6 years**

*Participating groups

The children did not participate directly in the action research but were part of the situation that the research material was gathered from. Details about the participating preschool teachers are displayed in Table 3. Seven preschool teachers participated in the study, and, to prevent traceability, all seven individuals have been given female pseudonyms. All earned a bachelor's degree as preschool teachers (before the law mandating master degree was legalised) in addition to one who has a master's degree in early childhood education. The years of employment represent the total length of time each participant had worked in preschools at the commencement of the research (some had worked for a few years elsewhere before obtaining their education as preschool teachers), and the last column in Table 3 shows the number of years each preschool teacher had worked at Hill Park. The preschool director is the head teacher for the whole preschool, and the pedagogical leaders are head teachers for the groups of children and are responsible for professional practice in that group.

Table 3. Participants in the research.

Name	Education	Position	Years of employment	At Hill Park
Anna	B.Ed.	Preschool director	19 ½	10
Sara	B. Ed.	Pedagogical leader and assistant director	20	5 ½
Helga	B. Ed.	Preschool teacher	8	8
Elín	M. Ed.	Preschool teacher	25	7
Karen	B. Ed.	Pedagogical leader	14	13
Íris	B. Ed.	Preschool teacher	15	5
Lísa	B. Ed.	Special teacher and preschool teacher	13	12

5.1.1 My role as a researcher

Through the whole research process, I collaborated closely with the seven preschool teachers who participated in the action research. I found out soon that my role as a researcher had no formal instructions to follow. Like the whole action research process, my role as a researcher in the collaboration was constructed during the process. To continue with Herr and Anderson's (2005) metaphor stating that the process of action research is like 'designing the plane while flying it' (p. 69), I could say that I was a pilot who learned to fly the plane during the flight. I began approaching my

role by emphasising the creation of close relationship with the participating preschool teachers, by gaining trust in the setting. I also emphasised to remain patient, open, creative and responsive, as Postholm and Skrövset (2013) recommended. Furthermore, I followed their advice about being confident and honest and about possessing a high degree of self-respect. However, these expectations are complex, and not always easy to fulfil, as they require deep self-reflection on part of the researcher. I needed to explore my identity as a researcher and reflect on my actions to evaluate if I followed the expectations I had read about in the literature and my own expectations. Finally, I emphasised allowing the research to be process-driven while also being aware that there would likely be some unexpected events that we would need to deal with, as Postholm and Skrövset (2013) pointed out. Later in the process, when I started to reflect more deeply on my role as a researcher, I realised that the collaboration between me and the preschool teachers could be defined as a so-called *third space* (Arhar, et al., 2013; Sigurdardottir & Puroila, 2018). To understand my role as a researcher even better, I used a model from Ellström (2007; Sandberg & Wallo, 2013) concerning the relationship between researcher and practitioners in collaborative action research (CAR). Sandberg and Wallo (2013) conceive this relationship as an interaction of two activity systems, a research system and a practice system. However, after reflecting on my role and the collaboration I had with the preschool teachers, I added the concept of the third space from Arhar and colleagues (2013) to Elström's model. I found the concept suitable to describe my experience and to help me to understand the collaboration better and how and where it was constructed through the process (Sigurdardottir & Puroila, 2018). The third space is a common space where two parties meet, and bridges are built between them. Therefore, action research can be understood as happening in each system, on one hand the practice system and on the other hand the research system. The third space is where these two systems meet and collaborate. Figure 5 illustrates my understanding of the collaboration between me and the preschool teachers.

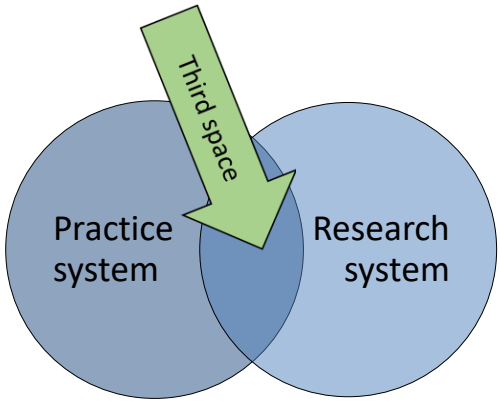

Figure 5. Practitioners and researcher meet and collaborate in the third space.

In Ellström's model, the research system is 'driven by the researcher's problem formulations, theories, data collection and analysis' (Sandberg & Wallo, 2013, p. 198). The practice system, by contrast, is 'driven by the need to find knowledge and methods for solving problems in the organization' (Sandberg & Wallo, 2013, p. 198). In this study, I place myself in the research system, and the preschool teachers belong to the practice system. Thus, my focus was on creating new knowledge through problem formulation concerning values education in the setting and the process of action research in order to improve practice. I focused on theories that could be used to explain the topic under study as well as the research material and the analytical approaches. The preschool teachers' focus, on the other hand, was more related to their practice in the preschool; to gain knowledge on the topic of values education and to find methods to solve problems and by that improve the practice. It is our experience that through our collaboration during the action research, we managed to create a changing process in the third space by intertwine our focuses and aims (Sandberg & Wallo, 2013; Sigurdardottir & Einarsdottir, 2018; Sigurdardottir & Puroila, 2018).

5.2 The process of the study

In Figure 6 I have summarised the research process of the study. The process of action research is often summarised and presented graphically or divided into phases. Nevertheless, it is important that each research

team develop their own plan rather than rely on a plan that others have devised (Koshy, 2010; MacNaughton & Huges, 2009; McNiff, 2010). I describe the research process of this action research as a circle, even though the reality showed that we proceeded back and forth. The process can be described as a zig-zag process rather than a linear process. It was sometimes difficult to distinguish between different phases, but both I and the preschool teachers found a graphic representation very helpful in tracking our general movement through the research process. Below I discuss the process in relation to Figure 6.

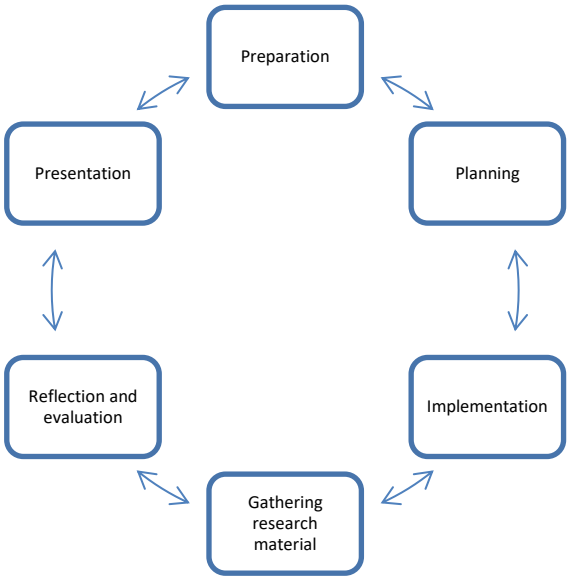

Figure 6. Process of the study.

5.2.1 Preparation

At the preparation phase, I got acquainted with the theoretical frame for the project, the underpinning methodology and some existing knowledge on values education. The methodology of action research and the ideology behind values education was introduced to the seven preschool teachers at this stage. Finally, meetings for the next term were planned, and the responsibilities of each party were discussed.

The preparation period also included the preschool teachers deciding what focus they wanted to take in the research, as MacNaughton and Hughes (2009) mention as a starting point in the action research process. The topic of values education had already been chosen – and the preschool teachers knew that before deciding to participate – but there remained the

issues of what values are and which value or values to focus on. After reflecting on their practice for few weeks, the preschool teachers at Hill Park decided to concentrate on communicating three values to the children: *care*, *respect* and *discipline*. They found that these three values were important to communicate to the children because they would make them socially stronger.

5.2.2 Planning

Herr and Anderson (2005) explain how the process of action research is hardly planned since it develops while it is conducted, and, as mentioned, they use the metaphor of 'designing the plane while flying it' (p. 69). This was the case with the process in this action research. I planned some parts of the project, roughly, in advance, in collaboration with the preschool teachers at Hill Park. A more detailed plan was constructed while conducting the research, and this was built on what was needed for the further professional development of the preschool teachers, both collectively and individually. The process of action research typically begins with the participants reflecting on their practice and asking the question, 'How can I improve my work?' (Herr & Anderson, 2005; McNiff, 2010). In this study, a considerable length of time was spent on clarifying certain key concepts. Therefore, a strong emphasis was put on gaining a mutual understanding on the issue of values education in order to develop a mutual professional language, as Thornberg (2016) states being important when working with values education. During the planning phase I visited Hill Park regularly, once or twice every week. At first, my visits were short, but after I became acquainted with the preschool teachers at Hill Park and they got used to my presence in the unit, my visits became longer. I stayed for about 2–4 hours each visit. The preschool teachers undertook an enormous amount of reflection during this phase, and it was extraordinarily important for the forthcoming phases.

Two seminars were held during the planning period, where we reflected on the issues of values and values education, on the practice at Hill Park and on how the action research was proceeding. The first interviews were also conducted in the planning period to obtain information regarding the ideas the teachers had about values in general, about the chosen values specifically, about their own role in values education and how they planned to work with values education in practice. I interviewed the preschool teachers in two small groups and the director individually and used an interview guide common to all the five countries in the Nordic project (see Appendix A). In addition, we had one inspiration day that brought together the participants from both Icelandic preschools that participated in the Nordic project. We reflected upon the project and listened to two

presentations about values and values education. This was followed by group discussions and then educators from each preschool got time to work on their own project.

5.2.3 Implementation

At the implementation phase, the preschool teachers began to work according to their plans and aims. They implemented changes that they had agreed on after reflecting on the practice and tested new ways of achieving their goals. The preschool teachers' aim was to better communicate the values they had chosen to focus on and better understand their role as values educators. They soon found out that the key to this was to focus on how they, themselves, worked with the children. They found out that being a good role model was important to communicate values to the children, and therefore they reflected constantly on how they acted in the setting. Discussing values with the children was also seen as important as was using words for the values that the children would understand. Furthermore, guidance and closeness were found to be important to communicate values, and finally, sometimes it was necessary to direct the children towards better behaviour (see Sigurdardottir & Einarsdottir, 2016).

5.2.4 Research material

Research material was gathered throughout the entire research process: before, during and after the implementation. The preschool teachers kept research diaries (explained below), but, in accordance with their wishes, other research material was gathered by me, the researcher. I thoroughly documented the process and the changes undertaken by the preschool teachers. This was important as evidence demonstrating the nature of the new knowledge that was generated and the changes made. I emphasised capturing the preschool teachers' experiences of the process and their perspectives on the topic at issue.

The main focus when gathering the research material was on the preschool teachers' professional development. The methods are demonstrated graphically in Figure 7. In the figure I have divided them in accordance with Habermas's different levels to clarify the rationale behind each method. The yellow boxes represent the system-level research material that was gathered, which were policy documents. The green boxes show the life-world-level research material, and the blue boxes show material from the communicative level.

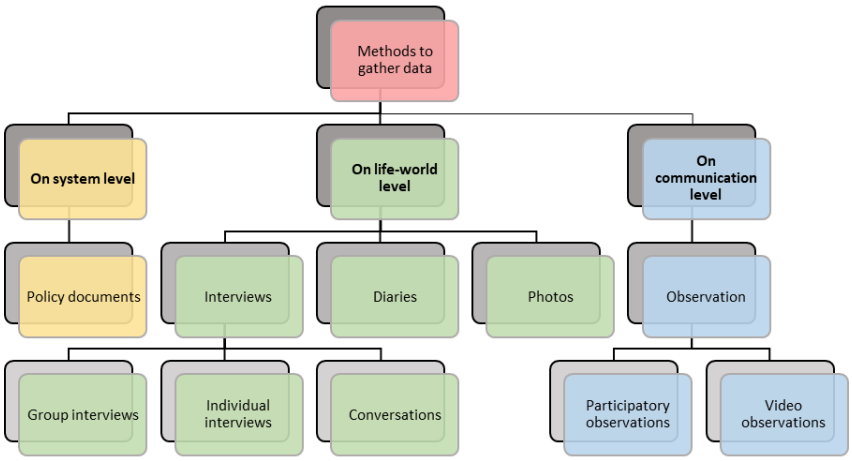

Figure 7. Methods for gathering research material in relations to levels in Habermas' theory.

5.2.4.1 Research material gathered on the system level

Even though my focus was not on how the broader social contexts frame values education – which is part of what is called the system perspective in Habermas's theory, where power and money are the steering media (Edgar, 2006; Heath, 2011; Ingram, 2010; Kemmis, 2011) – I found it important to get to know these as background.

Policy documents included the Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Preschools (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011), the Preschool Act (Lög um leikskóla nr. 90/2008) and Hill Park's Curriculum Guide (Ingvadóttir, 2009). As Bogdan and Biklen (2007) point out, these documents offered me access to the 'official perspective' on how values education is presented and discussed. Leaders in the Nordic project conducted a study on how values emerge in the Nordic National Curriculums (Einarsdottir et al., 2015), and that study I used as background concerning the system perspective in this study.

5.2.4.2 Research material gathered on the life-world level

The focus of the study was related to Habermas's life-world perspective, namely, on the preschool teachers' professional development in relation to values education. The life-world level gave an opportunity to explore the preschool teachers' perspectives on values and values education in addition to exploring how they communicated values to the children. Furthermore,

at this level knowledge about the process of action research was gained. The methods for gathering this research material consisted of the following:

Interviews provided me useful information about the research topic in the preschool teachers' own words through descriptions of their activities, experiences and opinions. The preschool teachers were interviewed formally at the beginning of the action research and at the end of it. The interviews were open-ended, but the topics of focus were clear, namely, values education and the methodology of action research. The preschool teachers were asked how they understood the concept of values and how they understood the three values they had chosen to focus on in the action research. They were also asked about how they saw their own role as values educators. An interview guide common to all the five countries in the Nordic project was used in these interviews (see Appendix A). I interviewed the preschool teachers in two focus groups and the preschool director individually since her status in the group could have affected other practitioners. Furthermore, her perspective may operate on another level, as she does not work 'on the floor'. In certain cases, interviews were not necessarily distinguished from other research activities but instead took the form of informal conversations. Indeed, I was able to access important information simply by talking to the preschool teachers about what was happening at any particular time. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by me.

Diaries: I encouraged the preschool teachers to keep diaries throughout the research process. These are similar to what Kennedy-Lewis (2012) has called self-narratives, a concept I started to use at the final steps when writing about my own role in the fourth paper. The diary writings were organised personal writings in which the preschool teachers recorded information regarding when, where, what, who, why and how; reflected upon certain issues; preserved detailed descriptions of a certain action and wrote short narratives. I encouraged them to try to focus on their own learning in their writings. Some of the participants needed support to begin to write in their diary, and therefore I encouraged them to start by focusing on *what they did* and *what they learned*. Moreover, I gave the practitioners a memo note that they could put in their diary as a reminder about how to write in the diary (see Appendix B). This proved to be a good support for those who initially had had a hard time writing. Indeed, it can be relatively easy to describe what happened but more difficult to describe the learning that took place. The diaries were good for keeping track of the process, and they showed developments in thinking regarding how the preschool teachers made decisions in the research process. Furthermore, as some

researchers have discussed, the diaries were important research material and will assist the eventual audience in better understanding how the findings were arrived at (Guðjónsdóttir, 2011; Kennedy-Lewis, 2012; McNiff, 2013; McNiff & Whitehead, 2005). To prevent the practitioners from 'holding back' in their writings, they were not obligated to hand their diaries in as research material at the end of the process. At the end of the period, four out of seven practitioners handed in their diaries for me to use as research material.

As a researcher, I also maintained a diary throughout the process. In my diary, I wrote my thoughts about the process. I reflected on my communication and relationship with the practitioners, my role in the study and my thoughts about how the action research was going. Therefore, my writing was personal where I reflected on my work, the preschool teachers' work and the learning and transformation that we went through. My writing was also important documentation of the action research process because I wrote down everything that was done in the action research and reflected on it.

Photos: I took several photos throughout the research process. I had no special criteria for these photos except to capture the nature of the process. Although photos can provide information about every level of Habermas's theory, they are perhaps most useful in terms of the life-world, that is, the everyday social world in the preschool (Edgar, 2006; Finlayson, 2005). The photos were helpful for reflecting on the process. They were an important addition in documenting the process we went through, and finally, they were helpful when presenting the process and the findings to others.

5.2.4.3 Research material gathered on the communication level

The study also focused on how values were communicated in relation to the communication level in Habermas's theory.

Observations were used to examine how the preschool teachers communicated the values they had chosen to focus on to the children. I conducted observations throughout the entire research process and in several different situations. I kept field notes during and after each observation to record what I heard, saw and experienced in the field, as Bogdan and Biklen (2007) recommend. In addition, I made *video recordings* to use as research material. In accordance with Curry's (2012) ideas, the recordings were also used as documents for the preschool teachers to watch, discuss and evaluate, with the purpose of further developing their own practice. In two seminars we watched and reflected on short video

clips from different situations that I had chosen from the research material. These were highly fruitful reflections and made the practitioners see their practice from a new perspective. The preschool teachers found the method very effective. Namely, they believed that learning to use videos to reflect on their own practice was one of the most valuable benefits they got from participating in the action research. In these cases, the videos were used as a stimulation for reflection on the practice, rather than as a research material.

I recorded 68 videos, which lasted for nine hours and 17 minutes in total. I recorded these videos in play-time situations, at meal time, at circle time and in the cloakroom when the children were going out or coming in from the playground. The recordings were conducted during the process of the study and all preschool teachers who participated in the study, were recorded in their practice.

5.2.5 Reflection and evaluation

The preschool teachers reflected and evaluated in collaboration with me at all phases of the action research – before, during and after implementation. They constantly asked themselves whether they were truly having the intended impact on their own practice. At the end, the preschool teachers reflected on and evaluated their practice in relation to their experience of the participation. They used these reflections to further develop the preschool practices, as Einarsdóttir (2013) and Gordon (2008) recommend. These reflections were used to create new knowledge about the process of action research.

In addition, the members of the Icelandic research team met at least once a month to reflect on and evaluate the process. We reflected on our experiences as researchers, on the work of the preschool teachers and on what should constitute our next steps. The other doctoral student (who collaborated with the other Icelandic preschool) and I frequently discussed our roles as researchers and our respective studies beyond even these monthly meetings. I saw the three members on the Icelandic research team as my *critical friends.* McNiff (2010) discusses the importance of having a critical friend during the action research process to have someone to talk to about the research and to view the process in a new light.

5.2.6 Presentation

Presentation constitutes an exceedingly important part of all research in mediating the new knowledge that has been created to other professionals,

and, by that, it makes the research more effective in the broader school community (Einarsdóttir, 2012; MacNaughton & Hughes, 2009). At this phase, the preschool teachers and I drew conclusions from the research material and shared our results with others in the preschool profession so that the findings would affect additional settings. The findings of this study constitute important new knowledge in the field of early education.

The study has been presented at national as well as international conferences several times during the research period by me and the preschool teachers who participated in the study. The presentations were especially valuable for the preschool teachers and an important part of their professional development; it was valuable for them to be able present what they had done and how they had transformed professionally.

5.3 Analysis of research material

Given the sheer amount of research material gathered, the analysis is perhaps the most difficult part of action research. MacNaughton and Hughes (2009) say that the aim of the analysis process is to search for an explanation and understanding of the issue under study. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the research material in this study. This means that the analysis process involved organising and sifting the research material and looking for any patterns or regularities in order to interpret the research material, as Braun and Clarke (2006) and MacNaughton and Hughes (2009) have explained. In this study, an emphasis was put on moving beyond mere description of the object of study and towards a sense of how collaborative action research can support preschool teachers' professional development in relation to values education, in line with the main research question. This is in accordance with Mills's (2007) suggestions. Furthermore, MacNaughton and Hughes's (2009) four tasks were supportive through the analysis process, as discussed below. It is worth noting that the participating preschool teachers did not take part in the analysis process described here. Their analysis was on practical level rather than theoretical level, meaning that they chose to reflect on their pedagogical work based on their former experiences and professional knowledge rather than using the theoretical background that I as the researcher used. The preschool teachers analysed their practice and made changes in accordance to their findings. This was important contribution and an addition to my theoretical analysis of the research process.

First, I *organised the research material* to make it accessible and easy to work with. I organised all research material in chronological order to be

able to see the process we went through and the development that occurred. Furthermore, I labelled items with relevant descriptive background information, including when the research material was documented, how, in what situation and so on. Primary research material was also transformed at this stage; for example, recordings were transcribed. By transcribing all the verbal research material myself, I believe I came to an even more sophisticated understanding of the findings, as Braun and Clarke (2006) have pointed out. Finally, I skimmed the research material; I read it swiftly and added small notes to get the 'big picture' – a holistic view on the overall research material (MacNaughton & Hughes, 2009).

Next I *coded the research material*; that is, I applied more detailed labels to the research material. For example, when the research material showed information about a certain value, I labelled that according to the relevant concept. The codes were related to the aims of the study: 1) values, 2) values education, 3) care, 4) respect, 5) discipline, 6) preschool teachers' role in values education, 7) participating in an action research and 8) collaboration with a researcher from outside. I chose to use colours to code the research material; each code had a different colour. I wrote a description for each code so that it was clear what it meant and included. I also used what MacNaughton and Hughes (2009) call *analytic memos*; these are notes or comments that I wrote and then used to track what was similar in the research material. Through this I began to see what was significant in regard to my research questions.

Sifting the research material for patterns was the next task. In accordance with MacNaughton and Hughes's (2009) advice, I chose what codes would most likely help me to answer the research questions. I identified patterns in the research material in relation to the research questions and looked for what surprised me, remaining open to all possibilities. After identifying patterns, I grouped together those that were related. But first of all, I started working on those that were most helpful in answering my research questions.

Analysing the research material and displaying the results was the final task. MacNaughton and Hughes (2009) state: 'having found some patterns in your primary coded data, you now have to explain what those patterns mean, why and to whom they matter and whether/how they help you to answer your research question' (p. 182). They then discuss five approaches to analysing qualitative research material: thematic analysis, exemplars, narrative, reading for 'voice' and critical discourse analysis. I used thematic

analysis in all my papers in addition to narratives in the last one. I described the analysis process in each paper, what themes arose and how they were important for answering the research questions. Finally, I analysed the findings from all four sub-studies to see how they integrated. At that stage I managed to find the main themes from the overall study in order to answer the main research question of this thesis. The main themes that arose in the overall study are 1) *developing professional identity,* 2) *collaboration with a researcher from outside* and 3) *values education: an implicit practice*. These themes and the main findings will be described in more detail in Chapter 7.

5.4 Ethical issues

All research gives rise to ethical issues that demand consideration, but because action research differs in crucial ways from other forms of qualitative research, with its highly personal nature, there is a need for ethical guidelines that are specific to action research (Zeni, 2009). In this study, I relied on general ethical research guidelines for early childhood researchers (see e.g. EECERA, 2015). Furthermore, I relied on guidelines from Locke, Alcorn and O´Neill (2013), who developed a set of principles that can adequately respond to issues often faced in an action research. Their eight principle guidelines are as follows:

1. *Principle of inclusivity*: a principle holding that the whole research group, the researcher from the outside and the participants from the inside, should respect all those who are interested in the focus of the research.
2. *Principle of maximal participant recognition:* a principle stating that all of those directly related to the field of study are considered to be members of the research group, even though their roles in the group differ.
3. *Principle of negotiation and consensus*: a principle holding that practical issues – such as the aim and design of the study, the ownership of the research material and the dissemination process – should be discussed and decided in consultation with all stakeholders in the research group.
4. *Principle of communicative freedom*: a principle stating that members of the group can withdraw their participation at any time.

5. *Principle of plain speaking*: a principle holding that members of the group should use language that maximises their understanding.
6. *Principle of right action*: a principle stating that members of the group should evaluate whether the aim of the study and the understanding it will bring are morally right.
7. *Principle of critical self-reflexivity*: a principle holding that the members should be transparent when they bring something into the study. This is important so other members can understand the input from each other.
8. *The affective principle*: a principle stating that members' feelings should be respected and that they count as information in the research.

In all research endeavours, it is crucial that the researchers respect themselves and one another and commit to do no harm. At the beginning of the research process, authorities and participants must negotiate access to the field (Locke et al., 2013; McNiff, 2010; McNiff & Whitehead, 2005; Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). In this study, all the participants signed informed consent document (see Appendix C), which meant that they participated in the study of their free will and understood the research's aims, what it meant to be involved in the research and any possible dangers. The participating preschool teachers were informed that they could continuously make decisions about their participation and withdraw from the research whenever they wished to. Moreover, I obtained permission from the preschool teachers to use all the research material both for my doctoral research and for the Nordic research project. Other, non-participating staff members at Hill Park also signed informed consent documents (see Appendix D) as they could be part of the research material, particularly in the case of videos and photos. Parents and children were informed about the study even though they were not directly participating in the study. Parents signed informed consent documents (see Appendix E) though the children did not. According to The Data Protection Authority (2012) in Iceland, consent from parents is required when young children are involved in studies. Children at Hill Park certainly were part of the photos and video recordings; however, they were not in the focus of the research material. Nevertheless, I explained my role as a researcher at Hill Park and remained aware of their reactions to me as a researcher in the field and their possible expressions of dissent, as Dockett, Einarsdóttir and Perry (2012) have recommended (see also EECERA, 2015).

