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"Next year we are small, right?" Different times in children's development

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How do children conceptualise their own development? From their point of view, what serve as constraints for their movements in time and space? The theoretical framework of the experiment described here was a cultural historical first person developmental perspective. The concept of transition is here put in use to capture the children's experience of their movements with or against a dynamic, inviting and demanding socio-cultural landscape over time. An interpretation of children's experience of their developmental timing with temporalities of the childhood landscape is presented.

This paper starts by outlining some of the theoretical and methodological premises for examining children's development. Following this introduction, the zone of research is presented to give the reader insight into the methodological constraints that allowed time, space, person and novelty to be empirically presented and created by the children. The analysis of the children's presentations of themselves as developing persons points towards different dimensions of time that created transitional conditions for their development. These dimensions of time are here presented as *cultural time*, *social time* and *personal time*. The discussion deals with insights in developmental science based on information from a first person perspective and it raises questions concerning the timing between developing young persons and a multi-temporally organised socio-cultural landscape.

Cultural historical theory and first person perspectives

In a cultural historical frame the central focus of the investigation of development is the interdependent relationship between child and environment (Hedegaard, 2003; Rogoff, 1990; Shotter, 2000; Valsiner, 1993, 1997, 2005; Valsiner & Winegar, 1992; Vygotsky, 1987; Wartofsky, 1983). While the theoretical frame is well-known, and scientifically accepted, some additional clarification seems to be needed regarding the use of a first person perspective on developmental processes.

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As the basic unit for the study of developmental processes, Vygotsky proposed the child in "the social situation" (1998, p. 198). "The social situation" underscores the child's *understanding* of and *engaging* in specific aspects of the environment. The meaning of the environment to the child has priority:

> the most essential turn-around that must be made in the study of the environment is the transition from absolute to relative indicators (...): most of all we must study *what it means for the child*, what the child's relation to the separate aspects of the environment is (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 293) [our emphasis added]

Corresponding with the "the social situation", Vygotsky proposed the child's *experience* as basic unit for investigating children's personal development since the child's "experience" entails the interconnections between aspects of the child's personality and aspects of her environment.

> All experience is always experience of something. (...) But every experience is my experience (...) in experience, environment is given in its relation to me, how I experience this environment; on the other hand, features of the development of my personality have an effect (Vygotsky, 1998, pp. 294-295).

An empirical investigation on the child's perspective on her own life, the social situations she has experienced and lived her life in and through, thus corresponds with a cultural historical theoretical framework. Vygotsky argued that children's experience of their social situations change with the child's development. New needs and new motives develop, old ones transform or disappear. In these processes of transformation Vygotsky underlined the child's active participation in restructuring her relationship with the environment, creating new conditions for her development: "we have studied inadequately the internal relation of the child to those around him, and we have not considered him *as an active participant* in the social situation" (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 292) [our emphasis added].

In search for a concept that unites the child's "aspirations and tendencies" (ibid, p. 4) with aspects of the environment in a temporal fashion, Vygotsky suggests the concept 'interest'. Interests are neither innate nor acquired, but developed through the child's selective participation in her given environment. "Interests" gives direction to the child's participation in specific aspects of the environment over longer periods of time.

Further I suggest that we bring into use a concept that can capture and unite the child's involved participation in *the actual social situation.* I suggest the concept of "engagement". In existential philosophy the concept of engagement was introduced aiming to reinstall personality development in the concrete world. When engaged, human beings got "involved in the situation, thereby changing it, and thus creating a future for themselves as persons" (Lübcke, 1999). In a developmental perspective, engagements can be seen as situated zones of potential development. It unites potential interests of the child with certain aspects of the environment. Like interests, engagements does not stem from inside but are created by the child *in* the situation she experiences. The specific characteristics of the situation, stimulates or invites to certain engagements. Vygotsky writes: "... things and events we meet manifest for us a more or less determined will, they stimulate us to certain actions: Beautiful weather or a lovely landscape move us to take a walk" (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 10).

In engaged situations human beings move and are 'moved'. We experience a sense of losing ourselves or being absorbed in a situation. Here, the child is "more" than herself – she is herself and the situation (or object) of her engagement. This partial fusion between child and surroundings, an interdependent structural fuzziness, optimizes rise of novelty. In other words, development in a situational, microgenetic sense (Hviid, 2002).

Time is indispensable in developmental studies. Structural change, and novelty, can't be studied here-and-now but only in the process of time (Valsiner, 2002). Vygotsky described how development precedes in different paces, sometimes like smooth, flowing movements with small, "microscopic changes of the child's personality", at other times abrupt, chaotic

and maybe obviously subversive, in relation to earlier ways of thinking, acting, and feeling. In "revolutionary states" of crises (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 184), the child's engagements and interests changes radically and conflicts might escalate.

