Conclusions

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Chapter 20

Conclusions

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This edited volume has brought together researchers from the Nordic countries to share their insights and empirical research findings on children's communication, learning, and education in the digital age. Drawing on the works of the Nordic Research Network on Digitalising Childhoods (DigiChild) the volume responds to calls for generating more research knowledge about local cultures, values, and communication practices that make up childhoods in times of major social, cultural, economic, ecological, and technological transformations. This is important as an incomplete understanding of the cultural characteristics and local contexts can lead to narrow approaches and misinterpretations about the role and meaning of digital technologies in children's lives, learning and education (Livingstone et al., 2017). Not only do countries and cultures differ around the world in how they view and value childhood, and see children in relation to the digital world, but their demographic, technological, socioeconomic, geographic, and political contexts also shape children's lives and childhoods at large. Therefore, research on children's communication, learning, and education in the digital age needs to be situationally, culturally, and spatially sensitive, addressed in this volume by investigating both formal education and everyday informal spaces as research sites situated in the Nordic countries.

This volume highlights how the inherent principles and practices of children's communication, learning, and education are played out, challenged and transformed amidst technological, social, cultural, and environmental developments. Importantly, the volume portrays children's communication, learning and education as fluid and under constant development, entangled with other sociocultural transformations taking place in Nordic societies and globally. From this perspective, it becomes difficult or even impossible to define Nordic childhoods from the outset but rather to view the notion as a social construction, a materially, culturally, and socially defined life space of children (Dencik, 2020). In doing so, the present volume draws a complex and dynamic picture of Nordic childhoods in the digital age by shedding light into its various manifestations, developments, and tensions in the social and communicative practices of children living and learning in the Nordic countries in a specific time and space.

Many of the studies of this volume are based on holistic research designs across sites and settings, and a child rather than an institutional or technological

perspective. The studies also move beyond the seemingly dichotomous discourses between children's protection and participation rights as well as screen on/off time. Instead, understanding the 'digital' as permeating children's everyday lives and recognising children's rights and agency in the digital age, the digital is viewed as an integral element of contemporary Nordic childhoods. This approach taken in this volume differs from the international literature, where navigating a balance between risks and opportunities so that children can enjoy the benefits of the digital age is often impeded by anxieties that accompany the risk of harm to children, resulting in protective responses that at the same undermine their digital participation (Livingstone, et al., 2020). Instead of focusing on the risks and concerns related to children's uncritical, passive, or consumerist engagement with the digital world and its effect on their values, habits, and identities – rhetoric often emphasised in the current research and in discussions held in public media (e.g. Kirschner & De Bruyckere, 2017) – many of the chapters in this volume focus on children's creativity and agency with digital technologies and media within and across settings. Additionally, in this volume, emphasis is given to the unpredictable and uncontrollable nature of children's communication, learning and education with digital technologies (Kumpulainen, Kajamaa, & Rajala, 2019).

The Nordic insights of this volume contribute to the wider international body of research on how digitalisation is shaping children's communication, learning, and education that make up contemporary childhoods. The chapters advance scholarly knowledge about the ways in which children and young people engage with and are afforded to use digital technologies and media in and across settings. They also illuminate theoretical and methodological advances in Nordic research in the field(s) addressing how digital transformations are impacting children's communication, learning, and education. Originating from Vygotsky's ideas (1978), many chapters share a joint emphasis on cultural and material mediation as being central in children's communication, learning, and development. From a sociocultural perspective, digital mediation is viewed as being connected to the historical changes, present context, and future activities and social languages in the lives of children (Gutierrez, 2008). Further, cultural and social values a.nd tools that emerge or are used in interaction and shared learning activities define, guide, and support participation and learning in a community (Rogoff, 1995). The sociocultural lens of this volume unpacks conditions and mechanisms that position children and young people as active, creative, agentive, and critical investigators and users of digital technologies for personal and social change across formal and informal everyday sites of digital mediation, online and off. In doing so, this volume demonstrates how digital technologies and media can mediate children's participation and agency in their lifeworlds, also bringing them closer to civic engagement and decision-making processes. From this standpoint, it becomes possible to understand digitalisation as a dynamic, tool-mediated entity with opportunities and tensions for learning and development over time, and across societal, institutional, and personal situations (see Hedegaard, 2012).

Despite the widespread optimism in the Nordic countries about the potential of digital technologies and media, especially for information and the formal and civic

education of children and young people, this volume also acknowledges to some extent the multifaceted challenges related to digitalising childhoods. These challenges are entangled with evolving globalisation, migration, mobility, heightened economic inequality, and marginalisation together with technological developments (Hiitola, et al., 2020; Wedin, et al., 2017). Furthermore, while the authors of this volume were writing up their chapters, the COVID-19 pandemic suddenly forced schools, education and children's families to engage in multiple, fast digital transformations, such as distant schooling and management of new digital tools, due to lockdowns (Iivari, Sharma, & Ventä-Olkkonen, 2020). The pandemic has required remarkable resilience and perseverance from children and their educators, as well as families, school administration, policy makers and the whole society.

It is clear that there is a constant need for new research knowledge in the area to construct a more nuanced picture of the opportunities and challenges of the digital age for children's communication, learning, and education. In particular, more research attention needs to be given to issues around equity and the 'dark sides' of digitalisation for children's learning and wellbeing. Furthermore, current research reveals scattered research evidence and an insufficient evidence base to guide policy and practice in the area of digitalising childhoods in the current COVID-19 'new normalcy'. The original themes of our Nordic Research Network on Digitalising Childhoods (DigiChild) create a fruitful pathway also for future research with a focus on a) inequalities and opportunities of digitalisation for children's learning and education, civic engagement, social life and leisure, b) the impact of digitalisation on children's physical and mental well-being, health, and safety, security, and privacy, and c) on research methods and ethics to study childhood in the digital age.

Widening our understanding of the opportunities, inequalities and risks of digitalising childhoods can better inform policy and practice in the field, to prepare both children and societies for the future. This requires not just accepting 'what is' but efforts to imagine new ways to research and enhance children's communication, learning, and education in the digital age (Kajamaa & Kumpulainen, 2019). With this volume, we hope to encourage researchers and other actors, such as educators, digital content developers, third sector professionals, and representatives of industry and policy, to continue their important work in addressing the potentials and pressing issues related to digitalising childhoods in different cultural contexts so that all children can access the digital world creatively, knowledgeably and fearlessly.

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