5.5 Limitations of the study

Validity in action research refers to exhibiting the changes that occur during the research process by way of evidence and/or critical instances from the research material. Quite simply, it is about convincing the readers that your findings are believable (McNiff, 2013; Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). To understand better and increase the validity in this study, I relied on Herr and Anderson's (2005) explanation on validity in action research. They break down the concept of validity into five more detailed definitions and link the criteria concerning outcome-, process-, democratic-, catalytic- and dialogic validity to the goals of action research that most traditions agree on. First, they say that *outcome validity* is about the achievement of action-oriented outcomes. In this study, the researcher and the practitioners constantly reflected on the whole process and evaluated it at the end. That gave us the opportunity to evaluate the outcome from both the researcher's perspective and the practitioners' perspectives. The outcome is presented in the thesis and the four papers that it builds on. Second, *process validity* concerns the methodology of the study (Herr & Anderson, 2005). In this study, I emphasised explaining the methodology of action research to the participating preschool teachers early in the process so that they would understand the forthcoming process. Nevertheless, as a researcher, I kept track of the process and was responsible for supporting the preschool teachers in their development. Third, *democratic validity* is about how the research is done in collaboration (Herr & Anderson, 2005). In this study, there was great emphasis on collaboration, and my role as a researcher from outside was, among other things, to build a trusting relationship with the preschool teachers. This is explained in detail in the fourth paper (Sigurdardottir & Puroila, 2018). Fourth, *catalytic validity* is about the learning that happens through the research process, both for the preschool teachers and for the researcher (Herr & Anderson, 2005). We reflected constantly on the learning that the preschool teachers went through, and they also wrote about it in their diaries. This is explained in the third paper (Sigurdardottir & Einarsdottir, 2018). I wrote about my own learning in my diary, and the development I went through is explained in detail in the fourth paper (Sigurdardottir & Puroila, 2018). Fifth, *dialogic validity* is about the generation of new knowledge and how it is created in collaboration, similar to the peer-review process that articles go through before being published in research journals (Herr & Anderson, 2005). In this study, there was constant reflection, where we discussed our experiences and the learning that had taken place in the field. The preschool teachers

who participated in the action research also got a chance to read the findings and comment on them before I submitted the papers, with the exception of the findings from the fourth paper, which was built more on my personal perspective and experience. Furthermore, all papers were written in collaboration with other researchers, and, through that collaboration, the findings were discussed deeply, which can be part of dialogic validity.

Research findings are often meant to be generalised. However, this is not the case with the findings from action research; the aim of action research is not to generalise from the findings but rather to focus deeply on the context that is studied (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Mills (2007) even claims that generalisability can never be the aim of action research because of the method's highly contextualised nature. This study builds on research material from action research in one Icelandic preschool, which leads to the fact that the findings cannot be generalised to all preschool settings. Herr and Anderson (2005) point out that the term 'transferability' is more appropriate for action research. This means that findings are not generalised but rather transferred between contexts and require a detailed description of the context that the action research was conducted in. In relation to this, I believe that the findings of this study are transferable to other preschool contexts and can support other action researchers by giving them indications about how to design their study.

6 The four sub-studies: Important milestones in the journey

The aim of this PhD study was to create new knowledge on values education in early childhood education and on the CAR methodology and to contribute to change in the field. In this chapter, the main research question – *How can collaborative action research support preschool teachers' professional development in relation to values education?* – will be answered.

Four studies were conducted to achieve the overall aim of this study and to answer the main research questions. The four studies were followed with four research papers submitted as a foundation of this dissertation and are attached at the end of the thesis. All four sub-studies build on research material from the collaborative action research that has been described above. Each paper is an independent paper; nevertheless, all four studies are combined together and constitute a holistic view on the methodology of collaborative action research used to support professional development in relation to values education. Two of the papers describe studies where the main focus is values education, and two papers describe studies where the main focus is the methodology of CAR; see Figure 8.

In this chapter, each sub-study will be described briefly, including theoretical standpoint, methods and main findings. Then the findings will be combined, and the key themes of the overall study will be presented and discussed. The findings of each study are explained in more details in each of the articles, with references to the research material.

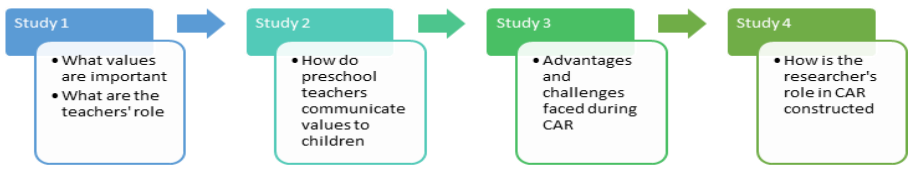

Figure 8. Research questions answered in each study

6.1 Study I

The first study was presented in the first paper, *An Action Research Study in an Icelandic Preschool: Developing Consensus about Values and Values Education*. The paper was written in collaboration with my supervisor, Jóhanna Einarsdóttir, and published in the *International Journal of Early Childhood* (see Sigurdardottir & Einarsdottir, 2016). The focus was on the nature of the values that the preschool teachers deemed important to communicate to children, why these values were seen as important and how the preschool teachers saw their own role in values education. This study was an important start for the overall research to get an overview of the participants' understanding of the values they were focusing on.

The theoretical framework of the study was Habermas's theory of communicative action, in which the preschool setting represents the life-world where values are experienced, expressed and negotiated (Habermas, 1981/1987; Heath, 2011; Ingram, 2010; Kemmis, 2011). Moreover, the study builds on previous studies on values education in early childhood education. The main findings from these studies show that values education has been a neglected area in early childhood education, both in theory and practice, even though all the Nordic curricula emphasise values (Values Education in Nordic Preschools, n.d.).

Research material was gathered in collaboration with the participating preschool teachers. This was research material from the first phase of the action research, when the preschool teachers were reflecting on the issue, planning the process, and creating a mutual understanding and mutual professional language to be able to collaborate effectively. The research material consisted of audio recordings from meetings and interviews and of journal writings from the practitioners.

Three values were agreed upon as most important to communicate to the children and were therefore chosen to focus on during the action research process; these were *care*, *respect* and *discipline*. The preschool teachers saw these values as important because they believed that they would make the children socially stronger and that being socially strong is important in modern society. At the beginning of the action research, a great deal of time was spent reflecting on how the practitioners understood these three values, how they understood the concept of values in general and how they could work with these values in the practice. These reflections were highly important, and, in fact, the practitioners found that a mutual understanding and an agreed professional language were important when working on a subjective area such as values education,

where the practitioners can have different understanding of values. In line with the ideology of action research, the preschool teachers' understandings of the values were used in the process rather than utilizing definitions from others. This approach empowered the preschool teachers in the process and encouraged them to create mutual understanding of the three values.

Table 4 summarises how the preschool teachers understood each of the three values. This is explained in more detail in the paper (see Sigurdardottir & Einarsdottir, 2016).

Table 4. The preschool teachers' definitions of the three values

	Care	Respect	Discipline
Definitions of values (What is involved)	Wellbeing for others Warm Comfort Helpfulness Consideration Friendship	Good communications • Talk nicely • Listen • Respond How to treat others Consideration See others' points of view Understand difference Fairness Courtesy	Rules • Framework • Foundation • Help/tell what to do Self-control/self-discipline • Sticking to what started • Finishing what started Positive discipline • Flexible rules Negative discipline • Rigid rules

Concerning the preschool teachers' role in values education, we identified five themes:

1. *Being a good role model* was seen as the main way to communicate values to the children.
2. *Use of language* was also viewed as an important factor, specifically, to use language that the children would understand. Therefore, the preschool teachers emphasised the use of the term *friendship* to communicate care. Similarly, they used the terms *courtesy* and *consideration* of others to teach respect. Finally, they used the term *self-control* to teach the children discipline.
3. *Discussing* the values in daily interactions with the children was also seen as important to communicate the values. By that the children would learn to understand what the terms mean and later learn how to use them in their own communication.
4. *Guidance* was seen as important in some situations, specifically, to guide the children in their communication and help them to reach their goals.

5. *Direction* was sometimes seen as necessary to help the children to learn when rules could not be flexible. In such cases, the practitioners found they needed to put a stop to behaviour and to take control of the situations.

6.2 Study II

The second study, *Preschool Teachers Communicating Values to Children,* was an independent extension to study I. The study was presented in a paper that was written in collaboration with both of my supervisors, Pia Williams and Jóhanna Einarsdóttir, and has been submitted to *International Journal of Early Years Education* (see Sigurdardottir et al., manuscript). The aim of the study was to investigate how preschool teachers communicate the values they consider important for children to learn in preschool.

The study takes a sociocultural theoretical standpoint, where the preschool context and individual preschool teacher are seen as key factors in children adopting values. Furthermore, the preschool reflects the values of the society to which it belongs (Rogoff, 2003).

The research material consists of 17 hours' video observations in which the preschool teachers and children communicate. Two short episodes were chosen for further analysis in the paper. The findings show that the preschool teachers used different approaches and different actions when teaching and communicating the values to the children in the group. Their actions seem to be related to their professional or personal beliefs, which has been recognised in earlier studies (e.g. Brady, 2011; Gray, 2010; Puroila & Haho, 2017). Furthermore, the findings of the study indicate the influence of the action research where the preschool teachers focused on values education since previous studies have shown that preschool teachers do not usually focus on values education in their practice (Johansson, 1999; Karlsson, 2009; Lovat et al., 2011). However, the findings give reasons to further explore the issue under study since both preschool teachers faced conflicts concerning preschool rules and how to act in such situations. The findings can also be supportive for the preschool teachers in starting a new action research cycle and continue their professional development, since many questions are left to be answered.

6.3 Study III

The third study was presented in a book chapter in an edited book, *Values Education in Early Childhood Settings: Concepts, Approaches and Practices.* The chapter's title is *Challenges and Advantages of Collaborative Action*

Research in Preschools, and my supervisor, Jóhanna Einarsdóttir, is a co-author of the chapter (see Sigurdardottir & Einarsdottir, 2018). The paper focused on the methodology of collaborative action research (CAR) and addressed the advantages and challenges the preschool teachers faced during the action research at Hill Park.

The research material consisted of recordings from interviews conducted at the end of the project, recordings from seminars over the whole process, journal writings from the practitioners and notes from group discussions at the final seminar where practitioners reflected on and evaluated the whole project.

The study is an important contribution to knowledge on what aspects influence the process most in terms of what was supportive and what was discouraging. The study builds on the methodology of CAR, which has proven to be effective for teachers' professional development a good way to narrow the traditional gap between research and practice (Bruce et al., 2011; Curry, 2012; Gordon, 2008). The findings of study III supported this. The findings showed that the main advantages were related to professional development, improvement of practice and children's learning and wellbeing. The main challenges the preschool teachers faced were how to find time for the action research, uncertainty concerning the process of action research and values education and how to influence the whole preschool. Collaboration with colleagues was a crucial factor in making the project successful. The findings also show that collaboration with me, the researcher, was very valuable for the preschool teachers and an important part of their professional development. We seemed to have created what is called a 'third space', where practitioners and researchers meet and create new knowledge.

6.4 Study IV

In study IV, *Encounters in the Third Space: Constructing Researcher's Role in Collaborative Action Research*, the focus was also on the methodology of collaborative action research. The study was presented in a paper written in collaboration with Anna-Maija Puroila and published in the journal *Educational Action Research* (see Sigurdardottir & Puroila, 2018).

Former studies have shown that professional development in action research is even more successful when there is collaboration with an outsider (Bruce et al., 2011; Gordon, 2008). Paper IV continues with the issue that was addressed in the third paper, the creation of a 'third space'. The focus in this paper was on how the role of the researcher in the CAR that this dissertation builds on was constructed with the practitioners and researcher collaborating in the so-called third space. The research material

mainly consisted of the researcher's self-narratives, written throughout the whole research process, over a period of 24 months. Recordings from focus group interviews at the end of the process were also used as research material as well as journal logs from the practitioners, where they looked back at, reflected on, and evaluated the research process.

The findings show that the third space emerged as a landscape filled with a variety of the researcher's emotions. The researcher went through ups and downs while constructing the researcher's role during the process. The findings also showed that the researcher's role was somewhere between that of an insider and that of an outsider. When I was in the field, I felt neither as solely an insider nor as an outsider but rather a little bit of both. Finally, the study showed that being a researcher in CAR involved challenges regarding coping with different tensions in terms of how close I should be to the preschool teachers and how to deal with similarities and differences in our expertise. The findings from this study can be supportive for future researchers using CAR to understand their own role better and by that to plan their approach.

6.5 Research material in each study

Table 5 shows the research material used in each of the four sub-studies and shows that some of the same research material was used in more than one study. However, the focus in each study was different, and therefore, the same research material was looked at differently in different sub-studies.

Table 5. Methods used to gather research material in the four sub-studies

	Method(s):
Study I	1) Interviews at the beginning of the process 2) Recordings from seminars (meetings) during the process 3) Diary writings
Study II	Video-observations
Study III	1) Interviews at the end of the process 2) Recordings from seminars (meetings) during the process 3) Diary writings 4) Notes from group discussion at final seminar
Study IV	1) Researcher's self-narratives 2) Diary writings 3) Interviews at the end of the process 4) Recordings from seminars (meetings) during the process

7 The overall findings: New knowledge discovered during the journey

The overall findings from the four studies integrate and answer the main research question, *How can collaborative action research support preschool teachers' professional development in relation to values education?*

To review the main findings of the four sub-studies, they have been summarised in Table 6.

Table 6. Aims and summary of the main findings of the four sub-studies

Study	Aims to find out	Main findings
Study I	1) What are important values to teach children and why? 2) What are the preschool teachers' role in values education?	1) Care, respect, and discipline; because they make children socially stronger 2) Importance of mutual understanding and professional language 3) Being a good role model, use language that the children understand, discuss values, guidance and direction
Study II	1) How do preschool teachers communicate the values they consider important for children to learn in preschool?	1) Individual in approaches and actions when communicating values to children 2) Values are communicated implicitly rather than explicitly
Study III	1) What are the advantages and challenges preschool teachers faced during the process of CAR?	1) Advantages were related to professional development, improvement of practice, and children's learning and well-being 2) Challenges were related to finding time for the research, uncertainty concerning the process and values education, and to influencing the whole preschool 3) Collaborations with insiders and an outsider were crucial for successful process
Study IV	1) How is the researcher's role in CAR constructed through the process?	1) Collaboration happens in the third space 2) The third space emerge as emotional landscape 3) The researcher's role is somewhere between an insider and an outsider 4) The researcher needs to cope with different tensions; about closeness/distance and about how to deal with similarities/differences in expertise

Three main themes have been identified as emerging from the findings of the four sub-studies as follows:

1. Values education: moving from implicit to explicit practice
2. Professional development: empowerment through the learning process
3. Collaboration with the researcher: two forms of expertise meet in the third space

Each theme is discussed in detail below as well as some sub-themes that also were identified through the process.

7.1 Values education: Moving from implicit to explicit practice

At the beginning of the action research process, the preschool teachers found it challenging to work on values and values education. They were unsure how to make sense of the concept of values and the three values they chose to focus on in the project. Therefore, it was crucial that we spent a considerable length of time at the beginning of the CAR to reflect on how these concepts were understood by the preschool teachers and to create a *mutual understanding* and a *mutual professional language*.

Working with values and values education proved to be complicated for the preschool teachers. Moreover, the findings indicate that values education in preschools is more implicit than explicit. This means that values education is more part of what is called 'the hidden curriculum' than part of the written curriculum that is visible to others, both inside and outside the preschool. Furthermore, this means that the preschool teachers found it hard to conceptualise the values they were focusing on to teach the children. Nevertheless, it was clear that they chose to focus on these three values because they believed they would make the children socially stronger. This fact shows that they value social skills above other skills, such as academic ones.

Values education is also closely related to each teacher's *personal* values, and these can be different when teachers have different backgrounds. The personal differences were identified in the study presented in paper 2, for example, different approaches and actions when communicating values to the children. The personal differences, furthermore, support the need for creating a mutual understanding and professional language so colleagues can collaborate in practice, and thereby the values education will be more explicit and therefore more effective.

This was the focus in the action research project, and the participating preschool teachers managed to make their values education practice more explicit through the collaboration in the CAR process. The photos taken throughout the process capture how the values education practice became more explicit. The photos show how the preschool teachers made the values they focused on, care, respect, and discipline, visible in the setting. For example, they had posters on the walls that showed how they had worked with the concept of friendship, which they used in the practice to teach the children the value of care.

7.2 Professional development: Empowering through the learning process

Overall, the findings show that the collaborative action research (CAR) project was very useful for the preschool teachers' professional development in relation to values education. The seven preschool teachers who participated in the project managed to focus on their professionalism, empower themselves as professionals and develop their practice. Four aspects were especially important concerning their professional development:

- Reflections
- Professional language
- Learning community
- Time

The preschool teachers found *reflections* on the practice to be the most important aspect for their professional development. This is also related to *time*, since the preschool teachers reported that they valued the time they were given for reflection during the project. They were not used to having time for this in their daily routines. Through the project, the preschool teachers learned how to use reflection, by themselves or with others, to develop themselves professionally, which leads to their empowerment as professionals.

The preschool teachers realised how mutual understanding was important to develop a mutual *professional language* and that this would best be done through reflecting deeply together. The preschool teachers, for example, spent a considerable length of time in reflecting on the concepts of values and values education and on the three values they chose to focus on: *care*, *respect* and *discipline*. The preschool teachers realised

how important it was that they had a mutual understanding on these concepts in order to work with them in the children's group. The *time* aspect is, furthermore, also related to *professional development*. It turned out to be crucial for the overall project to spend a great deal of time working on mutual professional development, especially at the beginning of the action research.

Learning community was one aspect that came out as important when using collaborative action research for professional development. The preschool teachers found that close collaboration with their colleagues was powerful in the process. They valued that they could learn and develop together as a group of professionals, and through that they supported each other in the professional development process. Learning community proved to be a highly empowering aspect for the preschool teachers.

Even though the *time* aspect was usually positive, as stated above, it proved to have a negative side, too. Time was a negative aspect when the preschool teachers found they lacked time to work on their professional development. They found that regular daily routines sometimes were detaining them in the process and for example preventing them from reflecting on their practice or trying out new things.

At the end of the action research, the preschool teachers valued the methodology they had learned by participating in the CAR, and they believed they would continue to use it in their practice. They saw the methodology as an empowering learning process through which they learned to reflect on their practice, to emphasise a mutual professional language, to create a learning community and to set aside time to work on their professional development. The challenges that the preschool teachers faced during the process was not seen as something negative but rather something to learn from and to plan future professional development projects.

7.3 Collaboration with the researcher: Two forms of expertise meet in the third space

Throughout the process, I worked in close collaboration with the preschool teachers as a researcher. This proved to be a very important aspect in the process, even more crucial than I expected in the beginning. The preschool teachers found the *support and encouragement* they got from me to be very helpful. They even stated that the action research project would not have been as successful as it proved to be without support, encouragement and collaboration from me, the researcher.

At first, I was not sure about my own role in the project. Throughout the process, I reflected on my role as a researcher and found out how important it is to create what is called a *third space*. At the end, I see that we managed to create a third space in our collaboration, where I as a researcher and the preschool teachers as practitioners met on equal basis, each with our own forms of expertise and different aims and research questions to follow. The action research was mostly collaboration but it also happened in the two systems adopted from Elström's model (2007; Sandberg & Wallo, 2013), the practice system and research system. In the third space, we managed to work together and create new knowledge on values education in preschool practice and on the profession of preschool teachers. My background as an educated preschool teacher and the experience I have from working as a preschool teacher were supportive in the process. It helped me to understand the context under study as well as the practice and the profession of the participating preschool teachers.

The collaboration encouraged me to reflect deeply on my own role as a researcher in CAR since there are not many previous studies on the issue and no universal guidance for the role. My reflections resulted in new and important knowledge on the researcher's role in CAR. I found that the researcher's role was constructed through the collaboration and throughout the process. I also realised that it happened in the so-called third space. Being a researcher in CAR requires the recognition of an emotional journey and understanding one's own placement as neither an insider nor an outsider but a little bit of both, and it requires you to cope with tensions concerning relationships with the practitioners and the expertise of both parties. This is discussed in more detail in paper IV.

7.4 Summary of the overall findings

The findings from the four papers clearly intertwine. To sum up the overall findings, the preschool teachers found it important to build a learning community, where there was time for reflection and the creation of a mutual professional understanding and language. They saw this as very important for their professional development and empowerment. Moreover, collaboration with a researcher was a crucial aspect in the process and created a third space, where new knowledge arose, which was a fundamental step for their professional development.

Values education proved to be a complicated issue for the preschool teachers to focus on. Nevertheless, they managed to develop their profession and practice as values educators. This was done by focusing on

important aspects in the CAR methodology, and their development was identified in their communication with the children, and, not least important, in the communication between the children. The findings therefore show that the work the preschool teachers went through in the CAR had a positive influence on their practice. Furthermore, it resulted in a positive influence on the children's learning and wellbeing, even though they were not the main focus of the CAR.

In the next chapter, the meanings of these findings are discussed in more detail, including what this new knowledge means in relation to previous knowledge and for future preschool practice.

8 Discussion and conclusion: At the endpoint of the journey

In this chapter, the overall findings are discussed and reflected upon in relation to theories and previous research. Moreover, I reflect upon how the findings are important for early childhood education. Finally, my ideas about further research will be discussed.

8.1 Values education: Moving from implicit to explicit practice

The findings show that in the beginning, values education was an implicit practice at Hill Park preschool. This means that values education was not visibly evidenced in the practice; the focus on values education was not part of the preschool's curriculum but rather part of the hidden curriculum that Halstead (1996) describes as education that is embedded in the practice but escapes direct attention. These findings are in accordance with findings from other Nordic studies showing values education as an implicit rather than explicit practice (see e.g. Johansson, 2018; Juutinen & Viljamaa, 2016). However, some researchers, such as Thornberg (2016) and Johansson (2018), emphasise the importance of making values education an explicit one in order to make it more effective in practice. In this study, by participating in action research, the preschool teachers managed to make their values education practice more explicit than before. This was realised by creating a mutual understanding and professional language though reflection and close collaboration between the participating preschool teachers and with the researcher.

Habermas states the importance of communicative actions, where the aim is to collaborate and create mutual understanding (Brand, 1990; Edgar, 2006; Fultner, 2011; Kemmis, 2011; Thomassen, 2010). The findings of this study show that collaborative action research (CAR) was an effective method to create such conditions for values education. Mutual understanding was created through reflection and close collaboration.

Values education is a fairly new field in early childhood education, both in practice and in research. The focus on values education has been a neglected area in both preschool practice and early childhood education research even though it is part of the national curricula in all the Nordic countries (Einarsdottir et al., 2015). The Icelandic philosopher Skúlason

(2009) has stated the importance of focusing on values and social skills rather than academic skills in education. He worried about the future society if we do not change the way we teach our children. He even hinted that the financial crisis in Iceland in 2008 can be traced to a wrong emphasis in the educational system, which has focused on technical skills rather than critical thinking and the ability to make judgements about values in our lives. The preschool teachers' choice of values in this study shows that they emphasise children's social skills rather than academic skills. These findings are similar to findings from previous Nordic studies (Emilson & Johansson, 2013; Fugelsnes et al., 2013; Juutinen & Viljamaa, 2016; Puroila & Haho, 2017; Williams et al., 2015) and in line with the emphasis in the national curricula in the Nordic countries (Einarsdottir et al., 2015) and in accordance with the so-called Nordic Model (Wagner, 2006; Wagner & Einarsdottir, 2006, 2008). Furthermore, previous studies show that it is important to start values education as early as preschool since children are especially responsive at this age, and during this period of early childhood the foundation for further development and learning is laid (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/-Eurostat, 2014; Keskin, 2012; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004).

Then we come to the question, *what does values education look like in practice?* The findings of this research show that the preschool teachers who participated in the project found it challenging to focus on values education in their practice in the beginning. This is similar to findings from other studies (see e.g. Puroila et al., 2016). As the action research proceeded, they became increasingly more confident about their role as values educators. The preschool teachers created a mutual understanding and mutual professional language throughout the process, which was part of making them more confident about working with values. The findings support what Thornberg (2016), Johansson (2018) and Puroila et al. (2016) have stated, that reflections are crucial aspect in order to create a mutual understanding and professional language and to build close collaboration. This can also be related to Habermas's theory, where he talks about communicative action being characterised by openness, reciprocity and mutual understanding (Brand, 1990; Edgar, 2006; Fultner, 2011; Kemmis, 2011; Thomassen, 2010).

The fact that the preschool teachers emphasised social skills over academic skills indicates changes in the educational system, moving away from what both Skúlason (2008) and Habermas warn about (Edgar, 2006; Kemmis, 2011). They both warn that the educational system can become too instrumental, where communication and values are not in the front,

even though these two aspects lay the foundation for the society as a whole and how individuals live together in it. The findings from this study indicate that the participating preschool teachers are not heading towards instrumentalisation but rather are focused on communication and social competences. Furthermore, they seem to emphasise children's perspective and opportunities to participate in their own learning process. However, it seems important for preschool teachers to be conscious of what values they want to communicate to the children and thereby become more likely to work according to their aims and values and be confident about their practice.