Time and pace do thus not only belong to the maturing child, but exist as an interdependent phenomenon. It is suggested that subjective time can be represented by Bergson's (1917, 1915) "durée" – a non chronological composition of past, present and future, functioning both as condition and cause in creation of present, present past and present future, whereas objective time (Schutz, 2005) is a social structure, a functional, symbolic constrain in society, that aims at coordinating the activity of the societal members.

It has been argued that knowledge of the child's experience of her own life is an inherent aspect of a cultural historical developmental theory. Attention to children's steady and changing engagements are of basic interest because they point to strong interconnections between psychological and environmental fields, and are thus considered to be at the foreground of the child's potential development (Hedegaard, 2003; Hviid, 2002). The theoretical outline of developmental processes structured the investigation on children's conception of their own development.

Methodological considerations

Five 12 year old children each participated in three 1½ hour interviews at their youth club.

Because 'development' is a highly abstract concept the zone of research was constrained to facilitate the children's activity dealing with their own developmental experiences, including a focus on novelty, change and resistance to change in experience of themselves in their everyday life-situations over time. They were asked to describe the places they had been, the particular meanings they ascribed to them, the choices they made, the changing interests they developed and the conflicts that appeared. The children moved back and forth in spaced time and were hereby given opportunities to reflect on their development.

To lighten the task the children were asked to draw maps on big papers illustrating the spaces they had been in, actually were in, or expected/hoped for to be in, in the years to come. They drew structures of experienced childhood landscapes. They made tracks, roads, bumps and highways between different places such as nursery home, kindergarten, home and the football club. At some places they drew symbols or made comments to specific places as markers of their specific engagements; horses, Harry Potter's Golden Lightning, people.

The researcher was given impressions of engaged pasts, present and possible futures situated in time and space. The stories told about developmental experiences and concepts were also situated in the present moment or the 'specious present' (E.R. Clay in James, 1950) when the children were 12 years old talking with a researcher at the youth-club. Because children will get new futures, their interpretation of the past will change accordingly. This is not considered as a problem of validity of the results; on the contrary, another "present" time will potentially change subjective past and future (Valsiner, 1993).

Results: transitional constraints at work in children's lives

The data consist of different types of activities. In all the first interviews the children were a bit disoriented regarding how to represent their lives on a map as all strategies chosen were accepted. When they found a form, the mapping seemed to become the organising principle of their presentation. All children chose to present their lives on the map in chronological age, starting from their birth.

Very quickly narratives of their life in different social situations emerged. They told stories of family life, getting a sibling, attending nursery care, playing in kindergarten, school-days etc. They also omitted things on the map that were told, but never the less valued as

having minor importance. These narrative data are considered the most basic data of the investigation. They represent a "historical time"; the temporal characteristics of experience in connecting inner and outer time (Nelson, 2000; Ricoeur, 1988). At different times the children paused and reflected on the institutional arrangements they had lived in, the ideas, values, and goals of the particular places. "Kindergarten: is a necessary station, because your parents are at work" or "From age 8 to 15 you only live to learn". At other times, mostly in third interview they paused and reflected on how the map represented their earlier or actual lives: "It is really weird; this is precisely the picture I have inside my head". At other times they spoke of the principle dynamics of developmental processes: "It is like my space is getting bigger". Or: "I have never liked changes. Children don't like changes". Along second, mostly third interview the children reflected on their lived life as a whole. "Look how many times I have been in love with somebody"; "I have always wanted to be a vet and I want to stick to that as long as possible" etc.

In the third interview a small "zone of research – bubble" was drawn on their map. They were asked to "enter" it and to reflect on how the research had made an impact on their life experience and value the data they had created. "It is like a world map without all the towns. That is how you could say it", one boy said. "This is my life" another said. The children were also asked to improve the introduction to the research. By doing that, they presented their understanding of their participation in the research. All children commented on the research practice. They were happy about doing the map, but had a lot more to tell than already told, and wondered why the investigation stopped.

On many occasions the data twisted central and traditional understandings of human development. To the researcher's surprise, no child talked about development as a process where they felt bigger and bigger. They described a process – and exemplified it consistently – where they got bigger and smaller and bigger and smaller. At other times they referred to themselves as "big when small" or "small when big". And all the children also agreed that they were not big *or* small on some chronological age. They were always big *and* small. Their reflections on themselves as developing persons were of a very consistent relational character. They were nothing in themselves, always in relation to...

