

Book review: Methodology for Research with Early Childhood Education and Care Professionals; Cecilia Wallerstedt et al., Eds.; Springer Nature: Cham, 2023; ISBN: 978-3-031-14582-7

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1. Introduction

This edited book presents examples of collaborative research methodologies that bring together researchers and practitioners in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) to investigate key issues and develop innovative solutions to these issues. The research was conducted in different countries on topics highly relevant to early childhood education, including play-based pedagogy, integration of technology, culturally responsive practice, etc. In addition to being grounded in the realities of ECEC settings, this research draws upon the expertise of academics and professionals working directly with children and families.

The book is divided into three sections: (1) an introduction that discusses praxis-related and developmental research approaches, emphasizing the importance of co-constructing research with professionals in early childhood education; (2) eight case studies that provide examples of collaborative research methodologies in practice, and describe the research focus, the partnership between researchers and practitioners, the methods used, and key findings; (3) theoretical and conceptual discussion that offers meta-commentary and analysis, that links themes and insights from across the example studies, as

well as develops theoretical frameworks and pragmatic considerations for conducting meaningful research with professionals in ECEC.

Participatory methodologies are adopted to increase knowledge about how researchers and professionals in ECEC can collaborate and leverage opportunities to improve policy and practice in ECEC, as well as to provide inspirational examples and enhance understanding of this important research approach for those interested in conducting research that will benefit young children, their families and the ECEC workforce in the future.

2. Content summary

In the Section I, the introduction, the importance of praxis-related and developmental research methodologies in early childhood education is discussed. These approaches emphasize the importance of co-constructing knowledge with ECEC professionals who have an intimate understanding of the realities, challenges and opportunities in their field. Collaborative research can provide insights and solutions that are theoretically grounded as well as practically applicable by bringing together the expertise of researchers and practitioners. The introduction states that

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such partnerships can bridge the gap between research and practice, ultimately improve outcomes for young children, their families and the ECEC workforce.

Section II of this book presents eight compelling example studies conducted in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden that illustrate the diverse ways in which researchers and ECEC professionals can collaborate to investigate critical issues in the field. The topics covered are wide-ranging and highly relevant to contemporary contexts of ECEC, such as children's learning processes, play-based pedagogical approaches, the integration of technology into ECEC settings, and strategies for implementing culturally appropriate practices. Each chapter contains a detailed account of the research focus, the partnership between researchers and practitioners, the methodologies employed, the key findings, and the lessons learned. There are several chapters dealing with the dynamics of children's learning and development. For example, one study explores ways in which researchers and preschool teachers can collaborate to improve children's educational experiences. Another study examines the use of collaborative research to support toddlers' mathematical learning and emphasizes the importance of balancing structure and flexibility in the research process. Play-based pedagogy is a major theme in this book, which examines a project that has developed an iterative cycle of research and practice to develop a play-responsive approach to early childhood education. Another prominent topic as several chapters examine, is the question of how digital tools can be meaningfully integrated into the settings of early childhood education. These chapters emphasize the importance of establishing trusting, reciprocal relationships between researchers and practitioners as well as valuing the knowledge and experience that each party contributes. Since ECEC settings are often reliant on adaptations to planned approaches, they emphasize that research processes must be flexible and adaptable. Furthermore, they demonstrate the transformative potential of collaborative research and show how it can be used to influence public policies and practices in the field of early childhood education.

The final section of the book provides a broader perspective on collaboration in ECEC through theoretical and conceptual discussions that link the insights from the example studies. The chapters in this section provide meta-commentary and analyses, identifying key themes and lessons that apply to all the individual studies. One chapter emphasizes the importance of identifying language when conducting research with ECEC professionals and argues that a critical examination of the terms and concepts used can lead to more productive collaborations. A further chapter discusses the "wicked" problems commonly encountered in ECEC settings and proposes strategies for managing the tensions and complexities involved in collaborative research. The last chapter provides terminological and conceptual reflections on practice-developed research and establishes a framework for understanding the various methodologies and approaches employed in the field. In

part III, the authors discuss the theoretical frameworks underlying collaborative research in ECEC, including sociocultural theories of learning, participatory action research, and design-based research. The authors also offer practical guidance on how researchers and practitioners can engage in collaborative investigations, including topics such as power dynamics, ethical considerations, and dissemination strategies.

3. Features of this book

Due to its unique emphasis on collaborative methodologies and the thoughtful integration of practical examples and theoretical reflections in this book, it stands out among similar works in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC). Although the importance of practitioner involvement in ECEC research is increasingly recognised, few books have explored this topic in such depth and breadth as this edited volume. As part of its uniqueness, the book presents a wide range of collaborative research projects from three Scandinavian countries that provide valuable insights into the processes, challenges and benefits of working with ECEC professionals.