In section 2.5, I discuss some of the main challenges Icelandic preschools face. One challenge concerns changes in Icelandic society and is related to it becoming increasingly more multicultural (Einarsdottir, 2017). These changes require preschool teachers to reflect upon their practice and how to accommodate and involve new Icelanders. These findings are also relevant for preschool teachers in other countries since similar challenges can be expected in our globalising world. This gives reason for focusing on values and values education to reflect on what kind of future society we want and what values are important to teach accordingly. Similarly, values education is relevant in relation to the challenge concerning 'schoolification', where the focus is on academic skills rather than social skills (Einarsdottir, 2017). By making teaching practices more explicit, they become visible to those outside the preschool and can promote understanding of the learning that takes place in preschools. This might reduce the pressure on an academic focus from the outside, or from the system, as Habermas calls it (Edgar, 2006; Heath, 2011; Ingram, 2010; Kemmis, 2011).

The findings of this study support the idea that values education is relevant in preschools and, in fact, at all school levels. Values education has proven to be strongly related to a focus on social skills since the preschool teachers emphasised values that would make the children socially stronger and provide them opportunity to be active participants in their learning process. Furthermore, the findings indicate that values education is more effective when it is explicit, which was not the case at the beginning of this research. However, through the process, values education became a more explicit practice at Hill Park. Explicit values education made the practice more purposeful and visible, which could lead to greater understanding and respect from different stakeholders, such as parents and policymakers. Explicit values education also reduces the likelihood of instrumentalisation, where active learning and discussions deviate, and thereby empowers the

preschool teachers. It is important that preschool teachers realise what kind of future citizen they need to foster for the future society and what values they need to focus on to make the children socially competent, both in the present and the future. It is impossible to know how future societies will be and what knowledge will be needed in the future. However, we know that social skills are becoming increasingly more important in today's societies and most likely will continue to become fundamental knowledge, with increased diversity and globalisation around the world.

8.2 Professional development: Empowerment through the learning process

The research question that guided the study focused on how CAR can support preschool teachers' professional development in relation to values education. The findings show that the CAR methodology was an effective way to for the preschool teachers to work on their professional development, and these findings support findings from previous studies (see e.g. Araújo, 2012; Banegas et al., 2013; Einarsdóttir, 2013; Jónsson, 2008; Webb & Scoular, 2013).

There were four aspects that stood out as relevant for the teachers' professional development: *reflections, professional language, learning community* and *time*. Reflections has been a prominent theme in previous studies as an important factor for successful practice (see e.g. Einarsdottir & Pálmadóttir, 2018; Johansson & Röthle, 2018; Puroila et al., 2018; Webb & Scoular, 2013). In this study, the preschool teachers practised using reflections, and they learned to appreciate the time they got for reflection. At the end of the project, they realised that reflections were a crucial aspect in developing themselves professionally. The professional language that was created through the action research process helped the preschool teachers to develop professionally. Through reflection they managed to create a mutual language that supported them in realising and talking about what they stood for in their practice. The preschool teachers found it important to go together through the process and learn together, that is, to create a learning community where a group of teachers learn together and from each other (Sigurðardóttir, 2013). Furthermore, time was a theme that affected all the other themes. It was an aspect that had both positive and negative sides. The preschool teachers really appreciated the time they had arranged to sit down and reflect on their practice during the action research. Nevertheless, they also found that the action research took time from other activities in their daily routines. By being a part of the planning

process, they managed to make the action research part of their day rather than extra work. Which is, in my opinion, a crucial aspect when teachers plan to work according to the methodology of action research. The preschool teacher practice is a living profession with constant changes and where new challenges arise regularly in accordance with the changing world. It is important for preschool teachers to develop themselves professionally and endeavour to cope with the challenges they meet in a changing world. The challenges faced through the process, proved to be a great learning experience for the preschool teachers, which they could use to plan their further professional development. The challenges were not regarded as negative nor discouraging but rather something to learn from and use for further professional development. The participating preschool teachers in the study were focused on improving their practice and profession.

Professional development is highly important for teachers at all school levels since it deepens and extends their professional competence (Richer et al., 2011). Furthermore, it has proven to promote teachers' job satisfaction and decrease the likelihood of burnout and turnover (Starfsþróun kennara. Vefur samstarfsráðs um starfsþróun kennara og skólastjórnenda, n.d.). This is especially important in relation to one of the challenges mentioned above, namely the lack of educated preschool teachers in Icelandic preschools (Statistics Iceland, 2017), which simultaneously affects the quality of the practice (Pramling-Samuelsson et al., 2006). Furthermore, teachers' professional development is important since their profession changes constantly in line with changes in societies around the world. The findings from this study will hopefully encourage the preschool teachers to continue their professional development in relation to values education. The findings can encourage the preschool teachers to further explore the issues that were identified in the study. The preschool teachers might, for example, explore their role as values educators further and continue to try out new ways to improve their practice. The findings might also encourage them to explore their actions further and investigate what determines their actions. Finally, the findings give reasons for exploring the process of action research even in more details and how action research can be implemented as a regular part of the daily routines in the preschool. This project only lasted for a period of 24 months. What happened afterwards is not part of this thesis. Hopefully, the preschool teachers will continue to work on their practice in relation to values education and start new action research cycles with new questions and new

challenges, even though they do not have support from researcher from the university any more.

These findings are important for policymakers at municipal and governmental levels. The findings shed light on useful methods to highlight professionalism in early childhood education, to increase the empowerment of teachers and to lessen turnover in the profession. The findings indicate the importance of the preschools' authorities understanding about the professional development of preschool teachers as a crucial aspect in terms of quality practice for young children and their families. To this end, preschool teachers need to have time for reflection, both by themselves and together. Reflection should be part of preschool teachers' daily routine rather than something only done when there are certain projects going on. Therefore, it is important that preschool teachers be provided with opportunities and some flexibility for in-service education.

Furthermore, the findings indicate the importance of the preschools' authorities and directors to encourage the creation of learning communities in preschools, where preschool teachers can learn together and create a mutual understanding and professional language.

8.3 Collaboration with the researcher: Two forms of expertise meet in the third space

The findings show that encouragement and support from me, the researcher, from outside, proved to be a crucial aspect in the process. The collaboration was important in making the project successful, according to the preschool teachers. Previous studies have similar findings (Bruce et al., 2011; Kemmis et al., 2014). In this study, I reflected deeply on my role as a researcher and emphasised building strong and trusting relationship with the preschool teachers. This resulted in a close collaboration between me and the practitioners. These findings can be helpful for those who plan to conduct action research in their setting as they reveal the importance of a researcher from the outside who encourages and supports the participating teachers throughout the process. Even though each case is unique, this study gives indications about what can work well in action research. Moreover, the challenges the participants in this CAR faced indicate what might come up in similar projects and what is important to beware of.

Furthermore, the findings concerning the researcher's role can be useful for preschool authorities. The findings illustrate the importance of the collaboration between researchers from the university and teachers in preschools, or the collaboration between theory and practice. The findings

can be informative for preschool authorities concerning the benefits in providing more opportunities for such collaboration, or even the benefit of promoting such collaboration in the first place.

The findings concerning collaboration also show that the CAR methodology is a good way for researchers to get access to practice and, by that, connect theory and practice. These findings support previous studies and the literature in the field (Bruce et al., 2011; Curry, 2012; Gordon, 2008). Therefore, the findings can be not only an eye-opener for preschool authorities but also for university authorities and university researchers. The findings can support university authorities in understanding the importance of providing opportunities for collaboration and in promoting collaboration with teachers working in schools. As, for example, Bruce et al. (2011) say, such collaboration is important for both parties since both learn from each other's expertise. Strong collaboration between these two parties is an important factor for making the profession more effective for children's learning and wellbeing. Furthermore, such collaboration can be an effective tool in the fight against the lack of educated preschool teachers and towards more professional and quality early childhood education since more empowered and confident preschool teachers can make the profession more interesting for young people who are choosing their education and future career.

There is a lack of knowledge on the researcher's role in CAR. The findings from this study are therefore an important contribution to the field. My findings show that it is important for the researcher to reflect on his/her own role in order to understand it and know how to act. There are always some uncertainties in action research, and therefore the process cannot be fully planned beforehand. This is important to know for those who plan to conduct action research. However, my experience shows that it is important for the researcher to be as prepared as possible, to have some idea about how to react when setbacks arise. Building on my experience, it is important for the researcher to realise that the process can become an emotional experience. This was most likely also the case for the participating preschool teachers even though I did not look into it in this study. I also found it important for me as a researcher to understand the nature of the collaboration in more detail. This helped me to understand my relationship with the preschool teachers at Hill Park. Through the process, I developed my role and began to understand that the collaboration happened where theory and practice meet, in what is referred to in this study as the third space (Arhar et al., 2013; Ellström, 2007; Sandberg & Wallo, 2013). I also developed knowledge about my

position in the research context as a whole: that I was somewhere between an insider and an outsider and that I needed to cope with certain tensions concerning the collaboration (see study IV, Sigurdardottir & Puroila, 2018).

Habermas talks about communicative actions which aim at mutual understanding (Brand, 1990; Edgar, 2006; Fultner, 2011; Kemmis, 2011; Thomassen, 2010), and the concept has been linked to what is called a *holistic* or *overall understanding of education*, where overall understanding of the child's day is emphasised (Lillemyr, 2009). These ideas from Habermas were of great importance in the process of the CAR and laid the foundation for the collaboration and how I understood my role.

8.4 Further research

The findings from this study give reasons for further studies related to the field. Firstly, I believe it is important to continue to study values education in preschools and to continue encouraging preschool teachers to focus on values education in their practice and become conscious about the values they communicate to children. Icelandic preschools are part of the Nordic Model (Wagner, 2006; Wagner & Einarsdottir, 2006, 2008), where social skills are emphasised. The same emphasis is recognised in the Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Preschools (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011). Furthermore, the ideology behind values education harmonises well with the emphasis on social skills recognised in the Nordic Model and the National Curriculum Guide. The Nordic research project that this study is part of asks: *what kind of future citizens do we need to foster in early childhood education in order to build cohesive pluralistic societies in the Nordic countries?* (Values Education in Nordic Preschools, n.d.). This question is highly relevant in contemporary societies, which are rapidly changing. Moreover, the issue under study is not only relevant in the Nordic countries but also internationally. Today, it is important for parents and teachers to realise what kind of persons they want their children to become when they grow up. Furthermore, it is important to listen to children's voice and make the children involved in their learning process. Today's societies are becoming increasingly multicultural, which entails the intertwining of diverse cultural values. This increases the importance of citizens' social skills, with a recognition and understanding of diversity in foreground. By focusing on values education in early childhood education, we might lay the foundation for socially competent future citizens. However, we should not only be focusing on what the children will become in the future. Not least important is the need to focus on the present when working with young

children and to understand early childhood education as worthy here and now. The ideology and the aim that lie behind values education are also relevant as 'here and now' practices since the benefits start almost simultaneously with the practice (see e.g. study III, Sigurdardottir & Einarsdottir, 2018).

In this study, the focus was on preschool teachers and how they communicated values to children. The focus was not on the children's perspective on values and values education. However, it is clear that the children are active participants in values education and that their perspective is of great importance to be researched in future studies. Adding to the understanding on children's perspectives would be an important contribution for more comprehensive knowledge about values education and how values are communicated in preschools where the mutual interaction becomes more visible.

The study shows that the CAR methodology proved to be an effective way of working on professional development. It was also good way to build a bridge between research and practice, where both parties benefitted. In future studies, it would be interesting to focus on studying quality in preschool practice in Iceland. This has been done in Sweden, for example (see Sheridan, Williams & Sandberg, 2013). Studying quality in Icelandic preschool practice is relevant in relation to some of the challenges discussed in section 2.5, that is, the lack of educated preschool teachers, the gap between parental leave and preschool, a more multicultural society and requirements related to an academic focus in preschools. It could be interesting to start by studying what perspectives different stakeholders have on the quality in preschool practice. Icelandic preschool authorities and other stakeholders could possible account more clearly what kind of preschools they want to offer Icelandic children and their families. Preschools functioning as a minimum service, with too few educated preschool teachers, are not acceptable. Preschools are part of the educational system in Iceland, and society needs to see preschools as an educational institution and make demands accordingly. Furthermore, the findings could provide indications about quality in early childhood education in other countries as well.

Finally, it is important to study preschool teacher education in relation to values education and professional development – to study whether and how preschool teachers are prepared for both values education and professional development since these are both highly important for the profession. Previous studies show that preschool teachers are not prepared

for explicit values education nor professional development, for example, through approaches such as action research (Lovat et al., 2011; Oğuz, 2012; Thornberg & Oğuz, 2013). However, my findings show the importance of both values education in early childhood and the professional development of preschool teachers. According to these findings, it would be beneficial to teach preschool teachers about values education in their training and how to work according to the ideology behind values education. They should also be prepared in regard to how to develop professionally by introducing the methodology of action research, for example. As mentioned many times, the society is changing rapidly, and this demands that teachers, among others, study their own practice and develop their profession according to these changes. The profession is a living profession, which in my understanding highlights the importance of constant reflection and development in the practice.

My ideas about further research are not exhaustive. The situation in today's early childhood education gives reason for endless further research. Here I have only mentioned the ideas that follow the findings of the study presented in this thesis – research that could be a logical continuation of this study. The aim should be to foster competent future citizens for global society. The aim should also be on quality education for our children. More research in the field of early childhood education would contribute towards both. Quality in education for the youngest citizens will be beneficial for the future of society. This study has been a small step in this direction.

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Appendix A

Hópviðtal: spurningar/þemu fyrir hópviðtal.

Upphaf verkefnis, Viðtal 1

Hugmyndir um hvað það merkir fyrir ykkur að vinna með gildi (almennt)
Hvað kemur upp í hugann þegar þið hugsið um gildi í leikskólastarfi?
Hvaða merkingu leggið þið í það að vinna með gildi?
Hvert er ykkar hlutverk sem leikskólakennara/starfsmanna í slíkri vinnu?
Einhver sérstök vandamál/áskoranir sem gætu komið upp og tengjast starfinu, foreldrum, fjölbreytni í barnahópnum?
Hvað er spennandi/mikilvægt/erfitt þegar kemur að vinnu með gildi?
Eru ákveðin gildi sérstaklega mikilvæg ykkar leikskóla?

Miðlun gilda (almennt)
Hvernig gildi eru mikilvæg fyrir börn? Hvers vegna?
Hvernig gildi eru mikilvæg fyrir fullorðna? Hvers vegna?
Hvernig miðla börn gildum? (kyn, margbreytileiki...)
Hvernig miðla fullorðnir gildum?

Hvernig styðjið/ögrið þið þekkingu/námi barna um gildi?
Nefnið dæmi þar sem börn miðla gildum? (kannski ekki nauðsynlegt)

Spurningar um valið þema/gildi
Hvers vegna völduð þið að vinna með þetta atriði/gildi/þema?
Hvers vegna er það mikilvægt?
Hvað viljið þið að börn (eða fullorðnir) læri/skilji/uppgötvi? Hvers vegna?
Hvernig ætlið þið að vinna með þetta gildi (þema)?

Appendix B

Að skrifa í dagbókina

Þegar þú skrifar í dagbókina er meðal annars gott að hafa í huga eftirfarandi spurningar:

Hvað gerði ég?

Hvað lærði ég?

Hvað gekk best?

Hvað var erfiðast?

Hvernig upplifði ég það sem ég gerði?

Appendix C

Reykjavík, 5. september 2013

Ég undirrituð/undirritaður samþykki að taka þátt í starfendarannsókn um gildi í leikskólastarfi. Rannsóknin fer fram í leikskólanum [nafn leikskóla] í samvinnu við fræðimenn og doktorsnema við Menntavísindasvið Háskóla Íslands. Rannsóknin er einnig hluti af norrænu rannsóknarverkefni sem unnið verður í leikskólum á Norðurlöndunum í samvinnu við fræðimenn í háskólum í hverju landi.

Ég hef fengið upplýsingar um að heildarmarkmið norræna rannsóknarverkefnisins er að dýpka skilning á því hvernig unnið er með lífsgildi í leikskólastarfi á Norðurlöndunum. Markmiðið með starfendarannsókninni í [nafn leikskóla] er að dýpka skilning á gildunum *virðing, umhyggja* og *agi* og breyta og bæta starfshætti í tengslum við þau gildi. Það markmið er í samræmi við val okkar starfsmannanna í [nafn leikskóla].

Ég hef verið upplýst/upplýstur um hvað felst í því að taka þátt í starfendarannsókninni og einnig er mér ljóst að ég get neitað þátttöku og hætt henni hvenær sem er á meðan á rannsókninni stendur.

Ingibjörg Ósk Sigurðardóttir, doktorsnemi við Menntavísindasvið Háskóla Íslands, safnar gögnum í rannsókninni og ég veiti henni leyfi til að nýta þau gögn í doktorsverkefni sínu auk þess sem þau verða nýtt í norræna rannsóknarverkefninu.

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(nafn þátttakanda)

Appendix D

Reykjavík, 20. Júní 2014

Hluti starfsfólks leikskólans [nafn leikskóla] tekur nú þátt í starfendarannsókn um gildi í leikskólastarfi. Rannsóknin fer fram í leikskólanum [nafn leikskóla] í samvinnu við fræðimenn og doktorsnema við Menntavísindasvið Háskóla Íslands. Rannsóknin er einnig hluti af norrænu rannsóknarverkefni sem unnið verður í leikskólum á Norðurlöndunum í samvinnu við fræðimenn í háskólum í hverju landi.

Ég hef verið upplýst/upplýstur um að sem starfsmaður [nafn leikskóla] get ég verið hluti af eða þátttakandi í þeim gögnum sem safnað verður í rannsókninni, þ.e. verið með á myndbandsupptökum eða ljósmyndum sem verða notaðar sem gögn rannsóknarinnar; og er samþykk/samþykkur því. Ég geri mér einnig grein fyrir því að ég get óskað eftir því að taka ekki þátt í þeim athöfnum sem verið er að nýta í rannsókninni.

Ingibjörg Ósk Sigurðardóttir, doktorsnemi við Menntavísindasvið Háskóla Íslands, safnar gögnum í rannsókninni og ég veiti henni leyfi til að nýta þau gögn í doktorsverkefni sínu auk þess sem þau verða nýtt í norræna rannsóknarverkefninu.

_____

(nafn)

Appendix E

Reykjavík, september 2013

Kæru foreldrar/forráðamenn.

Starfsfólk [nafn leikskóla] vinnur nú að „starfendarannsókn“ í samvinnu við fræðimenn og doktorsnema við Menntavísindasvið Háskóla Íslands. Rannsóknin er hluti af norrænu rannsóknarverkefni sem unnið verður í leikskólum á Norðurlöndunum í samvinnu við fræðimenn í háskólum í hverju landi. Heildarmarkmið norræna verkefnisins er að dýpka skilning á því hvernig unnið er með lífsgildi í leikskólastarfi.

Tveir leikskólar í Reykjavík taka þátt í verkefninu fyrir hönd Íslands, [nafn leikskóla] og [nafn leikskóla]. Rannsóknin sem fer fram í [nafn leikskóla] er einnig hluti af doktorsverkefni undirritaðrar. Starfsfólk [nafn leikskóla] hefur ákveðið að leggja sérstaka áherslu á *virðingu, umhyggju* og *aga* í sinni vinnu. Markmiðið er að dýpka skilning á hugtökunum í tengslum við leikskólastarf og þróa starfshætti í leikskólastarfinu þar sem áhersla er á þessi þrjú gildi.

Ég undirrituð mun safna gögnum í [nafn leikskóla] ásamt starfsfólkinu þar. Gagnasöfnunin felst meðal annars í því að taka ljósmyndir, videoupptökur og viðtöl. Börnin ykkar verða þó ekki beinir þátttakendur í rannsókninni því áherslan er á að skoða starfshætti kennaranna og þróa þá. Hins vegar geta börnin verið með á ljósmyndum, myndböndum eða verið í leik þar sem fram fer skráning og þannig verið óbeinir þátttakendur í rannsókninni.

Ef þið óskið eftir því að börnin ykkar taki ekki þátt í þessu verkefni vinsamlega látið okkur vita. Ef þið hafið einhverja spurningar varðandi verkefnið hafið endilega samband við mig (ios3@hi.is) eða umsjónarmann rannsóknarinnar Jóhönnu Einarsdóttur forseta Menntavísindasviðs (joein@hi.is).

Fyllsta trúnaðar verður gætt og engar persónulegar upplýsingar um börn, foreldra eða starfsfólk verða skráðar. Rannsóknin hefur verið tilkynnt Persónuvernd.

Bestu kveðjur,
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Articles in the PhD thesis

Article I

Sigurdardottir, I. & Einarsdottir, J. (2016). An action research study in an Icelandic preschool: Developing consensus about values and values education. *International Journal of Early Childhood, 48*(2), 161–177.

Article II

Sigurdardottir, I., Williams, P. & Einarsdottir, J. (manuscript). Preschool teachers communicating values to children. *International Journal of Early Years Education*

Article III

Sigurdardottir, I. & Einarsdottir, J. (2018). Challenges and advantages of collaborative action research in preschools. In E. Johansson, A. Emilson & A.–M. Puroila (Eds.), *Values education in early childhood settings. Concepts, approaches and practices* (pp. 109–127). Cham: Springer.

Article IV

Sigurdardottir, I. & Puroila A.–M. (2018). Encounters in the third space: constructing the researcher's role in collaborative action research. *Educational Action Research*, DOI: 10.1080/09650792.2018.1507832

Article I. An Action Research Study in an Icelandic Preschool: Developing Consensus About Values and Values Education

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An Action Research Study in an Icelandic Preschool: Developing Consensus About Values and Values Education

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Abstract Values education is embedded in the curricula of all the Nordic countries. However, values education remains a neglected area for research and practice in early childhood education and care. This article reports on the aspects of an action research project conducted in a preschool in Iceland, across a period of 18 months. The study focused on the nature of the values that the preschool teachers deemed as important to communicate to children and how they saw their own role in values education. Habermas' theory of communicative action is the theoretical framework of the study. Data for this study were gathered in collaboration with the seven preschool teachers who participated in the study. The preschool teachers chose three values to focus on during the action research project: care, respect, and discipline. The data consisted of audio recordings from meetings, interviews, and journal writings. Thematic analysis was used to find themes and patterns in the data. Five themes were identified concerning the preschool teachers' role in values education: being a good role model, use of language, discussion, guidance, and direction. The findings showed that the participating preschool teachers emphasized children's participation and development of social skills. While these data were collected in just one Icelandic preschool, it appeared that the preschool teachers strongly valued mutual understanding and meaningful interactions with the children.

Keywords Values education · Values · Preschool · Action research · Case study · Communicative action

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Résumé L'éducation aux valeurs est incluse dans les programmes de tous les pays nordiques. Cependant, l'éducation aux valeurs reste un domaine négligé dans la recherche et la pratique en éducation et garde des jeunes enfants. Cet article présente des aspects d'un projet de recherche action réalisé dans un centre préscolaire en Islande, pendant une période de 18 mois. L'étude se concentre sur la nature des valeurs que les éducateurs préscolaires estiment importantes à communiquer aux enfants et comment ils voient leur propre rôle en éducation aux valeurs. La théorie de l'action communicative d'Habermas est le cadre théorique de cette étude. Les données ont été collectées en collaboration avec les sept éducateurs qui ont participé à l'étude. Les éducateurs préscolaires ont choisi trois valeurs sur lesquelles ils souhaitaient mettre l'accent pendant le projet de recherche action : le soin, le respect et la discipline. Les données se composent d'enregistrements audio de réunions, d'entretiens et de notes de journal. L'analyse thématique a été utilisée pour trouver les thèmes et les modèles dans les données. Cinq thèmes ont été identifiés en ce qui concerne le rôle des éducateurs préscolaires en éducation aux valeurs : être un bon exemple, l'utilisation du langage, la discussion, le conseil et le contrôle. Les résultats montrent que les éducateurs préscolaires insistent sur la participation des enfants et sur le développement de leurs aptitudes sociales. Alors que ces données proviennent d'un seul centre préscolaire islandais, il apparaît que les éducateurs préscolaires valorisent fortement la compréhension mutuelle et les interactions significatives avec les enfants.

Resumen La educación en valores se incorpora en los currículos escolares de todos los países nórdicos. Sin embargo, la educación en valores sigue siendo un área descuidada para la investigación y la práctica en la educación y la atención de la primera infancia. En este artículo se informa sobre los aspectos de un proyecto de investigación-acción llevado a cabo en una escuela preescolar en Islandia, a través de un período de 18 meses. El estudio se centró en la naturaleza de los valores que los maestros de preescolar consideraron importantes para fomentar en los niños y en cómo veían su propio rol en la educación en valores. La teoría de la acción comunicativa de Habermas es el marco teórico del estudio. Los datos para este estudio fueron coleccionados en colaboración con los siete maestros de preescolar que participaron en el estudio. Los maestros de preescolar eligieron tres valores en los que centrar su atención en el transcurso del proyecto de investigación-acción: el cuidado, el respeto y la disciplina. Los datos consistían en grabaciones de audio de las reuniones, entrevistas y escrituras de diarios. Se aplicó el análisis temático para encontrar temas y pautas en los datos. Se identificaron cinco temas en relación con el rol de los maestros de preescolar en la educación valores: ser un buen modelo de rol a seguir, el uso del lenguaje, la discusión, la instrucción y el control. Los resultados mostraron que los maestros de preescolar hicieron hincapié en la participación y el desarrollo de las habilidades sociales de los niños. Mientras se recogieron estos datos en una sola escuela preescolar islandesa, parecía que los maestros de preescolar valoraron fuertemente la comprensión mutua y las interacciones significativas con los niños.