In the following an analysis of *what* children developed in relation to, *when* and *how,* will be presented. The time-dimensions presented were not distinguished by the children themselves but repeatedly *brought into use* in their narratives of their own life-history. *Cultural* time, *social* time and *personal* time refer to different temporal scales of the developing child – surroundings system. The "cultural time" is a dimension of time built into the interdependence between our society's organisations of structural changes of the children's lives and the children's dealing with those changes. "Social time" refers to interdependency between local representations of what is considered age-appropriate or not, and the child's dealing with those representations. "Personal time" is also considered as an interdependent phenomenon and not as an essence uninfluenced by the two other dimensions. Personal time stresses the personal standpoints and decisions the child makes regarding her possibilities and also her willingness to time her development with the demands and expectations of the socio-cultural landscape she lives in.

Cultural time

The map Michael drew had three tenets: A family tenet, a leisure-time tenet and an institutional tenet. These tenets structured his presentation of his life and development as a person. In Michael's view they consisted of different goals and expectations and possibilities of action to him.

Michael points to the institutional tenet:

Michael: This is my... what you have to go through in life; After-school-centre, school and kindergarten. It is the necessary stuff, things that must happen.

Interviewer: What Denmark wants to happen?

Michael: Precisely. Precisely. And the after school centre became a youth club. And the school will be college. It will continue. It is not mine at all. Michael points at his leisure-time tenet: This is what **I** want to happen, its all mine.

Interviewer: Ok.

Michael: And the family (tenet)... that is my life. It's a mixture.

Michael here explains the different degrees of personal influence on his life course as a child in Denmark. Some routes are left for him open to his own choosing some are chosen for him. His "lifemap" is constructed as institutions connected both in series and in parallel.

Looking at this landscape in a temporal *serial* manner, the *periodic* nature of cultural arrangements for children becomes visible. Periodicity is a basic and global constraint on children's development (Elder, 1998; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1999; Schousboe, 2000; Whiting & Edwards, 1988). Every society establishes cultural arrangements for children to participate in, for a certain expected time, and with certain goals to reach, followed by transitions to new institutions or arrangements – for a certain amount of time – with new conditions for children's participation. Michael reflects on his own developmental experiences in moving through the timed cultural landscape of childhood, in Denmark, and generalises his experiences.

Michael: You are big and small, big and small. Last year in nursery, you are big, right? Then you get very small in kindergarten. Then you are big the last year in kindergarten. And then you are really small in school. So, you are big and small, big and small, big and small...

Interviewer: When you went from big to small, it almost sounds like you lost something there?

Michael: I did. We all did. We all came from being the biggest to being the smallest ones. We were the smallest ones in grade zero.

Interviewer: Yes... but in developmental theories. They very often describe a movement that goes up, up, up. (Draws a staircase in the air)

Michael: But actually it goes up-down, up-down, up-down, up-down

Interviewer: Yes, that is how you move

Michael: Yes it is. All the time you get bigger – on the paper – so to speak. You grow older, but to your surroundings you get bigger and smaller and bigger and smaller.

Interviewer: It must feel somewhat... turbulent, to get moved around in that way?

Michael: Yeah, next year we are small, right?

Interviewer: Why are you small?

Michael: Because we begin in 7th grade. And that is the smallest grade on the big level. Next year we have nothing to say.

All the participating children shared this experience. These points illustrate development, not as a process where one gets bigger and bigger, but rather a process where one gets bigger and smaller and bigger and smaller in accordance with transitions between cultural institutions. The institutional movements are accompanied by radical changes in their view on themselves. In only one day they are moved from being the biggest in kindergarten to the smallest at school. Realising themselves in this new light, they obviously missed competencies and access to ongoing activities. Eve remembers her first days in kindergarten:

Eve: Now they were very much bigger than the biggest in the nursery care. They were six years old, right? You could see it, because they were the ones biking two-wheel bikes. We did not bike on those bikes. We couldn't even get near them.

Here, narratives on how the children slowly developed skills, competencies and a social network began, and in the end, they became 'Kings of the kindergarten'. The entrance and exits of cultural arrangements were more or less critical to the children, but never unnoticed as new situations demanding personal development. This suggests that cultural time dimensions constrains transitions for personal development.

Looking at the same childhood landscape in a parallel manner it becomes visible that children participate in a range at different institutions at the same chronological time. In Michael's family he got more and more freedom and responsibility and is considered big. Amongst his two elder brothers he is sometimes looked at as small, and sometimes as equal to them; at ice-hockey he is apprentice at master level, and therefore small, in the schoolyard he is amongst the eldest, and therefore big, and so on and so forth. Michael is, at the same chronological age *both* big and small. In diagrams Michael's cultural time can be presented as followed:

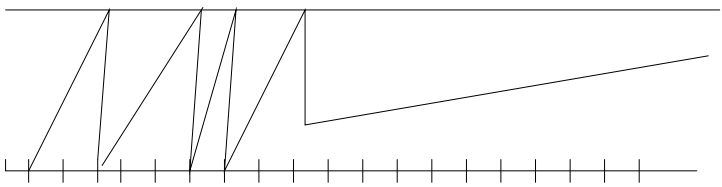

Figure 1. Day nursery – kindergarten – grade 0 – school

Figure 1 depicts Michael's movements in relation to his institutional tenet, and how experiences changes in second grade, where he realises that there is a very long way to go, before he is big in school.