There is a wide variety of example studies in the book, not only in terms of their geographical contexts, but also in terms of their topics and methodology. The studies cover a wide range of topics that are highly relevant to contemporary ECEC settings, including the exploration of children's learning and play-based pedagogy, as well as the integration of technology and culturally responsive practices. This breadth of coverage distinguishes the book from other works that may focus on a single topic or approach. Additionally, the studies present a realistic perspective on ECEC practice. Rather than presenting abstract theoretical discussions or findings from controlled laboratory settings, the chapters provide detailed descriptions of research conducted in close collaboration with ECEC professionals in their daily work environments. This emphasis on ecological validity and practical relevance sets the book apart from more traditional academic texts that may be disconnected from the lived experiences of practitioners.

Another strength of this book is the thoughtful integration of practical examples with theoretical reflections. While the example studies provide concrete illustrations of collaborative research in action, the theoretical and conceptual discussions in the final section of the book provide valuable frameworks and insights for understanding and advancing this effort. In other works, which may focus exclusively on one or the other, this interplay between theory and practice is often lacking. Furthermore, the book emphasizes the transformative potential of collaborative research, which is a major characteristic of the book. In all chapters, it is evident that the research presented is not merely an academic exercise, but a means to affect meaningful changes in policies and practices about early

childhood education and care. These studies demonstrate that collaborative inquiry can lead to the development of new pedagogical approaches, the refinement of existing strategies, and the empowerment of ECEC professionals as agents of change. This transformative orientation sets the book apart from other works that may treat research as a purely intellectual pursuit, disconnected from the practical concerns of ECEC professionals and the lives of young children and families. Through highlighting the potential of research to have a significant impact on early childhood education settings, the book encourages readers to reflect deeply on the purpose and impact of their own research projects.

Finally, the book is notable for its accessibility and practicality. Despite engaging with complex theoretical ideas, the book does so in a manner that is accessible and understandable to a wide range of readers, including researchers, practitioners and policy makers. The chapters clearly outline the research methods, findings and implications for practice, and the chapters are well structured and easy to navigate. For those interested in engaging in collaborative research themselves, the book offers concrete guidance and inspiration. The example studies provide a wealth of practical insights into the processes and challenges of working with ECEC professionals, while the theoretical chapters offer frameworks and strategies for navigating the complexities of this work.

4. Potential limitations

Although it is a significant contribution to the field of ECEC research, some potential limitations could be considered.

The emphasis on the researcher's perspectives: Although the focus of the book is on collaborative research, ECEC professionals do not always have as prominent a voice or perspective as researchers do. It may be of interest to some readers to hear about the experiences of practitioners participating in collaborative research and the impact this has had directly on their work.

Lack of a longitudinal perspective: Several of the example studies presented in the book are relatively short-term projects with little discussion of long-term impact and sustainability. Additional insights could be gained by following the implementation and impact of the research over time from a longitudinal perspective.

Limited attention to dissemination and scale-up: There is relatively little discussion of strategies for disseminating research findings and scaling up successful interventions beyond the immediate research contexts of the book, although the book emphasizes the transformative potential of collaborative research. Researchers could bridge the gap between research and widespread change in practice if they paid more attention to these issues.

Depth of methodological guidance: While the book provides valuable insights into collaborative research

approaches, some readers may wish for more detailed guidance on specific methodological issues, such as data collection techniques, analysis strategies, or quality criteria for collaborative research.

Limited engagement with critical perspectives: This book presents collaborative research in a positive light without emphasizing potential criticisms or limitations. Readers could develop a more nuanced understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of collaborative research by engaging more deeply with the critical perspectives.

Despite these potential limitations, it is important to recognize that no single book can comprehensively cover all aspects of a complex topic such as collaborative research in ECEC. According to the editors and authors, specific topics and examples have been selected that they believe will provide the greatest benefit to readers. Although the limitations outlined above are not intended to diminish the significance of the book, they do serve to highlight areas in which further research, discussion, and elaboration could be beneficial.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this book is a valuable and unique contribution to the field of ECEC research. It differs from other books in its focus on collaborative methodologies, its integration of practical examples and theoretical reflections, and its emphasis on the transformative potential of research conducted in partnership with ECEC professionals. By reading the diverse range of example studies from Denmark, Norway and Sweden, readers are provided with concrete examples of collaborative research in action, covering topics such as child development, play-based pedagogy, technological integration, and cultural sensitivity. The theoretical and conceptual discussions not only provide valuable frameworks and insights for understanding and advancing collaborative research, but also address the complexities and challenges associated with this approach. There may be some limitations of the book, but they do not undermine its overall significance and utility, rather they point to areas for further research and discussion.

For anyone interested in conducting meaningful and impactful research in collaboration with ECEC professionals, this book is an indispensable resource and guide. It provides inspiration, practical insights and theoretical foundations for conducting collaborative research that will transform ECEC policies and practices in the future. Therefore, it is an essential resource for researchers, practitioners and policy makers who are interested in improving the outcomes of early childhood education and care.