Introduction

The Icelandic philosopher Skúlason (2009) pointed out that a nation needs to think critically about what values should be dominant and desirable in the society, when he reflected on the economic crisis in Iceland 2008. He argued that the fault of the crisis laid in the Icelandic educational system, which in his opinion has put more emphasis on teaching, or technical issues, than on education, or critical thinking skills. Since the preschool constitutes the first level of education in the Icelandic school system (Icelandic preschool act no. 90/2008), preschool education is included in Skúlason's concerns.

The study reported in this article focuses on values and values education in an Icelandic early childhood education setting. *Values* are understood as "principles and fundamental convictions which act as general guides to behaviour" and as "standards by which particular actions are judged to be good or desirable" (Halstead and Taylor 2000, p. 169). *Values education*, on the other hand, refers to educational practices through which children are assumed to learn values. The aim of values education was to promote children's understanding and knowledge of values so they can act according to these particular values as members of the society to which they belong (Halstead and Taylor 2000; Thornberg 2008).

Recent research illustrates that values are embedded in the core curricula and legislation regarding early childhood education and care (ECEC) in all of the Nordic countries (Einarsdottir et al. 2015). Nevertheless, research in relation to values education among early childhood populations is largely neglected. This study is a contribution to the gap of values education in ECEC. The aim was to shed light on the values prioritized in one Icelandic preschool, including what values the preschool teachers deem important to communicate to children, and also to reveal how the preschool teachers see their own roles in values education.

Theoretical Approach

Habermas' theory of communicative action is the theoretical framework of the study. The foundational insight of Habermas' theory is, for this study, his dual view of society. That is, that society can be analyzed from two different perspectives: *the system* and *the lifeworld*. From the *lifeworld perspective*, the society is an everyday social world in which individuals share a meaningful context that helps individuals understand and interpret their environment. The preschool settings therefore represent parts of the lifeworld of preschoolers in which values are experienced, expressed, and negotiated. From the *system perspective*, on the other hand, individuals are seen as a natural force with no impact in the society, but it is fulfilled by the economy and the legal system. Educational laws, national curriculum guidelines, and other regulations therefore represent the system of preschools (Habermas 1981/1987; Heath 2011; Ingram 2010; Kemmis 2011).

Habermas talk about two kinds of social actions: communicative and strategic action. The intention behind these actions differs markedly. A *communicative action* is oriented toward mutual understanding and consists of meaningful interactions

characterized by a subject–subject relationship. A *strategic action* is goal-oriented, focused on individual purposive goals which lead to a subject–object relationship between the communicating parties (Habermas 1981/1987; Heath 2011; Ingram 2010; Kemmis 2011).

When education is viewed from the lifeworld perspective, it orients toward individuals' understanding and meaning-making. By contrast, from the system perspective, education is directed toward success and the achievement of goals in the overall society (Fleming and Murphy 2010). Habermas talked about *colonization of the lifeworld*, a circumstance in which the system takes over the lifeworld, and noted how power and money, for instance, can place demands on schooling and eventually undermine the conditions necessary for education. He warns that the result of such colonization could well be the "instrumentalization" (Heath 2011, p. 86) of communication in schools, which itself will lead to unreasonable demands for results and spoon-feeding teaching methods, at the expense of discussions and active learning (Habermas 1981/1987; Heath 2011; Kemmis 2011).

Values and Values Education

Halstead (1996) has pointed out that values are central to education, both in theory and in practical activities. Values education can occur at any time; nevertheless, as Keskin (2012) notes, the early childhood period is crucial since it is the stage at which education can most effectively influence children's development (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/-Eurostat 2014; Sylva et al. 2004), including values education. The preschool is part of young children's lifeworld, in Habermas' understanding, where they socialize with other children. It is a community where children should learn to live and practice democracy (Einarsdottir et al. 2015).

Halstead (1996) claims that school itself reflects the values of the society to which it belongs. However, the existence of different groups in the society with divergent values can sometimes lead to conflict regarding which values should be communicated to children, as Brady (2011) and Gary (2010) have noted. Others have also pointed out how values education can affect education in a positive way, like Toomey (2010), who assumes that systematic and conscious values education leads to increased child participation, a more positive learning experience, and increased cooperation. Some studies from primary schools support this and show that values education is powerful in helping children improve their communication skills (Aðalbjarnardóttir 2007). Other research findings give, on the other hand, reason to question the benefit of values education and claim that primary school children seem to have a problem understanding and interpreting some values (Keskin 2012). Lovat (2011) argues that "values education is increasingly seen as an effective way in which a more holistic approach to learning can be achieved, resulting, among other things, in enhanced academic diligence" (p. 150).

Prioritized Values in Preschools

Findings from a recent study on values embedded in Nordic ECEC curricula show that values related to social skills, rather than academic skills, are emphasized in

Nordic policy documents. Democracy, caring, and competence are embedded as value fields in the educational policies of all the Nordic countries, but discipline is, on the other hand, not emphasized in Nordic ECEC curricula (Einarsdottir et al. 2015). Other studies have shown that disciplinary values are communicated in Nordic preschool settings (Emilson and Johansson 2009; Fugelsnes et al. 2013), which might indicate a difference between system perspectives and lifeworld perspectives in the Nordic preschools.

Emilson and Johansson (2009) identified three different value fields in interactions between preschool teachers and children in Swedish preschools. These were *caring*, *democratic,* and *disciplinary* value fields. The authors point out that the fields of *care* and *discipline* contain values that obligate children, for instance, to not hurt others, to understand, and to show compassion. The field of democracy involves values that offer opportunities for participation, influence, and negotiation. Disciplinary values involve obedience, independence, and achievements, and obligate the children to behave in certain ways and teachers to aim at specific goals. Emilson and Johansson (2009) found that Swedish preschool teachers chose to focus on values that reflected the kind of persons they wanted the children to become. According to their findings, the "desirable Swedish child" (p. 72) is caring, democratic, and disciplined. In Norwegian preschools, seven different values were prioritized: the individual's rights, community, participation, care, independence, competence, and self-enhancement (Fugelsnes et al. 2013).

Preschool Teachers' Role in Values Education

The focus of this study is not only on what values are prioritized in the preschool, but also on the preschool teacher's role in values education. Existing studies show that the teacher's role is a crucial factor since children learn values from the teacher's response to their actions and from the setting's atmosphere, which itself reflects the teacher's values (Aðalbjarnardóttir 2007; Brady 2011; Gary 2010).

Few studies on values education in early childhood educational settings and on preschool teachers' roles have been conducted, but there have been some studies in primary schools (Mergler and Spooner-Lane 2012; Thornberg 2008; Thornberg and Oğuz 2013) and on teachers' education in relation to values education (Lovat et al. 2011; Oğuz 2012). Findings from these studies show that primary school teachers seem to focus mostly on instructing their students in proper behavior when it comes to values education and being a good role model is seen as the main method for teachers to communicate values for children. Excellent questioning and listening skills have also been mentioned as important features of values education, as well as the teacher's ability to recognize and respond to children's diversity (Mergler and Spooner-Lane 2012).

To sum up, existing knowledge illustrates an underpinning focus on values education in Icelandic ECEC documents, representing the system according to Habermas' theory of communicative action (Habermas 1981/1987; Heath 2011). Research has shown that values education can lead to increased child participation and that early childhood is an important period for values education.

Research Questions

There is a gap in knowledge on values education, especially in early childhood education and, in Iceland, no research in values education in preschools has been identified in the literature. New knowledge in the field can promote the future development of educational systems, curricula, and teacher education. This study aims to contribute to this knowledge, and in accordance with the aim of the study, the following research questions guided the work:

- What values do the preschool teachers deem important to communicate in preschool children and why?
- How do the preschool teachers understand their own roles as values educators?

Methods

Data for this study were gathered in collaboration with preschool teachers who participated in an action research study during a period of one and a half years, where they focused on their own values and professional development in relation to values education (Gordon 2008; McNiff 2010). The methodology was chosen since its main advantages are the learning and the professional development that happens through the collaboration between the participants (Kemmis et al. 2014). Action research is seen as an effective way to gain better understanding and improve practice, and furthermore, to increase the empowerment of the teachers (Koshy 2008). The limitation of the study is the fact that it only builds on data from single preschool in Iceland and therefore cannot be generalized (Bogdan and Biklen 2007). The first author of the paper worked in close collaboration with the participants throughout the whole process. The preschool teachers agreed on values that they wanted to focus on during the action research. In the beginning, an emphasis was placed on common understanding of concepts, and this common understanding was seen as crucial for continuing collaboration about values education. The views and understanding of the participants will be presented in this article, since the emphasis in the project was on their professional development rather than on teaching them the meaning of certain values nor give them predetermined definitions. Hence, we did not use definitions developed by other scholars but gave room for the participants to develop their own definitions of the three values.

Participants

The participants were seven preschool teachers in one Icelandic preschool, given the pseudonym *Hill Park* in the study. Hill Park was chosen as participating school after recommendation from the City of Reykjavík preschool authorities. The criteria behind the selection were based on high rate of preschool teachers employed in the preschool; staff stability; the preschool was not participating in other projects concurrent with this one; and finally, the preschool teachers were interested in participating in the action research. Details about the participants are displayed in

Table 1 Study participant details

Name	Education level	Position	Years of employment	Years working at Hill Park
Anna	B. Ed.	Preschool director	19½	10
Sara	B. Ed.	Pedagogical leader and assistant director	20	5½
Helga	B. Ed.	Preschool teacher	8	8
Elin	M. Ed.	Preschool teacher	25	7
Karen	B. Ed.	Pedagogical leader	14	13
Iris	B. Ed.	Preschool teacher	15	5
Lisa	B. Ed.	Special teacher and preschool teacher	13	12

Table 1. There were six females and one male, but to prevent traceability, all seven individuals have been given female pseudonyms. All are educated with a Bachelor of Education as preschool teachers, in addition to one who has a Masters degree in early childhood education. They have experience as preschool teachers from 8 and up to 25 years.

Data

Data were gathered through three methods throughout the action research study. Firstly, the participants kept *journals* throughout the process, in which they reflected on their professional development and how they dealt with values education. No instructions were given to the participants about how often they should write in the journals. Secondly, *audio recordings* from all meetings were used as data. There were two types of meetings held during the research period for the two units in the preschool. There were meetings for the staff in each unit which were held twice each term for each group over three terms. This was a total of 12 meetings overall. In these meetings, the preschool teachers discussed how they were working on values education collaboratively in the children's group and how they intended to continue this work. These meetings were important to harmonize the practice in each unit. There were reflection meetings held with the entire group. There were two meetings in each term. This was a total of six meetings across three terms, and each lasted approximately 2 h. The topic of the reflection meetings was chosen in collaboration with the participants. The preschool teachers reflected on their experiences using logs from their own journals to reflect on values and values education. They also watched video clips that were taken in the setting and discussed and analyzed their own actions in the video (MacNaughton and Hughes 2009; McNiff 2010).

Thirdly, the preschool teachers were *interviewed* and asked about their understanding of values in general, and the values they chose to focus on were discussed. The preschool director was interviewed individually, but other participants were interviewed in two focus groups (Kvale 2009), twice during the period, in the beginning and at the end. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

All the data were transcribed, and quotations from the participants were translated from Icelandic to English. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data and to find themes and patterns. The analysis started during the data gathering. The first step was to organize the data to simplify further work. At that stage, all data were classified chronologically, starting with the data from the beginning of the process. Journals were analyzed separately, one at a time, since the dates were not always written in each log. The next step was to code the data according to the three values that the preschool teachers chose to focus on early in the process as well as their views on role of the preschool teachers in values education. The software program Atlas.ti7 (2003) was used for coding the data, except for the journals which were coded manually, since they were handwritten and due to the time-consuming nature of typing them. The third step in the analysis was to examine the data for patterns and identify themes within each code. The focus was on how the preschool teachers understood the three values, why they found these values important to communicate to the children and the roles of the preschool teachers in values education. The final step was then to display the findings according to the themes (Braun and Clarke 2006; MacNaughton and Hughes 2009).

Ethical Issues

The study was reported to The Data Protection Authority of Iceland, and the City of Reykjavík preschool authorities provided permission for the study. All participants signed informed consent forms, where they acknowledged that they knew what was involved in participating and that they had the right to opt out anytime during the process. The confidentiality and anonymity of the participants was also emphasized (EECERA 2015). Parents and other staff members at Hill Park were informed about the study.

Findings

The time the preschool teachers spent choosing the values on which to focus indicated that they found it complicated to define the concept of *values*. In the beginning of the action research, they were unsure about their own understanding of the concept. After discussions and reflections during common meetings for some weeks, the preschool teachers chose three different values to focus on during the action research period: *care, respect,* and *discipline*. These three values are therefore seen as prioritized in Hill Park's practice, and the findings that will be presented here show the participating preschool teachers' view and understanding of values education.

Prioritized Values—Care, Respect, and Discipline

The preschool teachers agreed that *care*, *respect,* and *discipline* were important values to communicate to young children. They chose these three values because

they found them suitable for the children at Hill Park at the time and found these three values covering what they wanted to teach children in the preschool. The preschool teachers saw care, respect, and discipline as values that make the children socially stronger and therefore they wanted the children to adopt these values and learn to use them as guidelines in life. They found it important for the children to learn good communication and self-control, especially because they are and will always be a part of some group both in preschool and in the community. Elin emphasized this in a focus group interview, saying: "I think that social competence, to be able to have good communications with others, I think that is most important" (May 2013).

According to Sara, the preschool teachers seemed to realize that their choice did not necessarily stand for universal perspectives on what values are important in ECEC. She said during a meeting in the beginning of the project:

> For example we have, as a group of teachers, chosen certain values that we want to focus on, but maybe someone else won't find these to be the right values to focus on….this is something that we believe is right here and now (Meeting, May 2013).

The preschool teachers saw the three values as closely related, as Sara said at a meeting in October 2013: "…they [the three values] are very much intertwined," and Elin continued, saying: "…we cannot, for example, work with discipline unless there also is respect involved."

Table 2 summarizes how the preschool teachers at Hill Park understood the values of *care*, *respect,* and *discipline*, after reflecting on these concepts for the first 3 months of the process. Most of the teachers had been focusing on *respect* and *care* before in their practice but wanted to explore these two value fields further. They found *discipline,* however, an exciting challenge, something new and important to focus on in the practice and communicate to the children.

The preschool teachers emphasized that the value of *care* represented a main theme in the preschool practice. When the preschool teachers at one of the units

Table 2 Preschool teachers' definitions of the three values

	Care	Respect	Discipline
Definitions of values	Well-being for others	Good communications	Rules
(What is involved)	Warm	Talk nicely	Framework
	Comfort	Listen	Foundation
	Helpfulness	Respond	Help/tell what to do
	Consideration	How to treat others	Self-control/self-discipline
	Friendship	Consideration	Sticking to what started
		See others' points of view	Finishing what started
		Understand difference	Positive discipline
		Fairness	Flexible rules
		Courtesy	Negative discipline
			Rigid rules

discussed how they understood the value of care, Lisa said: "…you do care if something happens to the other person… it is about comforting and also having tolerance for others."

The preschool teachers also saw *respect* as one of the most important things for children to learn in preschools. During a focus group interview, Elin said: "…they [the children] learn that you cannot treat other people just the way you want… they learn communications that are characterized by respect" (October 2013). To clarify how she understood communications that are characterized of respect, Elin continued:

> It involves, for example, that you talk nicely to people, that you use nice words when you talk and that you listen to the person you are talking to… that you listen, hear, and respond to what the other person says.

The preschool teachers found *discipline* the most complicated value to work with out of these three and believed it might be because people often see discipline as negative and are reluctant to even talk about discipline, especially in relation to early childhood education. Despite this, the preschool teachers at Hill Park found it important to focus on discipline. In a focus group interview, Sara explained why: "Discipline was definitely chosen because we found it necessary to clarify it… both here in the preschool and outside…in the society" (October 2013).

Two main themes were evident when the preschool teachers reflected on how they understood discipline: *rules* and *self-control.* In a focus group interview, Iris mentioned these two themes when focusing on discipline, stating: "for me we have two principles concerning discipline; they are rules, you need to be able to follow rules, and the other is that you need to be able to control yourself" (October 2013). Thus, the preschool teachers saw rules as a necessary foundation for discipline, a framework that helps people to control themselves by reminding them to stop and think before they act.

The preschool teachers made a clear distinction between positive and negative discipline in their understanding of the concept, and clearly promoted positive discipline practices. The difference between positive and negative discipline, they argued, lies in certain flexibility regarding rules (see Table 2). This view is evident in Sara's journal when she wrote about discipline:

> Discipline is often in general discourse negative and related to power, violence, or abuse of some kind. Positive discipline is therefore something that I have more dedicated myself to use and I believe it is about teaching children and helping them in their communication—implementing social skills and competence.

How to Communicate Care, Respect, and Discipline?

Throughout the action research period, the preschool teachers consistently reflected on their own role as values educators and on how they could communicate values to the children. Analysis of the data revealed five themes in relation to preschool teachers' understanding of their roles in values education.

Being a Good Role Model

The preschool teachers understood their own role as values educators particularly as being good role models. Lisa said in a focus group interview: "I think that being a good role model is a good way to teach these issues [the values]" (May 2013).

Use the Right Words

The preschool teachers also agreed that it would be important to use words for the values that the children could understand. They believed that they could easily use the words *care* and *respect* in their discourse with the children, but found it more complicated to use the word *discipline*. The teachers came up with concepts to use that they found more suitable in their discourse with the children. For example, they decided to focus on the concept of *friendship* to communicate care to the children by discussing what it means to be friends, what friends do, and so on. They also decided to encourage the children to say nice things to each other, like Iris reflected on during a meeting:

> We have been connecting care with friendship, for example when there are conflicts in the group; what kind of friend do you want to be, do you want someone to do this to you, and so on. We connect the value of care with how we can be good friends (December 2013).

Likewise, the teachers decided to focus on teaching the children *courtesy* and *consideration* of others, in order to communicate respect to them. For example, they emphasized that everyone said good morning when they arrived and good-bye when they left the preschool.

The preschool teachers decided to use the concept *self-control* instead of discipline so the children understood the meaning of the concept as the teachers understood it.

Discussing Values with the Children

The preschool teachers decided to make the emphasis on values visible on the walls, by putting up posters with the values written on, even though the children could not read. It was mainly seen as a reminder for the teachers to use the concepts in their discourse when talking to the children. Elin discussed this in a focus group interview: "When the language is there to help us, then somehow we use it [the concepts] more" (May 2013).

As the action research evolved, the preschool teachers further realized the importance of using the values in discussions with the children in order to communicate them. In conflicts, they found it useful to help the children see others' points of view, and by that communicating both values of *care* and *respect.* Karen explained during a discussion at a meeting how she does this when she works with the children: "Use it [the values] with them [the children] in discussions when we are trying to solve conflicts between them, and maybe talk about who is your friend and what it means to be a good friend" (December 2013). Lisa agreed and

emphasized that discussions were more effective in smaller groups, because then each child has a better opportunity to participate. The preschool teachers found open questions as a good strategy when talking to the children, as Karen mentioned during a focus group interview: "Use open questions and then they [the children] may find the solution themselves" (May 2013). Elin was convinced that the teachers were good at talking to the children about values. She said, "I think we all are good at involving the values in the discussions with the children" (Meeting, March 2014).

Guidance and Closeness

The preschool teachers agreed that their role should be to guide the children in their communication: "In all communications we are communicating values by guiding… when you are helping them [the children] to find other or new ways to reach their goals," Lisa said during a focus group interview (October 2013). The teachers found it important to seek the opportunities in daily practice to teach the values, and they also agreed that being there for the children was very important. In a focus group interview, Helga explained, "…we are there on the side and always ready to come in if needed, but they [the children] are doing everything on their own assumptions" (May 2013).

The preschool teachers also noticed how effective closeness can be when they watched video clips from a play situation at Hill Park during a meeting. Anna commented, "Just look when Iris sat down on the floor, she isn't saying much, just approaching them and showing their play interest, how much changes, just by moving towards the children… it is so great and has a great impact" (December 2013).

The preschool teachers found it important to compliment the children on what they did well, for example, if they showed that they had learned something new. This was discussed in a focus group interview in the beginning of the action research study, where Iris said, "Compliments are very important, they are very powerful… one can see the good impact they have on the children… it's like a vitamin." Sara's reflections in her journal also show that she found it important to be close to the children: "My aim is to build a relationship with each child that is nourished on respect and care."

To Direct—Use Rules

The preschool teachers discussed rules in relation to *discipline,* and they agreed that some rules could not be flexible and that the teacher had to direct the children if these rules were broken. Hence, they found it sometimes important to put a stop to a behavior and to take control of the situations in order to teach discipline: "It is about self-control and sometimes we need to help them [the children] with that," Sara said during a focus group interview (October 2013). It was clear, however, that the preschool teachers did not always want to direct the children; it was usually seen as unnecessary and often rather negative. Elin reflected on her own practice after watching a video clip from lunchtime, and she was quite shocked by how much she

was in control of the situation by putting food on the children's plate instead of allowing the children to do it themselves:

> I just want to say that I find it disturbing to watch how much I am serving them [the children]. It is not always like this. I am serving them the jam and I am serving them the sauce (Meeting, December 2013).

The preschool teachers believed that when the children were able to follow their own interests, they would be more disciplined. They therefore believed in being flexible with rules and following the children's interests in order to promote discipline in the group. At a meeting early in process, Elin said, "I think that this route towards discipline is exciting; to have activities that are really interesting for them; that they find themselves disciplined in what they do" (October 2013). The preschool teachers also believed that teaching discipline could be about providing the children with more responsibility, for example, by letting them solve problems themselves and in a peaceful way, so everyone is satisfied.

Discussion

The aim of this study was twofold: firstly, to shed light on the values prioritized by the preschool teachers in one Icelandic preschool, and secondly, to reveal how the preschool teachers saw their own roles in values education. The preschool teachers gained new knowledge and empowerment in their own practice by participating in the action research (Kemmis et al. 2014; Koshy 2008). Even though the study only builds on data from one preschool in Iceland and cannot be generalized for other settings, the findings contribute to the field of values education in ECEC in several ways. For example, the findings show the complexity of working with values education. The study also provides important information on the roles of the preschool teachers as values educators, a field that has not been studied much. Finally, the methodology of the study has proven to be a constructive way to work on professional development in ECEC, for example to work on common understanding of values and values education, which the preschool teachers found important and crucial when they worked with values education in their setting. These issues need to be explored further in future studies.

The preschool teachers who participated in this action research study chose to focus on the values of *care, respect,* and *discipline.* Existing Nordic studies show that caring and democratic values are dominant in both the lifeworld and the system perspective of Nordic preschools (Einarsdottir et al. 2015), but disciplinary values are mainly found in the lifeworld perspective (Emilson and Johansson 2009; Fugelsnes et al. 2013). The preschool teachers believed that these three values would make the children socially stronger. Their focus on social skills is in accordance with existing knowledge on values education, and increased social skills have been found to be the main benefit of values education (Aðalbjarnardóttir 2007; Toomey 2010).

The teachers seemed to realize that their prioritizing of values reflected their personal values, which is in line with Brady's (2011) and Gary's (2010) discussions

about deviations of values in each society because of the members' different personal values. The findings demonstrate the importance of gaining a common understanding when reflecting on and working with values in early childhood settings. The concept alone does not necessarily explain what is to be communicated to the children, but needs to be well defined so everyone in the setting understands it in similar way. This need for clarification may be especially when working with values like discipline, which seems to be defined and understood differently among cultures or even among individuals within the same culture. Furthermore, personal background can affect one's understanding, as Brady (2011) and Gary (2010) have noted. Therefore, it might be some difference in how individuals understand the same concept even though they have been working in collaboration to find a shared understanding. This illustrates the complexity of interpretations of values and points to values education as a multifaceted rather than building on cause-and-effect relationship.

Discipline is not emphasized in the Icelandic national curriculum guidelines (2011), but nevertheless the participating preschool teachers wanted to focus on the value of discipline because they believed that it would make the children socially stronger and that they would learn self-control. It is interesting to consider where the preschool teachers' focus on discipline comes from and why they chose discipline as one of the values to focus on, and why they saw it as a challenge. A possible explanation is that, because of external factors, they found themselves constrained to communicate discipline to the children to meet requirements from society. If this is the reason for their choice, it might be seen as an example of colonization of the lifeworld, which Habermas warns against. The colonization Habermas speaks of is when the system perspective takes over the lifeworld perspective such as when discipline is forced into the preschools (Habermas 1981/1987; Kemmis 2011). However, the preschool teachers' unconventional definition of discipline, in this study, might have been their way to be true to their own beliefs, by relating discipline to social skills, and at the same time, responding to outside requirements.