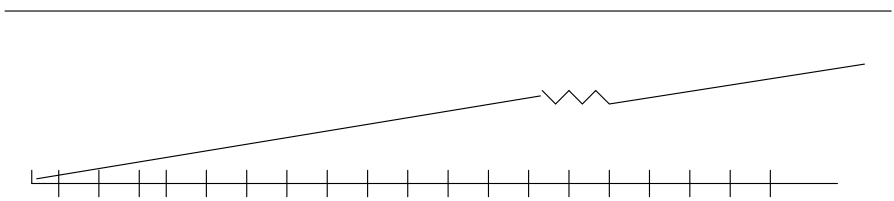

Figure 2. Family

Figure 2 shows a slowly increasing experience of development in family with some ruptures around this present year because of a divorce between Michael's parents that he expects will put new developmental demands on him.

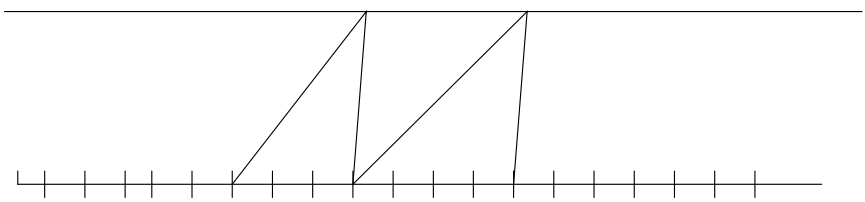

Figure 3. After school – club – youth club

Figure 3 shows other parallel aspects of Michael's institutional tenets. At 6 years old begin after-school club, and leaves for youth club 9 years old.

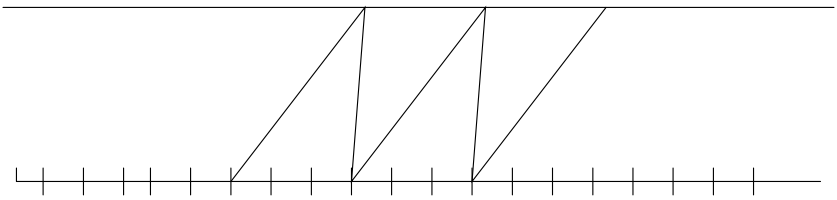

Figure 4. Schoolyard

Figure 4 shows the partition of pupils in different schoolyards during lunch-breaks.

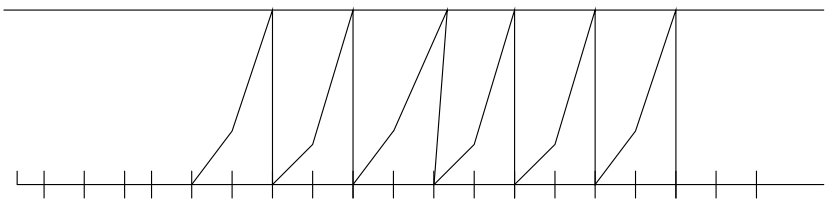

Figure 5. Ice hockey

Figure 5 shows the two-year time structures at ice hockey. The first year is a year of apprentice the second as master. An ice hockey player gets small (or big) every second year.

In real chronological life Michael is living simultaneously in many contexts. Adding them all together makes an interesting fuzzy picture:

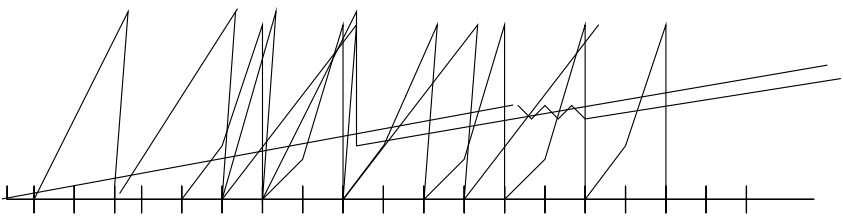

Figure 6. Cultural time dimensions in Michael's life

The last diagram (Figure 6) shows the complexity of arrangements Michael participates in, both in a serial and in a parallel perspective, which makes it obvious that the person, Michael, can't be big or small but big *and* small. The diagram intuitively provokes established theories of orderly stage – or phase – like changes in children's development. It looks messy, confusing. The author finds it of particular interest, that this impression not at all corresponds with Michael's own impression of his life or himself. Having finished his drawing he looked at the map.

Michael: It's my life.

Interviewer: It is?

Michael: It's like that – my life.