Conflicts within the value of discipline were identified in the study. On the one hand, the preschool teachers wanted to communicate positive discipline, in which rules were flexible to individual's needs. Hence, they found it important to aim at what Habermas calls mutual understanding, by communicating discipline through communicative action (Habermas 1981/1987). On the other hand, they found it important to have some rigid rules where the children were required to do as they were told or finish what they had started. In other words, they wanted to communicate some rules through strategic actions (Habermas 1981/1987). In fact, discipline was seen as the most complicated value of the three to work with, possibly because it is often related to something negative in the minds of educators. The participants, on the other hand, defined discipline as a social skill, and in a sense the term *self-discipline* (Aðalbjarnardóttir 2007) might be more appropriate for their understanding. They did not seem to understand the value of discipline as an obligatory value as Emilson and Johansson (2009) found in their study. When the preschool teachers found that they needed to make a stop to a behavior and direct the children's behavior, that is, to follow some rigid rules, they saw themselves

helping the children to gain self-control rather than to obligate them to act in a particular manner.

The emphasis that the preschool teachers put on children's participation, even in relation to discipline, is in line with Emilson and Johansson's (2009) definition of democratic values, which involves participation, influence, and negotiation. Even though the preschool teachers at Hill Park preschool did not choose to focus on the value of democracy, democratic values were evident in the data. The preschool teachers, for example, emphasized children's participation and influence in the setting, and thereby found it important to aim at mutual understanding, using communicative actions when communicating values to the children, rather than aiming at achievement of goals by using strategic actions (Habermas 1981/1987). The teachers also seemed to realize the importance of good listening and questioning skills, which indicates their emphasis on democracy, and is consistent with existing research (Mergler and Spooner-Lane 2012).

In addition to unveiling values prioritized in one Icelandic preschool, the aim of the study was also to shed light on how the participating preschool teachers understood their own roles in values education. Five themes were identified. *Being a good role model* was seen as the most important theme, a belief that is in harmony with findings from existing studies (Mergler and Spooner-Lane 2012). The participants also found it important to *use words that the children understood* and *to discuss the values with the children*, methods that indicate their emphasis on communicative actions and mutual understanding (Habermas 1981/1987). Further, the teachers wanted to *guide the children in their actions* rather than instructing them in proper behavior, which has been a common method found in values education research with primary school teachers (Mergler and Spooner-Lane 2012; Thornberg 2008; Thornberg and Oğuz 2013). Finally, the preschool teachers found themselves sometimes forced *to direct* the children to a certain behavior if the rules could not be flexible.

Conclusion

Values can be communicated implicitly or explicitly. One aim of this action research project was for the participating preschool teachers to become more conscious of the values they communicate to children. The findings of this study indicate that the participating preschool's practice is oriented more toward mutual understandings, that is, toward meaningful interactions with children, rather than toward the achievement of academic goals. Also, it was observed that during the action research period, there was more emphasis on a lifeworld perspective rather than a systems' perspective on education, in the participating setting.

The preschool teachers who participated in the study emphasized the importance of children's participation and development of social skills. For example, they related discipline to social competences, a value that would make the children socially stronger, even though discipline is often understood as a value that obligates certain behaviors and is not related to participation. The emphasis of the preschool teachers on social competence throughout the whole process appeared to

reflect their professional practices and attitudes which, in turn, affected their beliefs about values education and what values are important for young children and why.

The study has given insight into values education in one Icelandic preschool setting. The findings can only serve as an indication of the beliefs and practices of preschool teachers and an example of professional development in the area of values education in ECEC settings. These findings make a valuable contribution to a limited body of research available in the area of values education in an ECEC settings particularly the relationship between teachers' attitudes, teaching practices, and beliefs about values education as well as the dichotomy between teaching practices related to discipline and how children's participation can be fully realized. The role of preschool educators in values education is of special interest for future research in the fields of values and values education.

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Article II. Preschool Teachers Communicating Values to Children

Preschool Teachers Communicating Values to Children

This empirical study aims to find if and how preschool teachers communicate values they consider important for children to learn in preschool. The study is a part of a Nordic research project on values education in Nordic preschools. Values are understood as desirable principles that guide human actions. Theoretically, the study draws on a sociocultural perspective and Habermas' theory of communicative action. The data consists of approximately 17 hours of video observations of communication between preschool teachers and children. Two episodes were chosen for further analysis and in-depth discussion. Care, respect, and discipline had been agreed on as important values to communicate to preschool children. The preschool teachers used different approaches to communicate these values, depending on their professional and personal backgrounds. The values were communicated implicitly rather than explicitly. The study contributes to research on values education in the ECE and gives reasons for reflection on the practices of preschool teachers.

Keywords: preschool; preschool teachers; values education; communicative action; play; video observation

Introduction

The study reported in this article focuses on how values are communicated to young children in preschools. The study was conducted in the context of Nordic early childhood education where almost all children aged 2-5 years old attend preschool. The so-called Nordic model in early childhood education (ECE) has been described as a social pedagogy approach where social, emotional, and cognitive aspects are integrated into children's play, learning, and development. The ideology behind the Nordic model prioritises values such as democracy, equality, freedom, independence, and solidarity. Furthermore, children are seen as competent persons and their rights to participate and have their voices heard are highly valued (Wagner 2006; Wagner and Einarsdóttir 2008). All the Nordic countries have national curriculum guidelines for preschools; which explain the values, purposes, and processes of ECE. Learning strategies that are natural for children are encouraged, with special focus on play, relationships, curiosity, and a practical aesthetic to support children's learning and development. Moreover, values education is embedded in all the Nordic curricula and legislation, with the values of care, democracy, and community seen as fundamental (Broström, Einarsdottir and Pramling Samualsson 2018; Einarsdottir et al. 2015; OECD 2006; Wagner 2006; Wagner and Einarsdóttir 2008).

Over recent decades, preschool teachers' education has changed and developed in all the Nordic countries. Since 2008, Iceland is the only country among the Nordic countries where one must have a master's degree in early childhood education and get a licence from the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, to assume the title *preschool teacher.* Previously, only a bachelor's degree was required for the profession (Broström, Einarsdottir and Pramling Samuelsson 2018).

This study builds upon and extends a larger study where seven preschool teachers from one [country] preschool participated in an action research project over 18 months, working on their own professional development in relation to values education. The preschool teachers chose care, respect, and discipline as the most important values to teach the children; they found that these values would make the children socially stronger [reference deleted for blind review]. In the spirit of action research, we gave room for the participants to develop their own definitions of the three values and these will be used for this analysis, rather than using definitions from other scholars. The preschool teachers understood the value of care as involving well-being for others, warmth, comfort, helpfulness, consideration and friendship. They understood the value of respect as involving good communications (talk nicely, listen, and respond), thinking about how to treat others, consideration, seeing others' points of view, understanding differences, fairness and courtesy. The value of discipline was understood as involving rules or frameworks (foundation and help to know what to do) and self-control/self-discipline (sticking to and finishing what one started). The preschool teachers distinguished between positive discipline, which included flexible rules, and negative discipline, with rigid rules, and wanted to emphasize positive rather than negative discipline in their practice (Sigurdardottir and Einarsdottir 2016).

This study extends the prior study and focuses more explicitly on how values are visible in the communication between preschool teachers and children.

Theoretical standpoints

This study emanates from a socio-cultural perspective and assumes that human learning is culturally and historically situated and inseparable from the context in which it develops (Säljö 2015; Vygotsky 1978). From a sociocultural perspective, children learn

values through the environment in which they live. Furthermore, values can build on standards that are important with family, society, and preschool peers, as well as those presented in the media (Keskin 2012; Rogoff 2003). Keskin (2012) claims that these contexts constitute informal forms of values education. In this study, we focus on values in the preschool context, where the nature of the preschool and its teachers are key factors that influence the development of children's values. However, it is important to note that the preschool itself reflects the values of the society to which it belongs.

To examine the communication of values in detail, the study also draws on Jürgen Habermas' (1995) theory of communicative action. Habermas described two types of social actions that are based on different intentions: *communicative action* and *strategic action*. Communicative actions are oriented towards mutual understanding, with the intention of reaching a consensus based on the best argument. Interpersonal relationships maintained through communicative action are characterised by openness, reciprocity, and mutual understanding. It involves, at its base, the recognition of other participants. On the other hand, strategic actions are goal-oriented, and the intention is to reach certain unilateral goals. A person who acts strategically seeks to manipulate others and adopts an instrumental attitude (Edgar 2006; Fultner 2011; Habermas 1995; Kemmis 2011). Emilson and Johansson (2009) claim that communicative action between teachers and young children requires special qualities, which are described 'in terms of closeness to the child's perspective, emotional presence and playfulness' (63).

Values education

There is no universal definition of the concept of values. The understanding of the concept depends on which perspective is emphasised. The focus can be on values in relation to the human mind and action, on individuals and cultural groups, or on

context-related and universal values (Johansson, Emilson and Puroila 2018). This study employs a holistic view of values and sees them as intertwined in individuals' minds and actions, rather than being in either of these spheres (Hitlin and Piliavin 2004; Tappan 2006). Our understanding of values emanates from Tappan's (2006) ideas, which embrace values as cultural tools that individuals use in situations where their moral decisions and actions are demanded, namely, when seeking answers to the question 'What is the right thing to do in this situation?' *Values* are therefore defined as 'principles and fundamental convictions which act as general guides to behaviour' and as 'standards by which particular actions are judged to be good or desirable' (Halstead and Taylor 2000, 169). Furthermore, we understand values as emerging at the individual and group level and that individuals live according to their own personal values but also follow the values of groups they belong to (Johansson et al. 2018). Finally, in this study, values are seen as socially constructed and context-related, rather than constant and universal. Therefore, we believe that values can emerge differently in different situations (Halstead 1996; Johansson et al. 2018).

Values education is defined as educational practices through which children are assumed to learn certain values (Halstead and Taylor 2000). Furthermore, we understand that values education aims to promote children's understanding and knowledge of values so they can act according to these as members of the society to which they belong (Halstead and Taylor 2000; Thornberg 2008). Toomey (2010) argues that working with values education in preschools can lead to improved cooperation among children, and that requires teachers to let go of control, listen to the children and consider their perspectives.

Values education can be both explicit and implicit. *Explicit values education* refers to the school's curriculum and the teacher's specific intentions and educational

practices (Halstead 1996). The six fundamental pillars of education submitted in the icelandic national curriculum guide for preschools (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture 2011) are examples of explicit values. These values are: literacy, sustainability, democracy and human rights, equality, health and welfare, and creativity. *Implicit values education* is, on the other hand, embedded in practice and often escapes direct attention. It has been termed a hidden curriculum (Halstead and Xiao 2010). Implicit values education occurs through the experience of attending school but is not authorised by the school (Halstead 1996; Halstead and Xiao 2010). Preschool teachers, for example, often communicate values to the children through their daily practice, unconsciously (Johansson 2018). A recent Nordic study shows that values are seldom conceptualised or reflected on in preschools but are rather lived and communicated in practice (Puroila et al. 2016). Furthermore, Thornberg (2009) argues that school rules are part of the hidden curriculum and states, 'With rules, teachers attempt to create and maintain social order, to regulate pupil behaviour and to make lessons, breaks and other school activities function' (249).

Values communicated in preschools

Preschool children learn values from the specific preschool context, which reflects values from the society and from teachers' and peers' own personal values (Halstead 1996). Values are communicated both consciously and unconsciously in everyday preschool practice (Johansson 2018). Children also learn values from the teachers' responses to their learning and actions (Halstead 1996) and, therefore, the role of the teacher is crucial in values education (Gray 2010). The teacher is responsible for supporting children to reflect on values in the preschool setting (Johansson 2018). Johansson (2018) and Thornberg (2016) have pointed out that children learn for

citizenship through values and rules expressed and communicated in the preschool practice.

An individual teacher's actions are related to his or her professional and personal beliefs (Brady 2011; Gray 2010; Puroila and Haho 2017). In their daily work, teachers constantly face the question of what is the right thing to do in a particular situation (Puroila and Haho 2017).

Recent Nordic studies show that preschool teachers emphasise children's participation and social skills when working with values education. These studies indicate that teachers consider social competences to be a more prominent goal than academic competence in a preschool context (Juutinen and Viljamaa 2016; Puroila and Haho 2017; Sigurdardottir and Einarsdottir 2016; Williams et al. 2015). Children's individual rights also seem to be emphasised by preschool teachers in Nordic preschools, even though there is often tension between individual rights and collective rules (Johansson et al. 2016).

In Emilson and Johansson's (2009) study, the preschool teachers typically used communicative actions when interacting with the children during circle time; however, when they wanted to maintain control over the communication, they used strategic actions. Another study on values education in Nordic preschools shows that educators found it important to communicate respectfully with the children and give them the opportunity to influence a situation. Nevertheless, the preschool teachers' rights were found to be overarching when in conflict with the children's rights (Johansson et al. 2016). Similarly, Puroila and Haho (2017) found that educators in Finnish preschools saw rules as important to manage the complexity of the preschool context, to maintain order and to foster children's morality.

Research in primary schools have shown that teachers seem to focus mostly on instructing their students regarding proper behaviour when it comes to values education (Lovat et al. 2011; Mergler and Spooner-Lane 2012; Thornberg 2008; Thornberg and Oğuz 2013). Research conducted in preschools, on the other hand, shows that teachers emphasise being a good role model when communicating values to children, as they assume the children learn from their actions (Sigurdardottir and Einarsdottir 2016). Furthermore, existing studies show that preschool teachers recognize that it is important to find a common professional language when working with values education (Juutinen and Viljamaa 2016; Sigurdardottir and Einarsdottir 2016; Thornberg 2016).

Research conducted in primary schools has indicated that teachers seem to lack professional knowledge about how to work with values and have difficulties relating their practices to theories or research in the field (Thornberg 2008; Thornberg and Oğuz 2013). A similar situation seems to apply in the field of early childhood education when there is no special focus on values education in the curricula, since research shows that preschool teachers do not seem to focus consiously on values education in practice. Thus, values education seems to be an implicit practice rather than an explicit practice (Johansson 1999; 2018; Lovat et al. 2011).

Based on previous studies of the issue and the theoretical standpoints, we address the following research question in this study: How do preschool teachers communicate values to the children?

Method

The overall project builds on video observations from one icelandic preschool. Sixty-eight episodes were recorded, lasting for nine hours and 17 minutes in total. The dataset provided rich information regarding preschool teachers communicating with children

about values. In this study, the focus was directed towards playtime situations. Playtime was chosen as a focus because these situations provide an outstanding opportunity for preschool teachers to communicate with children and teach them values. After thoroughly examining the dataset, watching the videos repeatedly, analysing them broadly, and coding, two episodes were chosen for further analysis and discussion to provide descriptive examples of what values are communicated to the children and how they are communicated. Thus, the teachers and children in the episodes were selected to represent examples of frequent and recurrent playtime situations that are seen in the preschool. The dataset shows that in playtime the children usually play in small groups, have opportunities to control their play – even though there are some rules to follow – and there is always at least one preschool teacher present during playtime or monitoring off and on what is going on. The episodes also meet the criteria set to answer the research questions. Namely, they are framed by the preschool teacher's presence, in the sense that she observes what is going on in the situation, communicates with the children, and intervenes when needed.

Two preschool teachers and seven children participated in the two episodes. In Episode 1, four boys, aged three and four, are playing with blocks and the preschool teachers Linda is present. The boys can decide themselves what they are building and whom of them will build and play together. In Episode 2 three boys, five years old, are playing basketball and the preschool teacher Elin is monitoring their play every now and then. The boys had asked for permission to use the cloakroom, next to the playroom, to play basketball. Elin gives them freedom to negotiate the rules of the game themselves and tells them that she trusts them to play in the cloakroom by themselves. Unintentionally, all children in both episodes were boys. The intention in this article is, however, not to take a gender or age perspective when analysing the episodes, since the

focus of the study is on the communication between preschool teachers and children, in general, and in relation to values education.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data (MacNaughton and Hughes 2009). To grasp the totality of the data, the first step in the process involved watching the videotaped material a number of times. The videos were watched chronologically and coded in line with the theoretical background and existing knowledge on values education (theory-driven coding).

First, the concepts of communicative and strategic actions were used for analysis since they shed light on how values were communicated to children (Habermas 1995). Second, the two concepts of explicit and implicit values education, were used for analysis to understand how values education emerges in the preschool settings (Halstead 1996; Halstead and Xiao 2010). The final step in the analysis process included examining the data for patterns and themes within each code. After completing this step, episodes and quotations that represented and clarified the themes were selected (MacNaughton and Hughes 2009).

To improve the credibility of the findings, the two preschool teachers, Linda and Elin, watched the episodes in which they participated. They also took part in and read the analysis involving them and reflected on their own communications with the children in collaboration with a researcher. This procedure was important for background information about the situation. Furthermore, this was a significant step in the analysis process in relation to the action research methodology, since the voices of the preschool teachers were captured.

Ethical issues

To prevent traceability, names used in this article are pseudonyms. All participants

signed informed consent forms. The parents also signed informed consent forms. The children did not need to sign consent, according to the Data Protection Authority (2012) in[country]. Even so, it was important to inform the children and allow them to get to know the researcher. The researcher was aware of the children's reactions to her presence and the fact that she was recording the situations and paid specific attention to whether the children expressed dissent in any way during the video recording. Children can express dissent in many ways, both verbally and non-verbally, and it is the researcher's ethical obligation to respect this dissent (Dockett, Einarsdóttir and Perry 2012). There were no apparent signs of opposition from the children during the two episodes used in this study.

Findings

Responding to the aim of the study – to investigate how the preschool teachers communicated values to the children – two episodes from the dataset were chosen for further analysis. This gave us an opportunity for a detailed description and thorough analysis to provide a rich example to represent the whole dataset.

Each episodes is presented below, analysed and discussed from the perspective of two theory-driven themes. The first theme comes from Habermas's (1995) concepts: *communicative actions* and *strategic actions*. The second theme is *explicit* and *implicit* values education as defined by Halstead (1996) and Halstead and Xiao (2010).

In the transcripts of the episodes, the names of the teachers are written in capital letters to delineate them clearly from the children's names.

Episode 1 – Playing with unit blocks

Four boys, Tomas, Bjarni, Oskar and Steinar, aged three and four years, are playing with blocks. One preschool teacher, LINDA, is present. She sits on the floor near the boys and observes them. She has a camera and takes a photo of them playing. Two of the boys, Steinar

and Oskar, are playing with the blocks by themselves. The other two, Bjarni and Tomas, are building a bridge together.

Bjarni looks at LINDA, points to the bridge and says, 'Look!'

LINDA looks at it and responds, 'Yes'.

Bjarni then says, 'Okay, look' and crawls under the bridge towards Tomas, who is on the other side.

LINDA says, 'You need to be careful'. When Bjarni makes it through without knocking over the bridge, she adds, 'This was no problem'. Bjarni smiles.

Then Tomas says, 'Look at me!' and crawls under the bridge towards Bjarni.

Steinar has been watching them playing. He jumps up and says, 'Look at mine! Look at mine!' and points to what he has been building. No one looks at his building. Bjarni and Tomas continue to crawl under the bridge, and LINDA watches them.

Bjarni says, 'Then everyone can go', and LINDA asks, 'Everyone can try this game?'

Tomas asks Bjarni, 'Should we crash?' and they crawl and meet under the bridge.

LINDA takes a photo of them and says, 'Wow. But do you know that if you collide with it, it will be uncomfortable? You need to be very careful'.

Tomas and Bjarni listen to her, and Tomas says, 'Yes', and they continue to play.

LINDA says, 'It hurts to have such big blocks fall on you', and Tomas agrees by saying 'Yes'. They continue to play, and LINDA says, 'This is going very well'.

Now Oskar joins Bjarni and Tomas and starts crawling under the bridge too, and says, 'I'm going to be a worm'.

When Oskar joins in the play, Tomas says, 'This is just for those who are in green, in green socks'. Bjarni agrees to this by nodding.

LINDA says, 'But we all are in the green group, aren't we?'

Oskar looks at his socks, points and says, 'I have green socks,' and Bjarni says, 'Me too'.

Tomas looks at them and then says, 'No, only those who have green sweaters on; they can go'.

Steinar has been watching but now joins in. He looks at his sweater and says, 'Me'.

Tomas continues, 'No, those who have been building this', and then turns to Bjarni and whispers to him but so loudly that everyone can hear, 'They can just go'.

LINDA, who has been watching and listening, asks, 'Is that fair, Tomas?' Tomas turns to her and answers 'No'. LINDA, referring to a previous situation, says, 'Remember earlier, the starfish, how you found that unfair?' (The boys had gone for a walk and they found a starfish. They had a conflict about taking turns holding it).

All four boys look at LINDA. Bjarni answers, 'Yes, if one has it all the time'.

LINDA says, 'Yes, exactly, if one has it all the time and the others cannot even try. You were a bit sorry then'.

The boys stop shortly and then continue to play, Steinar on his own with his building and Bjarni, Tomas and Oskar with the bridge. The joint play situation fades out quite soon and Bjarni and Tomas express a desire to make something else from the blocks the bridge is built from. Oskar joins them. Steinar continues to play alone with his building. LINDA sits on the floor and observes the boys build and play.

Strategic and communicative actions. In this episode, Linda uses both communicative and strategic actions when communicating with the children. Strategic actions are observable in the sense that she as a teacher sets the rules for the activity. She wants to include all the children in a joint activity. Thus, she gives the two boys little opportunity to express why they want to play together, without the interference from other peers and what their intentions are with their activity. Linda also uses communicative actions to convey values to the children, where she seems to aim at a mutual understanding of fairness and how the children can practice this in their play. Her aim seems to be to help the boys understand what is going on in the situation. She does that by referring to the previous starfish experience, asking, 'Remember earlier…is that fair?' However, it is not possible to deduce in this situation what Bjarni learned from the previous situation. When Bjarni agrees with the preschool teacher and Oskar is let into the group, the play fades out. Bjarni and Tomas leave their ongoing activity and discuss new play plans. Simultaneously, no one takes notice of Steinar, who tries to get some attention and be part of the ongoing activity by referring to his green sweater. In that sense, the teacher's strategic action contrasts with the values she intends to communicate. After watching the episode, Linda commented that she had wanted to support the boys in their communication, based on her experience and knowledge about what kind of support and guidance these boys needed.

Explicit and implicit values education. The episode illustrates how children are socialised to systems of both explicit and implicit values education and norms. The

conditions for playing appear to be free in the sense that the activity allows the children to choose what they want to play in the block area and if they want to play alone or with peers. The preschool teacher does not take an active part in the children's play, but she monitors what takes place and intervenes when she considers that the children are not acting or communicating according to the preschool rules. She communicates values such as care and respect clearly and explicitly. However, she communicates discipline implicitly to the children, which can lead to misunderstanding for them. For example, she does not say directly to the children that all children should play together, and no one should be excluded, even though her interventions hint at this unwritten rule.

When Linda discussed the boys' rule about who gets to crawl under their bridge, she did not communicate her aim in a straightforward way. The two boys, Tomas and Bjarni, ended their play. This might be because they were confused about what was allowed in the situation and did not understand the rule that Linda was trying to communicate to them. However, the end of that play could also be because the two boys did not agree to abide by the implicit rule that all children should play together, and after trying to argue for their own rules in the play, they did not see another solution.

After watching the episode, Linda explained that there were some unwritten, implicit rules for the block area, including collaboration, common problem solving, and sharing blocks fairly. Before each group starts playing with the blocks, they sit down and talk about these rules. She said, 'We mention that it is good to work together, help each other and find solutions. We encourage them to communicate and collaborate'. She did not mention a rule that everyone should play together.

Episode 2 – Playing basketball

Aron and David, age five, are playing basketball in the cloakroom. ELIN, a preschool teacher, gave them permission to play there, and she keeps the door open from the main room of

the Butterfly Unit, where the rest of the children are playing. ELIN observes the children in the cloakroom every now and then. After playing for a few minutes, they start to argue about the rules of the game.

David aims for the next shot, and Aron defends and gets the ball from David. David seems dissatisfied and aggressively jumps up on Aron's back causing him to fall down.

ELIN comes in and says, 'No. Watch it'.

Aron responds angrily, 'This is forbidden'.

ELIN turns to David and says in a sharp voice, 'You need to control yourself, David'. David looks toward ELIN and sighs. He turns to Aron, who sits on the floor. ELIN continues, saying, 'This is not working'.

David turns to her and responds, 'Why do you have two belts?'

ELIN answers him with a calmer voice. 'David, I am talking to you. This is not really working. We do not want to see something like this during play'. David does not answer, and walks around for a few steps. ELIN turns to Aron and says, 'Aron, you need to talk together. David, I want you to talk to Aron. You need to agree on how the play should be'. She turns to them and continues, 'And there cannot be any rough tricks like this'.

Now a third boy, Hannes, enters the room and wants to join the game. The three boys discuss if they should play regular basketball with two-on-one, or if they should play a game called 'Donkey'. ELIN takes part in the discussion and tries to help the boys find a solution. Hannes asks, 'Can I play, too?'

David responds, 'Do you want to join me or Aron?'

ELIN asks, 'Is that possible? Is it fair to play two-on-one?'

Aron seems unhappy and says, 'I don't want to play real basketball'. ELIN walks toward him and leans down to him.