Interviewer: Wow

Michael: Yeah! (Smiles) I have been thinking about how long my life has been. I have only lived 12 year, but I have already experienced so much. And I have almost planned my whole life. I am thinking one century ahead. I know what is going to happen. Many people take one day at a time.

From Michael's point of view, his life is a very, very orderly life.

Social time

Jonathan's map was drawn as a 'lifeline' indicating two dimensions: Chronological age, and his well-being. When the line went up he felt good; when it went down he felt bad, and straight was easy, maybe boring. In grade 1 and 2, the line went up and up. Jonathan was very popular amongst the other peers in his class. He was funny. Then in third grade something happened to his popularity.

Jonathan: What is happening? There was no fun, and they began to get older, where I still thought it was fun to be funny. It went 'down' in third grade. It's like, new trends pop up. On a certain time it was fun to be funny, and then it changed to something else. The things I thought were funny were not trendy anymore. And so you have to change yourself. Try to think of something! The new trend was that the boys should play a little with the girls. We began to dance together at parties. Then it went 'straight' because I noticed it was fun. I was just a bit smaller.

Interviewer: Did you get a girlfriend?

Jonathan: Yes, in third grade. It was a girl from my class. In fact it was her, who pushed me ahead. She said: Try this! It's fun.

Interviewer: Did you like her?

Jonathan: I don't remember, but it started to go up, and I was quite normal, and then; in 6 grade I became the one, that pulled the class ahead.

At this point Jonathan told a story of a quite rough way of speaking and treating each other in the classroom. Groups of children were formed but dissolved easy, and they were constantly judged as popular or unpopular. The class was a rather tough social milieu and many of the children were quite often hurt by that.

Jonathan: Somebody had to do something, and without knowing it, it became me. I said: "Couldn't we all try to let everybody in? Make them feel welcome. Be kind. Not only think about ourselves. Try to help others a bit". It was me who pulled the class up. And that is funny, because I started being smaller than the other ones and now I am bigger. They look up to you, and you feel the responsibility you have. In that way you become older in yourself...

Jonathan articulates what I will refer to as *social time*. This dimension of time reflects another level of the interdependent developmental temporal system, here between the child and local representations of the order and the timing of age-appropriate behaviour between members inside the institutions. This time-dimension is considered as a social representation of *age appropriateness*. Moscovici defines social representations as system(s) of values, ideas and practises that:

> functions to establish an order which will enable individuals to orient themselves in their material and social world and to master it and enable communication to take place among the members of the community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history. (Moscovici, 1973, p. xiii)

Parents, teachers, trainers and pedagogues all have standards for 'the age appropriate' with respect to children's interest, competencies and behaviour. But the children referred to representations of the age appropriate amongst peers as the most forceful one. The representations concerned what to be engaged in and what to be disengaged in, how to feel and how not to feel, what to choose, and what not to choose etc. – at what age. Analysing the data, the social time leaves impression of a rather tight knitted social system that firmly constrains children's participation in everyday life and their perception of themselves as age appropriate or not. Thus it became an important part of their own developmental history in relation to the history of the group of peers.

All the children interviewed considered social time as constraining their development. Being in-time was marked as ok for Jonathan. Being out-of-time could be either a positive or negative experience; depending on the position, as lacking behind or being ahead of what is considered as the age appropriate. All children felt uneasy by lacking behind. Eve liked to play with boys:

Eve: They don't gossip, they do not tell rumours. They are not as cruel as girls. You can relax, have fun, and tell jokes. With girls you talk about feelings and problems. I wouldn't miss out on that, but I wouldn't want it all the time either.

Unfortunately, social times were changing. Her girlfriends stopped playing. Instead they engaged themselves in talk about boys and who they were in love with. The boys changed too. Last year Eve had a very good friend.

Eve: Then suddenly he fell in love with me, and I did not fall in love with him. But I really, really wanted us to be friends. He didn't understand that. Now, he is neither my friend nor are we going out.

Eve was out-of-time, both with respect to the engagement of the other girls and with respect to the boys. She had to wait for her change to come. Contrary to Eve, Michael was mostly ahead of social time, and often participated in groups of elder children.

Michael: It is a life-habit, he explained, I have always been older than I am.

To Michael, his relationships with his elder brothers pulled him ahead of social time already as a newcomer in kindergarten.

Michael: I played Dungeons and Dragons and that sort... I was suddenly cool, right? I was adopted by the big ones, because I knew the cool things that the even bigger ones played with. That is because my bigger brothers played that kind of games with me.

The data not only shows the strength of peer social representations of age-appropriateness on children's development but also that children dealt with a variety of social scales of age-appropriateness, at different places in their childhood landscape at the same chronological age. What are considered age appropriate by peers, might be conflicting with parents, siblings or teacher standards.

Personal time

Eve: (...) but that is really, really hard!

To Eve, life was often "really, really hard". She struggled in timing herself with social and cultural time. Her history is noteworthy, illuminating the strength of symbolic resources in life and her choices confronted with representations of age-appropriate signs. This is where Harry Potter came between her and her surroundings.

Eve: When I was eight years old I spent Christmas with my family in England. And I got this book as a Christmas present... here (Eve points at her life map). It was not famous yet, it first became famous here (Eve points on the map a year later). My step grandmother translated it into Danish for me. It was... a completely new universe for me! I became so happy, when it finally was published in Danish. If you saw my room, you would think: Freak, let me get out! Harry Potter is everywhere. I am dying for the universe this figure lives in. The phenomenon 'Harry Potter' is absolutely fantastic. How can she? It has taken her five years to write the first novel. She wrote on everything! She has an enormous packing-case only containing editions of the first chapter! If I am sad, I sit in my room surrounded by Harry Potter. All my posters look at me. I lock myself into it. I have a copy of Harry Potter's bed, with a red velvet curtain; I sit behind that with my necklace and my picture of my best friend. Then I become absolutely happy inside. So wonderful that Harry Potter is created. It can be hard to understand... No one in my class understood it. I had a terrible time in 2 grades. I felt so bad, sometimes I cried myself to sleep. I had two good friends but we still couldn't talk about the thing that meant most of all to me – next to my parents. People thought I was crazy when I said: "This reminds me of the Golden Lightning"... "The Golden Lightning!!? You are weird!!" I have had this necklace right from the beginning (Eve shows her necklace to me). It is a heart. And there are some pictures inside it.

Eve had a very hard time with her newly developed engagement. There was a huge intersubjective gab between her and her peers; a total lack of shared engagements or just acceptance of her interest. For more than two years she felt very alone. Then she met Quini.

Eve: In 5th grade she entered school. Everybody thought she was strange. At our first school party, she danced with the broom. The broom! She felt bad. I thought: That is what I have tried, nobody talked to me either. So I went to her, and noticed that she had exactly the same necklace as I had. I asked her if I could see the inside of her necklace. Inside was a picture of Rowling and a small Golden Lightning.

Interviewer: No!! In her necklace?

Eve: Yes!! Eve laughs. I opened my necklace, and showed her exactly the same pictures, that I myself had put there. That is our heart – friend-necklace now. We have been best friends ever since. She loved Harry Potter just as I did. She means all to me.

Fate is surprising. The strength of Eve's personal engagement is obvious and so is the personal pain being alone/rejected because of that. Seen culturally, Eve's engagement was ahead of time, but contrarily to Michael's ahead-of-time engagement in Dungeons and Dragons Eve didn't gain social approval for it. Eve didn't know why. The difficulties and pain Eve experienced points to the magnitude of social pressure to conform to socio-cultural accepted interests and is a fine example of the personal strength needed in following alternative developmental pathways. The participation in adding new cultural meanings into a social group by oneself seems almost impossible. Yet Eve met Quini and little by little the popularity and accept of Harry Potter as a legitimate engagement reached Denmark.

The strong engagement in Harry Potter opened new possible futures to Eve. At twelve years of age, Eve's greatest engagements was reading and writing. She had already prepared, by herself, practical trainee work at a publisher company. English language was besides literature her favourite subject in school.

Eve: My biggest dream is to become a writer. Like Rowling, I want to write a book that can do the same as Harry Potter once did for me. He opened my

> eyes to: There is something better than the real. I know the story is about evilness, but there is something to conquer the evil. He also taught me: Maybe you feel bad – but eventually something good happens.

The last dimension of time, *personal time*, here presented through Eve's narrative refers to the child's sense of, reflection on and dealing with her own timed development. The sharing or non-sharing of engagements with peers and the judgement of Eve's behaviour as inappropriate or lacking behind social time was a recurring theme in Eve's life-history. These situations were obviously very difficult for her to handle, but *nevertheless* she insisted on her own developmental time.

> Eve: I have a lot of imagination, I still play, and I play a lot with Lego. I love to construct things. All my friends have left that a long time ago, they have left all kinds of play, but I can't. That is really hard.

Eve was left behind, but even so, she still kept on playing. Playing with the ones who wanted to play made it even worse.

> Eve: My friends think it is outsider-like, to be together with smaller children. But I have friends in 4 and 5 and 6 grades. My friends in the class say: Do you really want to be together with them? We won't! Choose! Do you want to be with the small ones or with us? I said: "Fine! I choose them, because they do not push me the way you do...". But it is very difficult.

Michael was pushed by his brothers and he enjoyed it. Jonathan was pushed by a girl and he appreciated it. Eve didn't like to be pushed. In her dealing with social and cultural time, her own personal time became clearer and more solid. In that process she challenged local social representations of the age appropriate. But it "was hard, really hard..."