Hannes hears this and asks, 'Should we play Donkey, then?' But David gets angry and says, 'Wow, he always gets to decide what we do', and points at Aron. Aron whispers something to ELIN.

David looks at him and says to the teacher, 'But he, he always gets to decide if we play Donkey or not'.

ELIN answers, 'Do you think it is always like that, David?' '

Yes, It is like that', David responds.

Now Hannes has a ball and is shooting at the basket. ELIN asks, 'Aren't you taking turns in deciding what to do? I think you all can decide sometimes what you do'.

David disagrees and says, 'No. It is almost always him'.

ELIN asks, 'Is that really so, David?' Hannes and David are both bouncing balls but now ELIN takes both balls and asks the boys to sit down and talk about the game.

David becomes angry and demands, 'No, give me back the ball!'

ELIN leans towards David and says, ‘No. Calm down. Now the play is changing, and we are going to talk a little bit about how it will continue’. David turns away and doesn’t answer. ELIN continues, ‘Hannes wants to join you, and you want to let him play with you, but we need to, you need to decide how the play will be. Come here now’.

All three boys sit on a bench and ELIN on a chair across from them. The boys do not agree on how to continue the game, and after some discussion, they decide to stop playing basketball and find something else to do.

Communicative and strategic actions. In the episode, the preschool teacher turns towards the children and shows interest in how they can solve the upcoming conflict. She involves the boys in the communication, opens the conversation and expresses her interest in learning how they think the conflict can be solved (from a child’s perspective). She also problematizes the rules by asking if it is fair to play two-on-one, without providing a solution. Elin emphasises teaching the boys about taking turns, showing respect, and letting all voices be heard in the group by compromising and coming to a solution. Her communicative actions are identified when she uses the discussion about the conflict to reach a mutual understanding where everyone is given the opportunity to contribute. Nevertheless, her reactions to David’s actions and statements can be analysed as a strategic action where she aims to maintain control (Edgar 2006; Fultner 2011; Habermas 1995; Kemmis 2011), as she seems to doubt his perspective and suggestions. Her perspective is dominant as she tries to control or discipline the boys and does not seem to trust the boys to find solutions themselves. She comes in and tries to help them solve the situation by aiming at a mutual understanding (communicative action). Nevertheless, her attempt leads to her taking control without

taking the boys' perspectives into account (strategic action), which finally puts an end to the play session.

Explicit and implicit values education. In the episode, the preschool teacher, Elin, communicated values both explicitly and implicitly to the children. Values such as fairness, justice, and respect are evident when she involves the children in solving the looming conflict. This opportunity might have been developed even more if Elin had initiated a shared conversation about why rules are important and why people do not always agree on things. After watching the episode, Elin commented that the focus had been on teaching the children how to communicate with each other, but there were no explicit rules about that in the preschool.

Elin communicated explicitly how to behave in preschool using expressions such as 'No. Watch it', and 'You need to control yourself, David', and 'This is not working'. Although her statements made the unacceptable behaviour clear, no explicit rules to modify the behaviour were offered.

Discussion

In this study, the aim was to observe how preschool teachers communicate values to children. The findings show that the preschool teachers in the two episodes acted both communicatively and strategically (Habermas 1995) when communicating with the children. To review, communicative actions are oriented towards mutual understanding; to reach a consensus based on the best argument, while strategic actions are goal oriented, intended to reach certain unilateral goals. Their approaches seemed to depend on what values they were communicating. Care and respect were communicated through communicative actions, where the aim was to reach mutual understanding and where all perspectives were approved. Discipline was, on the other hand, mostly

communicated strategically with strict rules made by the preschool teachers. These findings are in line with previous studies (Emilson and Johansson 2009). Furthermore, the preschool teachers used different approaches to communicate values to the children. Their actions seem to be related to their professional or personal beliefs, which has been recognized in earlier studies (e.g. Brady 2011; Gary 2011; Puroila and Haho 2017). In this study, values are understood to emerge at both individual and group level so each teacher lives according to his/her own values but also follows the values of the groups that he/she belongs to (Johansson et al. 2018). However, these findings indicate that the personal values seem to overarch the professional values in this case. This supports the importance for colleagues to develop mutual understanding and professional language when working with values education (Thornberg 2016) which leads to more explicit values education where teachers are more likely to follow their mutual professional value (Halstead 1996; Thorberg 2009).

Linda acted communicatively towards the children. Her statements were characterised by openness and reciprocity and can be interpreted as aiming for mutual understanding (Edgar 2006; Fultner 2011; Habermas 1995; Kemmis 2011). Her actions were successful and in line with what has been considered essential and effective in values education (Mergler and Spooner-Lane 2012; Toomey 2010). Elin, on the other hand, acted more strategically, as she emphasised discipline more clearly than did Linda. Her actions indicated that she was pursuing her own goal (Edgar 2006; Fultner 2011; Habermas 1995; Kemmis 2011) by trying to control the situation and have the boys follow certain preschool rules. Her actions are in line with existing studies from primary schools, where teachers mainly instruct their students in proper behaviour when working with values education (Mergler and Spooner-Lane 2012; Thornberg 2008; Thornberg and Oğuz 2013) and the findings from a Finnish study, where educators

emphasised rules to maintain control in the setting (Puroila and Haho 2017). Elin attempted to consider the boys' perspective, but her control seemed to dominate the situation. Furthermore, she questioned David's comments concerning who was to decide the rules in the game, and by doing so ignores David's perspective and his right to have an opinion about the situation. Johansson and colleagues' (2016) study showed similar findings, where the preschool teachers' rights seemed to predominate when in conflict with the children's rights. However, Elin actions are in contrast with what Toomey (2010) characterises as successful values education, when teachers let go of control and carefully listen to the children and consider their perspectives.

It is worth wondering what would have happened if Elin had let the basketball play continue without interrupting it, and how the boys would have handled the situation of playing two against one. Elin's approach of pre-conflict hindrance may have prevented the children from experiencing the full benefit of values education, which builds on more opportunities for participation, cooperation and a chance to deal with conflicts (Toomey 2010). Instead, the situation was framed by discipline and teacher's control, with less respect given to the children's perspective. The findings indicate how difficult it can be to change one's ideas about values and support the importance of mutual understanding of values and values education in order to make it an effective practice (Thornberg 2016). The most likely result of this process is that professional values, those which have been developed collaboratively, would assume precedence over personal values when one is working with preschool children.

The findings show that the preschool teachers communicated values more implicitly than explicitly (Halstead 1996; Halstead and Xiao 2010). Only Elin used direct instructions when she tried to change the boys' behaviour into what she considered was appropriate in that situation. Both preschool teachers referred implicitly

to some unwritten preschool rules, or what has been referred to as the hidden curriculum (Halstead and Xiao 2010; Thornberg 2009). One such rule, for example, was that all children should play together. In fact, this rule seemed to override others, such as the rules about individual rights to choose with whom to play or who gets to join in play.

In both episodes analysed in this article, the children chose to end their play when the preschool teacher took control and acted strategically with strict rules and discipline. This indicates that the children wanted to have control of their play as well as the opportunity to deal with conflicts by themselves. From this, it is worth wondering if preschool children are given enough opportunities to have control of their activities and, for example, learn to negotiate and set rules that they have found out about collaboratively, a crucial step for children when they are developing their skills and independence through play. This would be in line with the Nordic model, discussed above, where democracy, equality, freedom, independence, and solidarity are prioritised values and children are seen as competent persons with rights to participate and have their voices heard (Wagner 2006; Wagner and Einarsdóttir 2008).

In the two episodes, both preschool teachers face conflicts about rules and which should predominate. The conflict resulted in the teacher either taking control of the situation, as Elin did (Episode 2), or overlooking some hidden rule regarding inclusion, as Linda did (Episode 1) when she ignored the fact that Steinar did not get a chance to join in the play. Conflicts like these could be the result of preschool teachers lacking the professional language to make the practice more explicit, which has been regarded as a crucial factor in values education (Puroila and Haho 2017; Thornberg 2008, 2016). Furthermore, our findings indicate that implicit values education can confuse children and make them unsure about what is expected of them and what is permitted in the setting. In both episodes, the boys ended their play when the teachers had taken control

of the situation by uttering strict rules that the boys had an unclear opportunity to influence. Explicit values education might, therefore, be more effective, where rules and culture are clear and visible.

The limitation of this study is that it provides insight into preschool teachers' roles in values education in only one [country] preschool setting. More involvement of the preschool teachers in the analysis process would also make the findings more meaningful. For example, we might have shed light on the learning they went through. However, the findings contribute to an understanding and indication of how values are communicated to preschool children in other settings. The study contributes to the limited body of research on values education in the field of ECE. The findings give reasons for professional reflections and further research on the issue. Johansson et al. (2018) point out that the changing world increases the need for more knowledge on values education. Even though it is hard to predict what knowledge and skills will be important in the future, the ongoing globalization process promotes the importance of social skills, which is part of the aims of values education.

Individual differences among preschool teachers are of special interest in future research, as is the importance of common professional language in relation to values education, which examines how to make the work more explicit (Thornberg 2016). Furthermore, the results show how rules play an important role in preschool practice, which is an issue worth focusing on in further research. Finally, studying children's perspectives on values education would be an important future contribution in the field and in line with the values education ideology.

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Article III. Chapter 7. Challenges and Advantages of Collaborative Action Research in Preschools

Chapter 7
Challenges and Advantages of Collaborative Action Research in Preschools

Ingibjorg Sigurdadottir and Johanna Einarsdottir

7.1 Introduction

Action research is an effective method for educators to develop professionally, and it also adds new knowledge to the field being researched, namely, values education. Collaboration with an outsider increases the possibilities for successful action research. In this chapter, a collaborative action research project conducted in an Icelandic preschool is discussed, with special focus on the advantages and challenges that the participating preschool teachers faced during the process. The participating preschool is given the pseudonym Hill Park. The study is part of the Nordic research project, *Values education in Nordic preschool: Basis of education for tomorrow* (Values Education in Nordic Preschools, project number 53581). Hill Park is one of two preschools in Iceland that participated in the Nordic project. The action research project at Hill Park lasted 18 months. Seven preschool teachers participated and focused on their own professional development while working on values education.

The first part of this chapter explains the main features of action research in general and then more specifically focuses on the characteristics of collaborative action research. Next, the process of the action research implemented in the study is explained. The participants are then presented, as well as the research material, followed by a discussion of the ethical issues of the study. In the second part, we present the findings of the study, the advantages and challenges the preschool teachers faced during the project, and how they experienced the collaboration with the external researcher and with colleagues. Finally, in the discussion and summary section, we reflect on the findings in relation to the existing knowledge.

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7.2 Action Research

Action research is an umbrella term for research conducted with or by practitioners. The methodology can be traced back to Kurt Lewin, who is often referred to as the originator of action research, having conducted his first action research around 1934 (Adelman, 1993). Many researchers have defined this methodology, and the keywords of these various definitions include "better understanding, improvement, reform, problem-solving, step-by-step process and modification" (Koshy, 2010, p. 9). Action research is highly personal because the participants may undergo changes during the process. Although the research is indeed a form of personal self-evaluation, it also creates the context for critical conversations in which all participants can learn as equals. The aim is always to improve practice and to create new knowledge for the benefit of children and the professional development of educators. The methodology can mobilize against professional stagnation, whereby educators often perpetuate old habits. The aim is not to come to certain final results or answers; rather, the findings of action research should always lead to new questions, which make them a powerful and practical mechanism for improvement (Einarsdottir, 2013; Gordon, 2008; Guðjónsdóttir, 2011; Guðjónsson, 2011; Koshy, 2010; McNiff, 2010).

According to McNiff (2010), action research consists of "taking action to improve practice" (p. 20); for Guðjónsson (2011), the aim of action research is to "struggle against isolation and for collaboration" (p. 3). Koshy (2010) understands action research as "a continuous learning process in which the researcher learns and also shares the newly generated knowledge with those who may benefit from it" (p. 9).

Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon (2014) talk about critical participatory action research and say that it "offers an opportunity to create forums in which people can join one another as co-participants in the struggle to remake the practice" (p. 20). Kemmis (2010) argues that action research should be critical and transformative and that the researcher should be willing to tell unwelcome truths, however uncomfortable they may be. Furthermore, action research should contribute to the evolution of the professional practice, rather than simply protecting old practices from changing times. The aim of such research, Kemmis claims, should be to achieve a better world, not simply to achieve mere knowledge of the world.

The prevalence of action research in educational research has grown rapidly in recent years. Dick (2009) suggests we can expect more action research in the near future, as well as even more methodological flexibility and variety in purpose. Such increased interest might be attributable to educators finding action research more interesting than educational research, which is simply conducted by university researchers alone. In action research, educators become researchers themselves, which makes action research more effective for them. They have the opportunity to develop the methods themselves, and their own participation has meaning in terms of their professional development.

7.2.1 Collaborative Action Research

The study presented in this chapter is a collaborative action research. This means that an expert from the outside – in this case, a PhD student who is also the first author of this chapter – worked with the preschool teachers during each phase of the research. The collaboration with an outsider distinguishes collaborative action research from other types of action research, which are conducted by individual educators or an entire preschool (Gordon, 2008). In collaborative action research, scientific and practice communities meet and work together to produce new knowledge. The collaboration between these two communities of researchers and educators has been described as the "third space" (Arhar et al., 2013). The collaboration is understood to involve two joint learning cycles, the research system and the practice system, that together create a change process. The aim is to create tools for practitioners to make changes themselves (Sandberg & Wallo, 2013). The focus is different from traditional educational research in the sense that the university researchers do not see educators as research subjects but rather as partners. Likewise, the educators focus not only on their own classroom and students but rather on the whole school culture. The third space created has also been described as a bridge between the school and the university (Arhar et al., 2013).

Collaborative action research is seen as a good way to narrow the traditional gap between research and practice for the benefit of both parties (Bruce, Flynn, & Stagg-Peterson, 2011). The process is an important part of educators' professional development, and the researchers from the university get an opportunity to connect theory and practice. The researchers support the transformation process and gain new knowledge in the field, while simultaneously, the preschool teachers get support from the researchers, for example, to gather research material, analyze, and present the findings (Catelli, Padovano, & Costello, 2000). Traditional educational research is criticized for failing to connect to practice and the real-life experiences of educators and students. Collaborative action research is, therefore, seen as a more effective way of reaching educators, since it constitutes an insider perspective. Thus, it is conducted by educators in the field, in collaboration with external researchers, leading to a mutually beneficial relationship (Curry, 2012; Mills, 2007). In fact, research findings show that a collaboration of educators and outside specialists is an important factor when working on changes or transformations in schools (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyso, 2004; Angelides, Georgiou, & Kyriakou, 2008; Catelli et al., 2000; Gillberg, 2011; NG & Chan, 2012). Learning through action research is regarded as more effective for the participants' professional development, and the learning is also more likely to be sustained if the action research is collaborative (NG & Chan, 2012).

Below we will explain the process of collaborative action research that was conducted in an Icelandic preschool, here called Hill Park, where the focus was on professional development in relation to values education. In this chapter, we focus on the advantages and challenges that the participants faced during the process.

The following research questions will be addressed:

- What benefits did the preschool teachers experience from participating in the action research focusing on values education?
- What challenges did the preschool teachers face during the action research?
- How did the preschool teachers experience the collaboration in the action research, with an outsider researcher and with colleagues in the setting?

7.2.2 Process of Action Research

There is no single correct way to conduct action research, although the process typically begins with the researcher asking the question: *How do I improve my work?* She constantly checks the process and evaluates whether or not she is actually influencing the situations (McNiff, 2010, 2013). Many of those who have written about action research summarize the process and present it graphically, for example, as a circle or as a spiral. However, these studies seem to possess their own specific process. It is common to talk about the process as consisting of phases. MacNaughton and Hughes (2009) call the first phase *choosing to change*, where the educators choose a topic and ask questions. The second phase is called *planning for change*, where a literature review is done, ethical responsibilities are discussed, the practice is discussed and reflected on, and the planning is done. The third phase is called *creating the change*, where educators start to create a change and research material is gathered and analyzed. After the third phase, the educators either choose a new topic and return to phase one or move to phase four, which MacNaughton and Hughes call *sharing the lessons.* At that phase, conclusions from the research material are made, and lessons from the project are shared.

At Hill Park preschool, it was helpful for the participants and the external researcher to see the process graphically to better realize where they were in the process, reflect on what had been done, and determine the next steps. A summary of how they saw the process of the action research can be seen in Fig. 7.1.

The preparation, in collaboration with the participants, began when an Icelandic research team, comprising two university researchers and one PhD student, introduced the notion of action research in the preschool, the focus of values education, and the responsibilities of each party.

In the planning period, we planned the process, identified the focus of interest, and clarified key concepts (Einarsdottir, 2013; MacNaughton & Hughes, 2009). The preschool teachers chose to concentrate on the values of care, respect, and discipline; however, the focus on values education had already been decided beforehand by the Nordic research team. The preschool teachers chose these three values because they believed that they would make the children socially stronger individuals in the future.

In the implementation stage, the preschool teachers began working according to their plans and aims. In the beginning, an extended period of time was spent reflect-

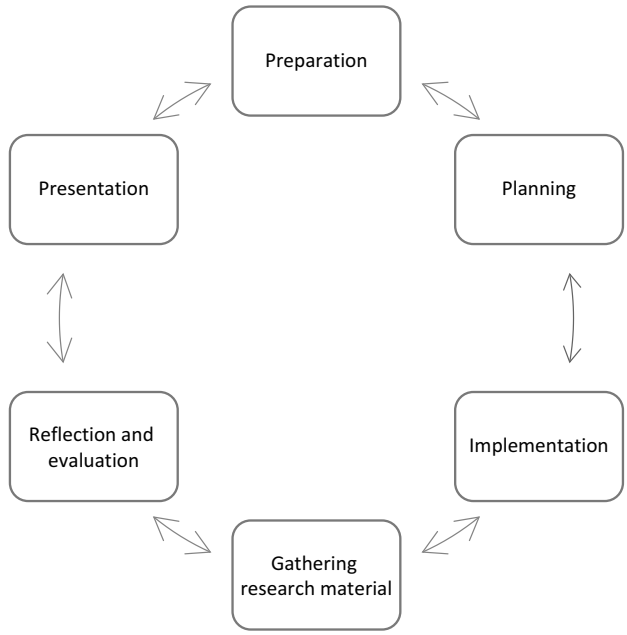

Fig. 7.1 Process of the study

ing on what values are and how to define the three values the preschool teachers chose to focus on, an important step toward creating a common understanding and professional language (Thornberg, 2016). At this stage, the preschool teachers reflected together on their actions, talking about their communication with the children and how they communicated values to the children. For example, the preschool teachers watched and reflected on video recordings from their practice, discussed notes from their own diaries, and discussed their beliefs about values education and how they changed during the project. They asked questions like: Was I showing the child respect by my response? and How can I encourage the children to be more disciplined in the circle time? The preschool teachers implemented changes in their practice and tested new ways of achieving their goals (Einarsdottir, 2013). The role of the preschool teacher in values education became their main topic. They discussed and reflected on how they could communicate these three values to the children so the children would learn the values and live according to them. The preschool teachers soon found out that they were important role models for the children and, therefore, focused on their own communication with the children and with colleagues. The preschool teachers also looked at the communication among the children and supported them, so as to make them socially stronger by learning and adopting the values of care, respect, and discipline.

Research material was gathered throughout the entire research process. The preschool teachers were invited and encouraged to keep diaries. At first, they found this a challenging proposition and were unsure as to what to write in the diaries. After encouragement and support from the external researcher, the preschool teachers became more comfortable with writing diary entries. In the end, four preschool

teachers gave their diaries to the external researcher as research material. Three preschool teachers wanted to keep their diaries for themselves and were uncertain about whether their writings were good enough to be considered research material. Other research materials were gathered by the external researcher, including audio recordings from meetings, seminars, and interviews, photos taken throughout the whole process, observations from the field, and video recordings from different situations in the practice.

Two seminars were held each term, with six in total during the process. The seminars were basically meetings where all participants reflected on the process and discussed issues of interest. There were three inspiration days in total or one each term. On inspiration days, participants from Hill Park and one other preschool met and were inspired by lectures from the university about issues related to the action research, such as values, action research, and professionalism.

The external researcher regularly spent time in the preschool during the project, gathering research material and supporting the preschool teachers during their participation and professional development. The visits lasted from 1–8 h each week during the 18-month period.

The participants reflected and evaluated at every stage of the action research. Reflection was seen as an important factor for professional development, a chance for them to observe their own beliefs and values, both personal and professional.

7.2.3 Participants

Seven preschool teachers participated in the action research at Hill Park. All were educated preschool teachers with B.Ed. degrees, in addition to one who had an M.Ed. degree. Six were female and one was male, but to maintain anonymity, all participants were given female pseudonyms. Further information regarding the participants is shown in Table 7.1.

Table 7.1 Participants in the action research

Name	Education	Position	Years of employment	Years working at Hill Park
Anna	B.Ed.	Preschool director	19½	10
Sara	B. Ed.	Pedagogical leader and assistant director	20	5½
Helga	B. Ed.	Preschool teacher	8	8
Elín	M. Ed.	Preschool teacher	25	7
Karen	B. Ed.	Pedagogical leader	14	13
Íris	B. Ed.	Preschool teacher	15	5
Lísa	B. Ed.	Special teacher and preschool teacher	13	12

7.2.4 The Research Material

To shed light on the advantages and challenges of the project, the following research materials were chosen. First, recordings from three interviews conducted at the end of the project were used. The preschool director was interviewed individually and the other participants in two groups of three each. Second, recordings from all six seminars became part of the research material. Third, diary writings from the participants were used, but only three preschool teachers handed in their diaries as research material for the study. Finally, we used notes from group discussions on the final seminar, where the preschool teachers reflected on and evaluated the project.

Recordings from interviews and seminars were transcribed, and quotations from the participants were translated from Icelandic into English. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the research material and to find themes and patterns. The first step was to organize the research material to simplify further work, by classifying all the material chronologically, starting from the beginning of the project. Journals were analyzed separately, one at a time, since the dates were not always written for each log. The next step was to code the research material according to the research questions. The third step in the analysis was to examine the material for patterns and identify themes within each code. The final step was to display the findings according to the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; MacNaughton & Hughes, 2009).

7.2.5 Ethical Issues

Action research requires high moral awareness throughout the entire process. Given the personal nature of such studies, the participants reflect deeply on their own beliefs and actions, and the researcher is closely related to the participants while conducting the research in collaboration with them. Additionally, the focus of this action research, values education, is a personal issue where the participants dive into their personal background to reflect on their values. This means that specific ethical guidelines are needed for action research, since it differs in crucial ways from other forms of research (Zeni, 2009). Locke, Alcorn, and O'Neill (2013) developed principles to respond to some of the issues that collaborative action research may face. Their principles emphasize that all participants in the study should have the same right to let their voices be heard about all parts of the process, regardless of their role. They also emphasize that participants should respect each other and that it is important to be transparent when people contribute to the research, because not all participants might be used to or understand the same professional language. We followed these principles while conducting the action research at Hill Park, by working in close collaboration with all participants and giving everyone equal opportunity to influence all phases of the research process. Our focus was also to use language that everyone would understand, for example, when explaining the process of action research or reflecting on the practice. Furthermore, all participants,

other staff members, and parents signed informed consent forms, since they and their children were part of the setting in which the research was conducted.

7.3 Advantages of Collaborative Action Research

All participants at Hill Park preschool agreed, when they looked back, that the action research was a successful journey. Anna, the director of the preschool, mentioned that one factor concerning the success was that the preschool teachers were ready to make changes and were enthusiastic to participate in the research from the beginning. Helga wrote in her diary: "It has been healthy to observe yourself as a teacher so you can improve and learn." Even though the preschool teachers saw the project as successful, they agreed that it was an up-and-down process, where the benefits were not always clear until they looked back. This is evidenced in Elín's diary, where she wrote: "There are days when I think everything is going great but in between there are days when I ask myself if we have accomplished anything. I think the process can sometimes be two steps forward and one step back." She continued: "I have to admit that even though I often feel that it is difficult to communicate values to the children successfully, there are more bright days."

Many researchers write about the advantages of action research. The main demonstrated advantages of collaborative action research include professional development, improvement of practice, and benefit for students' learning and well-being (Banegas, Pavese, Velázquez, & Vélez, 2013; Catelli et al., 2000; Gibbs et al., 2016; Gordon, 2008; Rönnerman & Salo, 2011; Walton, 2011). Our findings, concerning the advantages of the project at Hill Park, are in accordance with these and are discussed below.

7.3.1 Professional Development

The participants at Hill Park reflected on what they had learned from participating in the action research project, and their reflections show that they found the participation effective for their professional development in relation to values education. Sara wrote in her diary: "Wow, how much has changed and, wow, how much the project has done for me and for all of us." She then mentioned that the project helped her to be better at documenting and reflecting and that it changed the way she saw her own "working theory." Elín also wrote about her experience: "The participation was very educational and empowering for me." When Anna was asked to look back, she said: "Even though I think the staff group was very good, I found it suddenly more professional again. We were like this once before." She continued: "I felt that people were happy about themselves, were proud of themselves." Overall, she found that the project was good for everyone, no matter what previous experience they had.