Discussion

On child perspectives in developmental research

> *"There is in fact no reason a priori why children should not be questioned on those points where pure observation leaves the research in doubt"* (Piaget, 1929, p. 8)

Many questions still remain unanswered, or are still in need of further elaboration in developmental psychology. Including children's perspectives in developmental theory building, points to new problems and new answers to old questions.

From "within living moments" (Shotter, 1999) children offers a refreshing, vital but yet experienced look on central, old topics in developmental psychology. It seems so obvious, yet not fully recognised that children don't get bigger and bigger, but rather bigger and smaller and bigger and smaller. Likewise, the children's reluctance to characterise themselves as big *or* small persons and their more preferred characterisation of themselves as both big *and* small, is theoretically not surprising, yet it tickles the picture of the 'child' in traditional psychology.

Similarly; what from a 3rd person perspective (the traditional developmental perspective) would be interpreted as a child's developmental trouble getting *bigger* is from a 1st person perspective (the child's own perspective) very often experienced as trouble getting *smaller,* both on cultural and social scales. The children's estimations of their own development in relation to what is considered as age appropriate in different contexts seem enlightening to developmental psychology. Being ahead of social time or being on time is preferred to lacking behind by the children. Their ability and need to 'read' the age-appropriate and to relate to it,

in a diverse set of zones, seems to be a complex task that lasts all childhood (at least). Finally, the children's reflections on themselves in relation to other, their willingness and unwillingness to time themselves with respect to social and cultural standards, demonstrate a crucial identity-work, in trying to come into terms with their own pace. They continuously reflect, analyse and they act with strength on the interrelationship between themselves and their surroundings.

The timescales here presented are not at all a complete picture of timescales at work in children's development. Lemke (2000) suggests a heterochronical hierarchy of a multitude of temporal structures from 'neurotransmitter-time' to 'Universe change-time' are at work in a child's development. Nevertheless, from the child's own standpoint, some times are more important than other. As stressed in both Vygotskian (1998) and Piagetian (1929) traditions, developmental theory need to investigate the 'questions' children 'answer' through their own development. In this paper the central questions refer to the three time scales introduced.

On the importance of timing

Analysis of data showed recurring and consistent themes of the child's reflection of herself moving and changing in synchrony and asynchrony with her temporally organised social and cultural environment. Timing seem central to the child's perception of her own development. Timing refers in this case to temporal relationships between inner subjective and outer objective time. A further investigation into matches and mismatches of time might deepen our understanding of why children's development escalates between "microscopic changes of the child's personality" to "stormy, revolutionary courses", as Vygotsky formulated it.

Timing is central to developmental psychology (Turkewitz & Devenny, 1993; Cairns, Elder, & Costello, 1996). In Neugarten's work 'social ages' functions as a system of social control, also reflected in society's legislation, administration and court Neugarten (1996). As such, deviating from the normative temporality of a society obviously bear elements of personal risk taking. First you marry, and then you have a baby – not the other way around (Elder, 1998).

Following that line of logic traditional developmental psychology has both from within and from outside the discipline been criticised as a temporal straitjacket for children Schousboe (2000), Burman (1994), James, Jenks, and Prout (1999).

Sociologist most often link unfavourable outcomes to disjunctions between cultural and personal time. Glick and Norton show for example how off-time marriages are more likely to end in divorce (Shanahan, Valsiner, & Gottlieb, 1997). Investigations on personal, psychological level also points mostly to difficulties when asynchrony exists. In his study of teenage life Harry Stack Sullivan (1953) referred to 'disasters in timing of developmental stages', where disjunctions on an interpersonal level can 'arrest' personal development. "Arrested development" is not meant in a static sense, but rather in a sense where 'the freedom and the velocity of the constructive change are markedly reduced' (ibid, 1953, p. 218).

In this investigation all the children dealt actively with cultural structures of time. Fitting in and getting attuned to cultural clocks was experienced as an exciting transitional opportunity as well as a demanding task regarding the child's established identity, including her present and future engagements, interests and behaviour. They were sad to leave their kindergarten, and yet excited to start in school. Synchrony and asynchrony in social time were also dealt with by all the children. Sometimes the children explained how they 'changed in themselves' as Jonathan did, when he got unpopular, to attune the social group expectations. Sometimes they didn't.

It seems that being small or lacking behind generally posed the children problems, whether due to their position in institutional arrangements or due to more local social representations of age appropriateness. It is tempting to invoke that the uneasiness of being/becoming small is 'natural'. Nevertheless the author warns against such an interpretation. Rather it is suspected that behind this unbalanced emotional evaluation of 'big' and 'small' there exists a broader cultural representation in Danish society of 'development' as a progressive stepwise gain whereas developmental 'loss' remains mostly unnoticed and

unarticulated in the cultural representation of development.