Our findings are in line with existing studies. In Iceland, action research has been a growing research method over the past decade in the field of education and in particular early education. Findings from action research projects in Icelandic and Finnish schools show that educators report developing themselves professionally (Einarsdottir, 2013, 2016; Jónsson, 2008; Juutinen & Viljamaa, 2016; Sigurdadottir & Einarsdottir, 2016; Þorgeirsdóttir, 2016). For example, preschool teachers who participated in a collaborative action research project called "On the same path [Á sömu leið]" found that their participation in the project gave them opportunities to develop their own professional ideas about play and learning, which was the main focus of the project (Eiðsdóttir, 2013; Einarsdottir, 2014; Norðdahl & Eiðsdóttir, 2013; Sigurdadottir, 2013). Likewise, preschool teachers in Araújo's (2012) study, conducted in a Portuguese preschool, reported that they had strengthened their professional identity, their sense of professional competence, and their personal self-worth.

7.3.2 Improvement of Practice

When the preschool teachers looked back after participating in the action research project, they saw the methodology of action research as a beneficial process. The preschool teachers found they had learned new and good methods to work on their own professional development and saw themselves continuing to use these methods – for example, reflections and diary writings. Some participants even saw the method of action research as something that stood out when reflecting on the whole project and felt that they had learned a new way "to make the practice better," as Sara put it. Some of the participants also mentioned that after they learned to work on their professional development through the process of action research, reflections within the staff group increased. The preschool teachers at Hill Park mentioned that their ways of thinking about values changed by participating in the action research project, resulting in changes in their own practices. They said they thought more about values, which was the issue of focus.

These findings are also in line with existing studies. For example, Araújo's (2012) findings suggest that the method of action research proved effective in improving the practice. Also, the research project in Iceland, "On the same path," affected the entire school's practice, not just that of the participating educators (Eiðsdóttir, 2013; Einarsdottir, 2014; Norðdahl & Eiðsdóttir, 2013; Sigurdadottir, 2013).

7.3.3 Benefits for Children's Learning and Well-Being

One advantage the preschool teachers at Hill Park mentioned in their reflections and evaluation at the end of the project was the benefits for the children's learning and well-being. They believed they had changed their own thinking and practices, and by that they influenced how the children's activities and communication developed

in a positive way. In this way, the preschool teachers saw that the children's learning and well-being benefited from the project. Elín said: "If we say, for example, something like, 'Now you were very caring', the children understand what it means." Sara also wrote in her diary: "I have been listening more to the children. I've given myself time to do that, and I have learned most from the mistakes I make." The participants also believed that this changed their thinking and influenced their practice with the children, which at the same time affected the children's learning and sense of well-being. Similarly, the existing research has also demonstrated a substantial development in the children's learning and well-being (Araújo, 2012; Einarsdottir, 2013, 2016; Jónsson, 2008; Þorgeirsdóttir, 2016).

7.4 Challenges of Collaborative Action Research

The participants at Hill Park Preschool faced challenges throughout the whole project. Their reflections and evaluation at the end of the project presented three themes concerning challenges that are discussed below: (1) finding time for the action research, (2) uncertainty, and (3) influencing the whole preschool.

7.4.1 Finding Time for the Action Research

Time seemed to be the most challenging factor at Hill Park. Throughout the process, the participants talked about how they needed more time to work on the action research project. They needed more time to document, and, most important, they needed more time for discussion and reflection with each other, since that was an important part of professional development. The problem with the documentation was easier to solve because the preschool teachers soon managed to make it a part of their daily routine. For example, they started to carry small logbooks and pens in their pocket, so they could write logs when they wanted to, instead of waiting until they had privacy or a break. A bigger challenge was to find time for discussion and reflection about their own professional development, because there were many other practical topics to discuss but not enough time to sit down and discuss values education deeply. Íris said: "We often talk on the run, because we don't have any time to sit down and really discuss matters." Anna, the director, said when evaluating the project: "More time would have been better. It would have given us the opportunity to deepen our understanding further and to discuss the issue further." Sara also said: "We need to be able to give each other feedback and so on."

Our findings seem to be in line with other studies, since finding time to conduct the action research and making it a part of daily practice seems to be the challenge most often mentioned in action research (Gillberg, 2011; Rönnerman & Salo, 2011). Educators in a study by Angelides et al. (2008) were even worried that the time the

research took would detract from their teaching time. Research findings have also demonstrated that it takes time for educators to internalize this method of working. Postholm (2009), for instance, noted that educators constantly have to ask themselves how they can improve their work if the action research is to be professionally useful. In the Icelandic study, "On the same path," the educators discussed the difficulty of finding time for collaboration, both with educators inside the school and with educators or researchers outside the school (Eiðsdóttir, 2013; Einarsdottir, 2014; Norðdahl & Eiðsdóttir, 2013; Sigurdadottir, 2013).

7.4.2 Uncertainty

McNiff (2010, 2013) has pointed out that participants may feel uncertain about the process of action research since it is not linear. This concern was also felt by participants in the project at Hill Park. The preschool teachers, for example, mentioned that it took a long time to get the project started and they were sometimes confused about what to do and how to think, and in which direction they were going. This nonlinear process seemed to be especially confusing for the preschool teacher Íris. At a meeting, she said she would have preferred the project to be more planned, or linear, so everyone would be doing similar things. However, the other preschool teachers did not find it necessary for the process to be linear. After some months, the preschool teachers understood that it took time to get used to working in an action research like this and that they should make it part of a daily routine rather than extra work. For example, they said they needed to get used to always being reflective and writing in the diary. This is seen in the preschool teachers' reflections at a seminar when they discussed lack of time:

Researcher: How do you think the project is going now?
Sara: I think it is going ok, but I always feel like I lack enough time. I try to make notes and then write it more detailed later, when I am home.
Researcher: Is it mainly lack of time for documentation or something else?
Sara: Yes, I think so. Maybe it is just me. I haven't been able to make it a part of my daily routine.
Elín: Yes, I agree with Sara. But now I feel I am doing better at this. After our last meeting, I started carrying a notebook and pen in my pocket, even in my overalls when I have to be outside.
Anna: Yes, I borrowed your overalls the other day and I was wondering what was in the pocket (laughing).
Elín: I think this is good advice; then you can note more. But I have to admit that most of my preparation time is used to make it more clear and detailed, but I think it is fine.

This is congruent with earlier action research studies, where lack of research experience on the part of the participants was also a challenge (Bello, 2006). Similarly, in Einarsdottir's (2016) study, the participants' education affected how they experienced their participation in the action research. Those who were not educated as preschool teachers were more negative than those who were trained as preschool teachers and saw the research as extra work rather than as part of their

practice. This factor can be complicated and results in the participants needing more support and extra time to be able to work on their professional development. For example, in Einarsdottir's (2016) study in Icelandic preschools, all participants, regardless of their education, found they needed considerable time and support from an outsider to be able to reflect on and develop their practice. All participants at Hill Park preschool were educated as preschool teachers; therefore, education was not a factor that we can look at here. But the fact that they did not have much research experience could have affected the length of time it took to start the project, as they mentioned.

The uncertainty can also be related to the theme of the study – values education – since it is very subjective by its very nature and people have different understandings and experience of values. Findings from a prior study, based on the same project, show that the preschool teachers at Hill Park found it difficult to define values in general and also to define the values they chose to work with in the project (Sigurdadottir & Einarsdottir, 2016). The preschool teachers seemed to lack common professional language about values education (Thornberg, 2016).

The preschool teachers at Hill Park also found it challenging to continue the action research when the days were not going as planned. For example, when they were short on staff, or other stress factors interrupted their work, they felt as though they did not have time to focus and react as they wanted to but instead became more mechanical and controlling in their actions. Elín said: "I feel it very well, everything needs to be OK to make everything work the way you want it to work."

7.4.3 Influencing the Whole Preschool

The preschool teachers at Hill Park found it challenging that not all staff members in the preschool were participating in the project. They discovered that they needed to communicate what they were doing to the others, so the action research would affect the whole preschool. They also found that they lacked time for the study and that nonparticipating staff members lacked an understanding of what they had done. This is in line with former studies because the third factor mentioned as a challenge in action research is how to make the project effective for the whole preschool community. This was evident in Þorgeirsdóttir's (2016) study, where the educators believed that the action research would have made more of an impact on the whole school if a presentation had been made for the nonparticipating educators, other staff members, and students.

The educators in Þorgeirsdóttir's (2016) study also mentioned that encouragement from school leaders would have been an important factor in making the action research impact the whole school community. This was not an issue at Hill Park. The preschool director was one of the participants and engaged in the project.

7.5 Experiencing Collaboration

During the project at Hill Park preschool, we emphasized building a good collaboration, both among the preschool teachers and between the external researcher and the preschool teachers. The aim was to create the so-called third space (Arhar et al., 2013), where both educators and researchers benefit from the collaboration. The participants reflected on this collaboration regularly, and overall they found it a very important part of making the project successful.

Often mentioned in the research material was that it was good to have an external researcher to keep track of the process and also take care of planned factors, such as meetings and seminars. This was important for the preschool teachers, so they could focus on their own professional development and not have to think too much about the practical aspects of the project. Regular meetings, seminars, or inspiration days were seen as "professional injection," as Lísa called it, since these helped the preschool teachers focus on the project and made them reflect deeper and continue their development.

Support and encouragement from an external researcher were also an important source of support and encouragement for the preschool teachers when working on their professional development. At the end of the project, when looking back and evaluating it, Sara wrote in her diary that collaboration with the external researcher was very useful and a crucial factor leading to the project's success. She felt that meetings and discussions with the external researcher were very important and that the external researcher effectively kept the project on track. Íris talked about how she felt that having the external researcher around was a reminder for her, so she would not forget to focus on the action research. Anna, the director, also mentioned this in her final interview: "It was important that you [the external researcher] were so visible in the setting; it made the preschool teachers more aware that the project was going on. Otherwise they could have forgotten it in the daily routine." One of the challenges the preschool teachers faced was related to this, that is, how to find time for the project and make it become part of the daily routine in the setting.

The preschool teachers mentioned that it was effective having an outsider with whom to discuss the practice. That is why they found it beneficial that the external researcher spent time at the preschool. These findings are in line with existing studies, which have suggested that both parties in collaborative action research – educators in the schools and university researchers – benefit from the collaboration. Educators have reported that they appreciate the attention their work gets from the university as much as the advice about conducting the research. University researchers gain more insight into educators' practices and the capacities of educators as researchers through collaborative action research compared to traditional educational research (Bruce et al., 2011).

Discussions and reflections about values education with colleagues were seen as an important factor in the action research. The preschool teachers found it particularly effective to reflect together on their practice, to give compliments to each other for what was good, and to find solutions for what they felt needed to be changed.

At the end of the project, when the preschool teachers looked back and evaluated it, they mentioned that discussions about values were a very valuable factor for their professional development in order to gain understanding and new knowledge. They found that common aims and common understanding of the issue of focus (values and values education) were crucial factors in making their collaboration in the action research work. This was seen in Sara's diary writing from the last phase of the action research:

> It was really good to discuss values in the staff group and I found it unbelievable how alike our views were on the values that we chose, their importance, and not least how important it is to work with them in everyday practice and to see the children receive them and use them in their discussion.

Numerous studies have exhibited the importance of reflections and discussions with other educators and researchers. For example, the educators in Webb and Scoular's (2013) research reported that meetings and lively conversations sustained their collaboration, and over time their own reflections developed as their discussions became more complex (Ado, 2013; Ainscow et al., 2004; Gillberg, 2011; Goodnough, 2010; Walton, 2011). Similarly, the participants in Araújo's (2012) study agreed that teamwork was an important avenue for professional development. Furthermore, the preschool teachers, who participated in the "On the same path" project, also found that reflection on their own work in collaboration with each other and with external researchers proved to be valuable for their own professional development (Eiðsdóttir, 2013; Einarsdottir, 2014; Norðdahl & Eiðsdóttir, 2013; Sigurdadottir, 2013).

Learning with colleagues and from each other was an important advantage of the project. When Anna, the director, was asked at the end of the project what she believed the participants had learned, she answered: "I think, mostly that it is very healthy to observe yourself and it is good for us to go through these discussions or reflections based on your and your co-workers' practice." She added that one of the things that stood out was that the preschool teachers had learned how to reflect and use discussions to learn together and develop professionally. Others also mentioned that it was good to learn together. When you learn together, you do not have to mediate what you learn to your co-workers but can reflect on the learning in collaboration with them. The educators also mentioned that they supported and learned from each other and that collaboration built trust in the group, synchronized it and gave them the opportunity to use each preschool teacher's strengths. These findings are in line with what Kemmis et al. (2014) emphasized that the collaboration between participants can, in fact, increase the learning through the process. Indeed, educators have mentioned the phenomenon of learning from others with different strengths as one of the most effective factors in collaborative action research (Juutinen & Viljamaa, 2016; Sigurdadottir & Einardottir, 2016; Thornberg, 2016; Webb & Scoular, 2013).

Even though the preschool teachers at Hill Park saw collaboration as important and effective, Anna mentioned that it was also good that each participant could work individually on their own professional development. For example, they could use different forms of documentation; one educator would, for instance, mostly write in

her diary, while another would rather take photos. All seven preschool teachers participated with enthusiasm and were eager to make changes in their practice and improvements in their professional development.

7.6 Discussion and Summary

Our findings demonstrate that the seven preschool teachers who participated in the action research at Hill Park preschool found the project successful. They mentioned the following as advantages: professional development, improvement of the practice, and benefits for children's learning and well-being. These are in harmony with existing studies (Banegas et al., 2013; Catelli et al., 2000; Gibbs et al., 2016; Gordon, 2008; Rönnerman & Salo, 2011; Walton, 2011). In the project, we emphasized intensive collaboration between the participating preschool teachers and the external researcher. Our findings show that this was a valuable factor in the project, and we can assert that we managed to create a third space where both parties learned and worked together, creating new knowledge (Arhar et al., 2013). Our findings also recognize the two learning cycles that Sandberg and Wallo (2013) discuss in their research: the research system and the practice system, which together create a change process. The preschool teachers mentioned that the project would probably not have been as successful without the close collaboration between these two parties of practice and research. Our findings, therefore, support the importance of building a bridge between theory and practice, when the aim is to create new knowledge and improve practice, which, finally, can create the tools needed by the practitioners to create the changes themselves.

The biggest challenge facing the participating preschool teachers was finding time for the action research. They found it hard to find time for collaboration. They saw this challenge as a problem because they believed that more discussions and reflections would lead to deeper understanding of the issue with which they were working. Their concerns were in line with what Koshy (2010) mentioned that better understanding is one of the main reasons to conduct action research. Interestingly, the preschool teachers found that what they did individually was easier to involve in their daily routine, for example, documentation. These findings give reason to consider the preschool teachers' working environment and their opportunity for professional development and lifelong learning. What is the reason for a lack of time to focus on professional development in collaboration with colleagues? Is the context so scheduled and/or stressful that there is no space for professional conversations or deep reflection between preschool teachers? These questions are not answered in this study but are left for reflection and further research. The findings indicate that it is not enough to focus only on the work that preschool teachers do when they are with the children: the teachers also need time to prepare and develop, and doing this in collaborations seems to be more effective. Such work will benefit in the work with the children.

The preschool teachers at Hill Park also mentioned they sometimes found themselves insecure because the schedule was loose. Existing studies also reveal that little experience with action research is one factor that can hinder the process (Einarsdottir, 2016). All the participants at Hill Park were educated as preschool teachers and found it very supportive to have good collaboration with an external researcher. They found it helpful and supportive that she kept track of the project and was available when the preschool teachers needed her support. Collaborative action research is a proven and effective method for professional development (Einarsdottir, 2013; Gordon, 2008; Guðjónsdóttir, 2011; Guðjónsson, 2011; Koshy, 2010; McNiff, 2010). Nevertheless, the process of action research can be complicated to understand since it is not linear but rather follows a zigzag path, going back and forth (McNiff, 2010, 2013). That is why it is important for participants to begin the action research by trying to understand its features. This can help them understand that no two action research projects are the same and that each step can take a different amount of time. One person keeping track of the process seems to be a good technique, as we did in this project. This also made other participants feel comfortable, so they could focus on their own development rather than on whether or not the project was going as it should.

Action research is believed to be an effective way to make a change and improve the entire school community (Kemmis, 2010; Koshy, 2010). Nevertheless, since the whole preschool did not participate in the project, the preschool teachers at Hill Park mentioned that it was challenging to try to make the action research effective for the whole school community. Participants found that nonparticipants had problems understanding the process and the development that came with it. To make the project effective for the whole school, it is important to have transparency (Kemmis, 2010), by focusing, for example, more on presentation. The project lasted for 18 months, which is not a long time for such extensive work. If the project had lasted longer, there could have been more focus on presentations and making the project effective for the whole school. Furthermore, when a whole school participates in action research, it is more likely that the project will be part of the practice after it is formally finished. These findings can be valuable for further action research projects, where there should be more emphasis on this aspect from the very beginning of the process.

Our research material built upon the preschool teachers' own evaluations and experiences of the action research, which offers valuable insight into how and how well this method functions as a tool for professional development. The findings contribute to the knowledge of collaborative action research and will be useful for future action research projects. Values education is a neglected research field in early childhood education, especially in Iceland where we have no formal studies of values education in preschools. The field is not easy to study since values education is a subjective area and personal and professional values vary between individuals. It can even be hard to recognize one's own values at first, and the participants in this project needed to reflect deeply to understand precisely which values they live according to. All participants in the study were educated as preschool teachers, and they all were interested in developing their professionalism and focusing on the

issue of interest, on values education. These factors were important for making the project successful. The close collaboration with an external researcher, over a period of 18 months, is also a unique factor and should be mentioned as one of the strengths of this study. The external researcher is herself a former preschool teacher, which is a strength since she knows the field and the practice and was therefore easily taken into the preschool teachers' group at the very beginning of the process.

The research will also hopefully inspire other preschool teachers interested in further professional development. The study supports the idea of the methodology of action research as a successful way to improve practice and professional development. Furthermore, our study shows that the methodology of collaborative action research, where two parties work together and combine theory and practice, can be successful. Many factors should be considered when planning an action research project, but time is the factor that seems to be the most challenging. To make a project successful, it is crucial to give the participants time to make it part of their daily practice, rather than seen as additional work. Furthermore, good preparation seems to be a crucial factor, with the participants striving to recognize what characterizes the process of an action research project, even though each study has its own unique process. Finally, it is worth wondering about what happened at Hill Park preschool after the project was formally finished, once the external support was no longer present. Did the preschool teachers continue working on values education? Did they continue to reflect on their practice and focus on their professional development? These questions will not be answered at this stage but will be of interest for future studies.

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Article IV. Encounters in the third space: constructing the researcher's role in collaborative action research

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Encounters in the third space: constructing the researcher's role in collaborative action research

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ABSTRACT

Action research is a methodology that has been increasing in educational studies in recent years. Previous studies have revealed that action research affects practitioners more than traditional methods, since the practitioners are not only participants but also researchers themselves. One branch of action research is collaborative action research (CAR), whereby practitioners and the researcher collaborate through the action research process. This study builds on material from CAR in one Icelandic preschool that lasted over 24 months. The focus of this article is on the role of the researcher in the action research project and how it was constructed through the process. The research material consists of the researcher's self-narratives, practitioners' diaries, interviews, and recordings from meetings. The findings show that the researcher's role was constructed in a so-called third space where the researcher and practitioners collaborated. The researcher went through an emotional landscape while constructing her role and her position was something in between an insider and an outsider. Finally, she faced different kinds of tension concerning her role as a researcher in the CAR. The study contributes to the limited number of studies on the researcher's role in CAR and how it is constructed during the process.

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Introduction

This article focuses on the researcher's role in collaborative action research (CAR). The study is part of a larger Nordic research project (Johanssoon, Puroila, and Emilson 2016) where action research was conducted in five Nordic countries, based on collaboration between researchers from universities and practitioners in preschools. The aim of the study is to deepen understanding about how the researcher's role was constructed during the CAR process. In the field of education, there is a growing interest in employing CAR methodology, as there is evidence that it promotes practitioners' professional development and their learning from their own perspectives about practice. Moreover, CAR involves the potential to contribute to transforming educational practices (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014; Koshy 2010; Mills 2007). Like all forms of action research, CAR not only benefits the practitioners' side but it also offers researchers opportunities

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to gain insights into educational practices and to co-create new knowledge together with the practitioners (Bruce, Flynn, and Stagg-Peterson 2011; Koshy 2010).

The researcher's role in CAR differs from that in many other qualitative research designs as the researcher is challenged to build an equal relationship with the practitioners (Madsen 2013; Postholm and Skrövset 2013; Sandberg and Wallo 2013). As Madsen (2013) remarks, this is not an easy task since the practitioners tend to treat the researchers as persons with more expertise than they themselves possess. However, the researcher's role in CAR has not been widely discussed in previous research literature. This study aims to fill in that gap. We employ the concept of the third space to conceptualize the construction of the researcher's role in collaboration with practitioners. Moje and colleagues (2004) state that the third space is created when 'what seems to be oppositional categories can actually work together to generate new knowledge' (42). In our study, we attempted to create that kind of space to combine the researcher's and practitioners' expertise.

The study draws on research material from one preschool in Iceland. The first author of this article, Ingibjorg, was the researcher who worked with the practitioners in this preschool. The second author, Anna-Maija, came into the study later, for the analysis and writing processes. Nevertheless, she had conducted a similar action research project in Finnish preschools. Thus, the authors had an opportunity to share experiences, reflect on, and deepen understanding about the researcher's role in an action research project. The research question guiding this study is: *How is the researcher's role constructed in the third space, between the researcher and practitioners in collaborative action research?*

Collaborative action research: creating a third space

In accordance with Bruce and colleagues (Bruce, Flynn, and Stagg-Peterson 2011), we understand that the methodology of CAR aims to narrow the traditional gap between research and practice for the benefit of both parties. This means that experts from the outside, for instance, university professors and their graduate students, assist practitioners with each phase of the research (Bruce, Flynn, and Stagg-Peterson 2011; Koshy 2010). Researchers in the field of early childhood education have employed various terms to describe methodologies similar to what is designated as CAR in this article. Formosinho and Formosinho (2012), Araújo (2012) and Pascal and Bertram (2012), for example, used the terms *praxeology* and *praxeological research*. In praxeological research, the emphasis is placed on the integration of three levels: 'the work (practice), the worker (self) and the workplace (context power relations)' (Formosinho and Formosinho 2012, 600). These researchers understand the integration of the three levels as crucial if the research intends to change practice (Formosinho and Formosinho 2012). Similarly, Sandberg and Wallo (2013) employed the term *interactive research* to designate what is both a new form of collaborative research and a continuation and elaboration of the action research approach. Interactive research is concerned not so much with the solving of practical problems, but rather with the creation of opportunities for researchers and practitioners to engage in joint learning processes (see Figure 1).

In this study, CAR is regarded as one potential answer to Curry's (2012) criticism of educational research, where the benefits are often one-way, namely, only for the researchers and academic community and not for the practitioners and their community. The aim of CAR is that it will lead to a mutually beneficial relationship even though there are some challenges to overcome along the way. Arhar and colleagues (2013) discuss the importance of establishing a

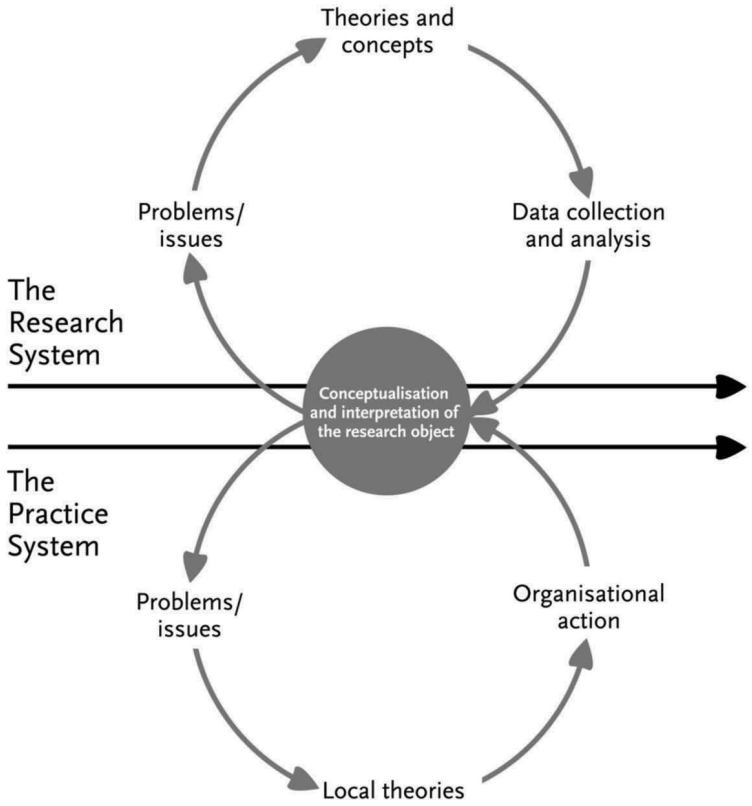

Figure 1. Ellström's model of knowledge creation through interactive research.

third space, which demands building bridges between researchers' and practitioners' worlds. They argue that when practitioners and researchers have successful partnerships, they manage to create a third space between their expertise. The teachers in Bruce's, Flynn's and Stagg-Peterson's (2011) study reported that they appreciated the interest the researchers' showed in their work and their support in problematizing and looking at educational practices from a critical viewpoint. Similarly, the university researchers experienced that they were able to gain deeper and more detailed insight into teachers' daily lives and their professional practice.