But being out of social time did not only trouble the children. As in the case of Michael's life, it became a preferred "life-habit" to be 'older in you'. Whether pleasant or not, being or becoming out of social time, requires the child to reflect on herself compared with other. Choosing what seems personally right in spite of social time, does pose children to serious questions of present and future identity. Yet, the narratives of Eve's life also demonstrate the possibilities of strengthening development in a personalised timed fashion. Eves reflection and actions with respect to her personal timing, resembles the processes of 'self-mastery', Vygotsky described:

> *"In subjecting to his will the process of his own reactions, man enters in this way into a substantially new relationship with the environment, comes to a new functional exploitation of elements in the environment as stimulus-signs which he uses, depending on external means, and directs and controls his own behaviour, controls himself from outside, compelling stimulus – signs to affect him, and elicits reactions that he desires"* (Vygotsky, 1934/1987, p. 63).

Still further investigations are needed to understand, which kind of junctions and disjunctions bear importance to the children, when, why and how. When are transitional ruptures productive in children's lives, how often, how many and on what?

The data leaves the impression that, children 'get used' to disjunctions between socio-cultural and personal time as they move through the landscape of childhood, and therefore grow less keen to panic with experience. They become competent novices. They develop strategies to deal with unpleasant disjunctions. 'Connect with one at your own age (synchronise), and it won't go totally wrong.' Even so, some disjunctions were worse than others and the number of simultaneous disjunction with social and cultural time was critical to their experience.

A range of educational questions can be raised with respect to timing. Put simply: Children want to get big. School wants children to learn. The question is how to connect and time personal development with school knowledge. Can (and will) school make a child reach a sense of being big, (not good, but big) with respect to school subjects, before she leaves school?

Conclusions

In this study, the goal of the methodology was to include children's perspective on development in developmental theory building. In doing so, old developmental questions were attained by 12 year old children in experienced, yet refreshingly new ways that opened to new questions to developmental and educational theory and practice. It was an axiomatic assumption that the children's participation, their personal engagement, their goal seeking and goal development were internal aspects of their developmental processes. By paying attention to children's priorities of places and events in their personal development, it was taken into account, that developing human beings dispose their participation differently according to their engagements and interest in the world and their view of the conditions and opportunities they are given.

The same goes with time and timing. Data on children's experiences of development showed that they could not live their personal life out of any outer structures of time, but on the other hand they were not, and their development was not, determined by social and cultural clocks. Cultural clocks are embedded in the institutional arrangements children live in, whereby the chronology of getting older is accompanied with abrupt experiences of getting smaller. Social representations of age appropriateness are powerful mirrors of the child's own developmental position in local communities, and urge the child to change or resist pressure to conform to the appropriate of the age. The children related to the time dimensions they lived

in and by, and reflected on and dealt with matches and mismatches. In some situations they felt satisfied with the mismatch, in other not. In these personal dialogues with different dimensions of time, the children developed their own personal time. The dimensions of time presented here worked as transitional constraints for personally timed development in everyday life. It is suspected that cultural time, social time and personal time, generally are at work as transitional constraints in children's development, but also that every child, due to personal, social and cultural diversity will construct a unique composition of their timed life-map, were they given the opportunity. That diversity is a fountain to new developmental questions:

> Jonathan: (judging his life-map) I have done well. (Laughs) It mirrors me, though I could have elaborated hundred times more. One hundred times more. But... a broad outline. Yes. It is a map without all the towns. That is how I would say it.

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Comment les enfants conceptualisent-ils leur propre développement? De leur point de vue, qu'est-ce qui contraint leurs mouvements dans l'espace et dans le temps? Le cadre théorique de la recherche décrite ici est une perspective historico-culturelle, développementale et à la première personne. Le concept de transition est utilisé pour mettre en évidence l'expérience que les enfants ont de leurs mouvements, allant avec, ou à l'encontre de leur environnement socioculturel et temporel, lequel est à la fois dynamique, invitant et exigeant. Une interprétation de l'expérience que les enfants ont de la temporalité de leur propre développement est présentée en rapport avec les temporalités caractérisant l'environnement de l'enfance.

Key words: Development, Dimensions of time, First person perspective, Timing, Transitions.

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Current theme of research:

I am currently occupied with how children deal with and develop in a complexity of interlinked cultural niches or contexts in their everyday living. More specifically we have studied how "family" (members, artefacts, practises and values and traditions) stretches into settings and institutions as kindergarten, school, after- school and other leisure-time activities and visa versa.
Project under development with M. Heedegaard, M. Fleer, J. Bang, and P. Hviid: Children's cross-contextual lives and development. In progress – Mariane Heedegaard, Marylin Fleer, Jytte Bang, and Pernille Hviid: Studying Children's lives: A Cultural-Historical approach. Open University Press.

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