The researcher's role in collaborative action research

In this study, we will explore the researcher's role in CAR. Even though there is evidence of the strengths of CAR, some recent studies address challenges that a researcher might meet when engaging in collaboration with practitioners. For instance, Postholm and Skrövset (2013) and Sandberg and Wallo (2013) note that the researcher is expected to be confident, honest, and possess a high degree of self-respect. In addition, they argue that the researcher needs to have good communicative skills to gain trust in the setting. The crucial point seems to be that the researcher cannot have complete control over the research process and therefore should remain patient, open, creative, and responsive. The researcher is challenged to allow the research to be process-driven, while also being prepared for

unexpected events. Some studies call for acknowledging the emotional challenges the researchers might face in collaborating with different practitioners (e.g. Carroll 2015; Dickson-Swift et al. 2007; Visser 2017). Furthermore, Gillberg's (2011) study draws attention to both individual and collective needs of the practitioners' community; she found it important to balance the collective and individual needs at all stages of the study.

Sandberg and Wallo (2013) employ Ellström's (2007) *model of knowledge creation through interactive research* to visualize the landscape of practitioners' and researchers' collaboration (Figure 1). The model represents the relationship between practitioners and researchers as an interaction of two activity systems, a research system and a practice system. The research system is 'driven by the researcher's problem formulations, theories, data collection and analysis' (198). The practice system, by contrast, is 'driven by the need to find knowledge and methods for solving problems in the organization' (198). Traditionally, these two social contexts are regarded as separated. However, in this study, we understand them as two joint learning cycles that together create a changing process, the aim of which is to provide tools for the practitioners to make changes themselves (Ellström 2007; Sandberg and Wallo 2013). Moreover, the changing process that is created by these two cycles is similar to what Arhar et al. (2013) call the 'third space', a common space in the intersection between the two systems, where there are bridges built between researchers and practitioners. This kind of collaboration can release traditional power relations that often are recognized in educational research, between the practice and research (Bruce, Flynn, and Stagg-Peterson 2011; Formosinho and Formosinho 2012). However, Sandberg and Wallo (2013) state that 'the researcher should not involve himself or herself in the goal-oriented actions of the practice system' (200). They argue that it is necessary for the researcher to maintain some distance from the practice and the balance between objectivity and subjectivity. As Puroila and Johansson (2018) note, looking at the phenomenon under study both from near and far involves potential to promote the generation of knowledge.

Platteel and colleagues (2010) provide concrete examples of how collaboration operates in the third space. They argue that it is important to develop trust, free and open communication, and dialogue between researcher and practitioners. Practitioners and researchers in their study contributed to the third space 'by staying open, taking each other's opinions seriously and learning how to be critical without passing judgment' (445). Also, Arhar et al. (2013) determined that it is crucial for both practitioners and researchers to be willing to go beyond their traditional roles and engage in new activities. In their study, 'succeeded partnership were those in which partnership persisted, ultimately creating relationship that bridged university and school' (225). These research findings provide a fertile ground to explore the researcher's role in our study.

The study

The context of the study

Research materials for this study were gathered over a period of 24 months. In the beginning of the Nordic project, the researcher, Ingibjorg, was offered an opportunity to participate as a member of the Icelandic research team. Ingibjorg was a beginning researcher with limited experience in educational research or in CAR but she had a previous experience as a preschool teacher. Two Icelandic preschools participated in this

project, chosen because of their high rate of qualified preschool teachers, staff stability, and, most importantly, their interest in contributing to the project. Ingibjorg was responsible for the collaboration with practitioners in one of the preschools, Hill Park. The preschool was one of the oldest preschools in Reykjavík, the capital of Iceland. At Hill Park, 51 children, ranging in age from two to six years, were divided into three units. There were seven practitioners from two units at Hill Park who participated in the project. All of them were educated as preschool teachers.

Ethical issues

The study was reported to The Data Protection Authority of Iceland and the City of Reykjavík preschool authorities provided permission for the research. All participants signed informed consent forms, where they acknowledged that they knew what was involved in participating and that they had the right to opt out at any time during the process. The confidentiality and anonymity of the participants was also emphasized (EECERA 2015). Parents and other staff members at the preschool were informed about the study.

Since CAR is based on the relationship between practitioners and researchers, the traditional ethical guidelines, although important, are not sufficient (see Hyry-Beihammer, Estola, and Syrjälä 2013). Ethics in CAR require high moral awareness throughout the entire process, given the highly personal nature of such studies (Zeni 2009). In our study, ethical criteria introduced by Locke, Alcorn and O´Neill (2013) are of relevance because they address researchers' role and the relationships with the practitioners. When being in the field, Ingibjorg was aware of and attempted to act in accordance with the following principles:

- *Principle of plain speaking*: the researcher should use language that maximizes the practitioners' understanding.
- *Principle of right action*: the researcher and the practitioners should evaluate whether the aim of the study and the understanding it will bring is morally right.
- *Principle of critical self-reflexivity*: the researcher and the practitioners should attempt to become conscious about their taken for granted assumptions.
- *The affective principle*: researcher's and practitioners' feelings and emotions are respected and they count as information in the research.

Moreover, we have regarded ethical sensitivity, respect of the practitioners, and self-reflectivity as guiding principles during the analysis and writing phases.

The research material

In order to gain insights into the researcher's role in the third space, we used research material that was generated both by practitioners and by the researcher. Firstly, the main part of the research material in this article is Ingibjorg's *self-narratives*, consisting of a total of 217 pages. On the one hand, the self-narratives are handwritten notes that the researcher wrote during some of her visits to Hill Park (164 pages), and on the other hand, they are narratives that she wrote on her computer after her visits (53 pages).

Kennedy-Lewis (2012) defines that a self-narrative is a text 'written by the researcher about the researcher's own experience in navigating the cultural dimensions of the research process' (109). Self-narratives can assist the researcher in reflecting on her/his role and making visible the decisions that were made during the research process. Finally, self-narratives can be utilized to explain and provide transparency of the research process for the academic and practitioners' communities. After each visit to Hill Park, Ingibjorg wrote in her self-narratives about the progress of the process as well as her thoughts and experiences concerning the communications and relationships with the practitioners. The self-narratives were, therefore, both personal reflections on her work and documentation of the learning or transformation that the practitioners experienced.

Secondly, the research material consists of *audio recordings* from focus group interviews, conducted at the end of the research process, where the practitioners reflected on the process they underwent. These recordings were transcribed by Ingibjorg, 89 pages in total.

Finally, the practitioners were asked to reflect on the research process in their *diaries* at the end of the project. Four practitioners handed in their handwritten reflections, 18 pages in total.

Analysis and interpretation

The analysis process drew on the ideas of hermeneutic analysis, the aim of which is to interpret and understand the phenomenon under study (Siljander 2011). Gadamer (2004) maintains that we cannot understand another's viewpoints through getting inside the other, reliving his/her experiences, nor conveying information from one to another. For Gadamer (2004), understanding takes place in an ongoing dialogue with one another and oneself. Respectively, understanding meanings in the text is a dialectical process that takes place between the text and the interpreter's prior understanding.

As typical in hermeneutic analysis, there was constant movement between the research material, the researchers' previous understanding, and the review of the previous literature in this study. Furthermore, the analysis involved looking closely at some details in the research material and then taking steps backward in order to get a holistic view on the research material. One part of the analysis and interpretation was the collaboration between the two researchers, Ingibjorg and Anna-Maija.

The analysis process consisted of three phases. The first phase occurred during the field work while Ingibjorg collaborated with the practitioners and wrote the self-narratives. At the same time, Ingibjorg familiarized herself with previous research literature on CAR and the researcher's role in action research because she was struggling between two different roles, being a teacher and being a researcher. Ellström's (2007) *model of knowledge creation through interactive research* (Figure 1) (Sandberg and Wallo 2013) and the concept of the *third space* (Arhar et al. 2013; Moje et al. 2004) were especially helpful in coping with these challenges. In the second phase, Ingibjorg read and re-read through the research material with the aim of identifying aspects that were meaningful for her role in the collaboration. At this phase, Ingibjorg looked at the research material both in relation to her experiences from fieldwork and in the research literature. In the third phase, the second author,

Anna-Maija, joined the analysis and interpretation process. The collaboration between the two researchers enabled combining both insider and outsider views on the research material and Ingibjorg's experiences. This allowed us to sharing our experiences and thus deepening understanding about Ingibjorg's role as a researcher.

Findings

The analysis process led us to identify three perspectives meaningful for the construction of the researcher's role in CAR. First, the third space emerged as a landscape filled with a variety of the researcher's emotions. Second, the researcher's role was something between an insider and an outsider. Finally, being a researcher in CAR involved challenges of coping with different tensions.

The third space as an emotional landscape

The research material, especially Ingibjorg's self-narratives, offered insights into a variety of emotions Ingibjorg experienced during the collaboration. In the beginning, Ingibjorg seemed to be insecure about her role as a researcher and about the processes involved in the action research. This is no surprise for those who know the characteristics of action research and the challenges involved in the researcher's role. The researcher cannot have complete control over the research process, but needs to let the research be process driven and be prepared for unexpected events (Gordon 2008; Koshy 2010; Postholm and Skrövset 2013; Sandberg and Wallo 2013). Ingibjorg realized that the creation of the researcher's role was not a straight road; it had its ups and downs. This was an emotional process where the ups represented positive emotions, for instance, Ingibjorg experienced herself as confident, the meetings were successful, and there was positive feedback from practitioners. The downs, however, represented negative emotions. For example, Ingibjorg's self-narratives show that she sometimes was insecure about her role, unsure if the action research was going well, and even anxious when trying out new things. In the following excerpt, Ingibjorg is at one of her down-points in the process:

> … but I feel a bit worried about whether the research is beneficial enough. Are the practitioners getting enough out of this? Have they developed themselves? Are they ready to finish the research at the end of December? Has this maybe not benefitted anything and just failed? Have I done well enough to motivate and encourage their development????? I feel like everything is a bit floating and I feel a bit insecure. I do not know where I stand or where the research stands right now.

Nevertheless, as Ingibjorg realized at the beginning, it is usual to have setbacks and the only way to deal with them is to aim high again (Koshy 2010; McNiff 2010, 2013; Sandberg and Wallo 2013). She twisted quickly to positive thoughts and in the same narrative she continued and wrote,

> … but on the other hand, I fully believe that this will be fixed soon and I will gain confidence again after a few visits to Hill Park and meetings with the research team. Let's hope so, at least. I guess this is a regular autumn feeling …

The self-narratives show a process of how Ingibjorg's emotions towards her role as a researcher developed, through ups and downs. The research material reveals that the research process was also an emotional one for the practitioners. On the one hand, the practitioners seemed to be uncertain about their capacity to meet the expectations set by the research process. On the other hand, they expressed their joy when Ingibjorg came to the preschool. Some of the practitioners showed even attachment to Ingibjorg and treated her neither as an outsider nor a colleague but as a friend. At the end of the process, when looking back, Anna said, 'I think it was a crucial factor how well we [the practitioners] clicked together with you [Ingibjorg]. You really fitted into our setting. It was just natural that you were there'.

Moreover, Helga wrote about her emotions in her diary at the end of the process, by using the metaphor of hiking. The hills represented challenges that Helga faced during the process and when she mention icy hills, the challenges were even harder. The guide she mention, represented the researcher, Ingibjorg. The following excerpt shows how Ingibjorg's support made the challenges easier, followed by more positive emotions:

> Sometimes there were hills that were hard to climb but then it was good to have a guide. I would say that when it was ice on the hill, Ingibjorg showed us where to go to avoid the ice. So when we were nervous, our guide helped and calmed us down.

There is not much previous research on researchers' emotions in CAR even though researchers have discussed their role (Postholm and Skrövset 2013; Sandberg and Wallo 2013). However, some scholars have emphasized the importance of taking the researchers' emotions into account in qualitative research, especially when the data collection involves close relationships with the participants. They argue for the need to pay attention to researchers' emotions in planning and conducting research, and when reporting the research findings (Carroll 2015; Dickson-Swift et al. 2007; Visser 2017).

Being in between the research system and the practice system as a researcher in CAR

The researcher's role in this study was connected both to the research system and to the practice system (Ellström 2007; Sandberg and Wallo 2013). This meant that when Ingibjorg was in the field, she felt herself neither as an insider nor as an outsider but rather as a little bit of both. Therefore, it was meaningful for her to get support and encouragement from both systems.

Firstly, positive feedback from the practitioners at Hill Park helped Ingibjorg to become more confident as a researcher. Research material shows how the practitioners experienced the researcher's role and what aspects of the role were meaningful for them. For example, the practitioners found it important that Ingibjorg guided and supported them in the research process, and this concurs with some previous studies (Bruce, Flynn, and Stagg-Peterson 2011). When reflecting on the process at the end, some practitioners mentioned that the research would not have been so successful if she had not guided them through the whole process and supporting them in their professional development. In her diary, Elin described how a short talk with Ingibjorg helped her to see how well she was doing in relation to values education, which was the focus in the action research:

> Once during a preparation time Ingibjorg came in and we talked for a while. I told her that I had not been connected to the action research project because I had been preparing for the parents' interviews. Ingibjorg then pointed out that the value of respect was involved in giving parents the opportunity to come to the parents' interview, and also to use good time to prepare the interviews well. I agreed with this. We also discussed the interview content, and Ingibjorg pointed out to me that she could see both the values of respect and care in the fact that I asked each child what they wanted me to tell their parents about the preschool. This talk with Ingibjorg opened my eyes a little bit, even though I thought I was not doing anything in relation to the values, that was not the case, I just did not realize what I was doing and how to relate it to the values.

The practitioners found it important that Ingibjorg was often available to them and very visible in the preschool. This made them more confident about the action research. Anna mentioned this in the final interview at the end of the project when she reflected on why she believed the project was successful:

> It was because you [Ingibjorg] were so visible in the setting and it was good to come to you for support. You were positive about the project yourself, and always ready to answer us. We were so confident, always, from the beginning, very confident that this would be a successful process.

Even though these examples of the practitioners' perspective on Ingibjorg's role were not fully visible to her until the end of the action research, she also received positive feedback during the process which helped her to construct and understand her role. This is obvious in the following excerpt from her self-narratives: 'At least they say that they are happy to have me and that they feel like I am one of them. I guess I am doing something right as a researcher'.

Kennedy-Lewis (2012) defines her own role as a *former-teacher-as-researcher*, as does Ingibjorg in this study. This background involved both potentials and challenges in shaping the researcher's role. On the one hand, Ingibjorg's previous experience as a preschool teacher helped her to draw her attention to details of the practice that otherwise might have remained neglected. On the other hand, her background posed a dilemma when it was difficult for her to decide whether to participate as a former preschool teacher, or to observe silently. There is no one correct rule on how to respond to such situations.

In addition to the practice system, Ingibjorg sought support and encouragement to understand her role from the research system – from more experienced researchers, form colleagues in the research team, and from reading literature about CAR. As the following excerpt from her first narrative shows, she was convinced that she would get strong support from the Nordic research team and later she described how discussions within this group helped her to reflect on her role:

> I know I will get good support from these people …

> I started a discussion about our [her and researchers in other preschools] roles at the preschools, how much we should participate and so on. The conclusion from this discussion was that there were no certain or universal rules about the researcher's role in collaborative action research. Everyone needs to evaluate on their own how to behave as a researcher in research like this. The key is to be constantly thinking about your own role and how you act. The circumstances each time need to control this.

Reflecting on her experience by writing self-narratives, supported Ingibjorg in understanding and constructing her role as a researcher. These self-narratives were also aspects coming from the research system. One narrative, for example, showed that she was improving in her interview skills with the preschool teacher:

> When writing up the interviews now, I am experiencing how I, myself, have developed as a researcher, i.e., my interview technique is so much better. I am better at waiting and letting people explain, and I am better at asking for further explanations.

Tensions when constructing the researcher's role

During the process of constructing the researcher's role in the third space in the CAR, we identified some tensions. The research material showed two different kinds of tensions that Ingibjorg faced and these affected how her role was constructed. On the one hand, there was a tension about closeness and distance in her relationship with the practitioners. On the other hand, there was a tension about differences and similarities in the expertise of the two parties.

Closeness and distance

In Ingibjorg's self-narratives, we saw how she reflected on her relationship with the practitioners. For example,

> Regarding me as a researcher, I am in a good relationship with everyone but I feel like I have not had equal communication with everyone. But people are different; some approach me more than others and everyone in their own way.

As this excerpt shows, Ingibjorg soon realized that each practitioner approached her differently. The practitioners saw her role differently and their need for support or encouragement from her varied. This seems to be one of the biggest challenges Ingibjorg faced concerning her role as a researcher during the process. She wrote several reflections on her relationship with the practitioners where she wondered how close to them she should be; what was relevant for her role. The following narrative shows how thin that line can be:

> The relationship with the practitioners is such a big part of this whole thing. I need to be close to them, but not too close, I think. Because, I do not want to be their best friend either; I am a researcher. They invited me to their Christmas party and I found that too much, but it would also be rude to say 'no'. Luckily, I had other plans that night and, therefore, I could say 'no' without feeling guilty.

Another narrative describes a struggle she had accepting a friend request on Facebook from one of the practitioners at the preschool:

> I got a friend request on Facebook from Sara. I am not sure what to do. I feel like if I accept her request, we are getting too close and our relationship is getting more personal and beyond the research. But, on the other hand, if I do not accept her friend request, I am sending her a certain message that tells her that I do not want to be too close and our relationship is limited and only professional. I believe this could have a negative impact and maybe limit my access to her feelings and thoughts about what we are doing.

After thinking for some days, Ingibjorg accepted the Facebook friend request from Sara, and there was never a problem related to their Facebook friendship and they remain

connected through Facebook. Ingibjorg worried that other practitioners at Hill Park would follow Sara, and send her a friend request, and she was unsure if they would behave like Sara in a Facebook relationship. This never happened so she did not have to deal with that.

Difference and similarity in expertise

Ingibjorg emphasized building a good relationship with the practitioners at Hill Park as suggested by previous researchers (Platteel et al. 2010). During the first weeks of the process, she visited the preschool mainly to get to know the people and to make them feel it was normal to have her there. Therefore, she focused on sitting in the teacher's lounge where the teachers came for their free-time and this setting provided an opportunity to talk informally.

Ingibjorg often wrote in her self-narratives about how easy she found it to come into the preschool and work in collaboration with the practitioners. She felt welcome from the very beginning and never felt that her presence disturbed or bothered the practitioners. Rather, they seemed happy to have someone at the preschool to discuss their practice and profession. The practitioners also seemed not to feel any pressure from Ingibjorg, because she was frequently in the preschool during the process. The principal Anna said, '… and there was never any shyness, nor did anyone change their practice or say, 'Oh she is coming. I have to be careful how I act.' I never heard that, never'.

We are aware that this is not always how practitioners understand the researchers' role in CAR (Madsen 2013). Also, Ingibjorg experienced some tensions about differences and similarities concerning her expertise and the practitioners' expertise. Ingibjorg's intention was to get close to the practitioners by focusing on the expertise she shared with them, namely, the profession of a preschool teacher. She wanted to avoid making a hierarchal relationship with the practitioners where she was higher than they were, based on the fact that she belonged to the research system, while the practitioners were part of the practice system (Ellström 2007; Sandberg and Wallo 2013). Ingibjorg's feeling was that the practitioners understood this relationship similar to how she understood it. She wrote about it after a meeting she had with the research team, where another researcher discussed problems she was experiencing in the preschool where she worked:

> … but this is not a problem in 'my' preschool. They [the practitioners] are not waiting for me to teach them something new. I think, no I feel, that they understand that we are in this together, that this is a collaboration between us.

Nevertheless, Ingibjorg worked in the research system and that seemed to make the practitioners expect her to have greater expertise concerning the research, as previous research has indicated (Madsen 2013). The practitioners were going through processes where they were challenged to develop professionally and create some new knowledge for their practice. Some signs indicated that they understood Ingibjorg's expertise as a researcher that could support them in this process. They saw her as different from those in the practice system. Ingibjorg wrote about this in one of her self-narratives:

> I feel a bit strange that Sara always calls me 'our doctor'. For example, she writes on the whiteboard in the teachers' lounge: *Dr. Ingibjorg is coming today*. And when introducing me to a new staff member the other day, she said, 'This is Ingibjorg, our doctor.' I know that

> Sara is referring to the fact that I am a doctoral student, but by doing this, she is putting me on another level. At least that is my feeling. Not sure how I feel about it. I think it is a bit inconsistent with them saying that they feel like I am one of them, a part of their group and so on.

There were also other indications that the practitioners considered Ingibjorg as someone who did not fully belong to their own community: For instance, Helga said that collaboration is always a good thing, both with colleagues and with someone who comes from the outside. At the end of the project, when reflecting on the whole process, Sara wrote in her diary:

> The collaboration between the institutions [meaning the preschool and the university], and with our doctoral student [Ingibjorg] has been very successful and it has giving us a lot. Without this collaboration, we would be poorer, that much is certain.

As an outsider, Ingibjorg was able to support and encourage the practitioners toward their professional development. This required sensitivity towards the practitioners' needs, which they did not necessarily recognize or verbalize themselves. She explained this in a discussion with colleague and then wrote about it in her self-narrative: 'If I see they are having trouble with the diary, then I come in with some input, and support them to think in a certain way'.

Discussion

The focus of this article has been on the researcher's role in CAR and how it is constructed in the third space, through collaboration between the researcher and practitioners. There is a growing interest in applying this methodology in educational studies. Increasing interest in working collaboratively with practitioners challenges researchers to re-consider their role. The findings from this study contribute to the limited number of studies on the researcher's role in CAR and how it is constructed during the process. The limitation of the study is the fact that it only builds on research material about one researcher in one action research project and, therefore, the findings cannot be generalized (Bogdan and Biklen 2007). Even though each action research process is unique and the findings are not generalizable to other contexts, our findings can inspire and support future researchers to plan the action research process and to reflect on their roles. The findings of this study draw attention to four points meaningful to understanding the construction of a researcher's role in CAR.

Firstly, the *theoretical and conceptual tools* employed in this study involved potential to deepen understanding about a researcher's role in CAR. The model from Ellström (2007) provided a fruitful conceptual tool for exploring researcher's role in between two systems, the practice system and the research system. Moreover, we applied the concept of the third space (Arhar et al. 2013; Moje et al. 2004) to understand where the expertise of the two systems meets, so that we could build a bridge and go beyond researchers' and practitioners' traditional roles to create new knowledge in the field (Sandberg and Wallo 2013). In this study, the researcher's role was created somewhere in between the two systems since the researcher could identify herself in both systems, as an educated preschool teacher who knows the preschool practice and as a researcher familiar with

the theoretical and methodological focus. Identifying herself as part of both systems also enabled the researcher to seek support and encouragement from both parties.

Secondly, the findings show that *the researcher's role cannot be fully pre-planned or fixed beforehand*; rather, the researcher's role becomes constructed through collaboration between the researcher and the practitioners in a particular context. The researcher's and practitioners' backgrounds, personalities, and professionalism are of high importance for the collaboration and the researcher's role as well. This demands the researcher to have good communication skills and to be sensitive to different people to be able to gain trust in the setting. This also challenges the researcher to cope with uncertainty and let the research be process-driven.

Thirdly, the findings show that working as a researcher in CAR is an *emotionally loaded process* where both the researcher and the practitioners are present in a holistic way. The construction of the researcher's role is not a direct road from point A to point B, there are hills and valleys along the way. The researcher travels through an emotional landscape while struggling with her own role in the process. In previous methodological research literature, researchers' emotions have largely been neglected (Gillberg 2011; Postholm and Skrövset 2013; Sandberg and Wallo 2013) and this is something that needs to be highlighted (Carroll 2015; Dickson-Swift et al. 2007; Visser 2017). This study draws attention to the emotional aspect of the researcher's role: the researcher not only works rationally, but also has emotions that affect his/her role. The role, therefore, is rooted in both the researcher's heart and mind.

Finally, our findings show that a researcher in CAR might *face tensions* to understand her role and, moreover, to work as a researcher. In our study, the first tension concerned the nature of the relationship with the practitioners. The second tension involved differences and similarities in expertise. The researcher was required to cope with these tensions to serve in her role. This helped her become aware of her own role and the nature of her relationship with the practitioners, i.e. the nature of the collaboration. In this sense, our findings imply that the tensions faced during CAR can promote transformation in the construction of the researcher's role.

Conclusion

CAR differs from other qualitative research approaches, as it is often implemented as a long-lasting process that requires the researcher to engage in a relation with the practitioners. This means that the two parties collaborate for a long time, not only to generate empirical knowledge but also to influence and transform the practice. The research approach also challenges the traditional researcher's role, as an objective outsider who looks at the research issue from a distance. The research reported here shows that the concept of the third space provides a potential framework to understand the researcher's role in CAR. Our findings demonstrate that the construction of the researcher's role in CAR involves emotions, falls in between traditional insider and outsider roles, and requires coping with tensions concerning the relationship with the practitioners.

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