Child and Youth
Participation and Competence Development
Research Program

Research Centre for Child and Youth Competence Development
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Introduction

Growing up in contemporary society is characterised by a confrontation with new forms of social, cultural and technical complexity. The choice of the development of child and youth participation and competence as a research area is, among other things, the result of discussions and analyses of the demands of contemporary and future society upon children and young people. The design of the research program should be seen in light of the following societal tendencies:

- Society is growing more complex, and people must *continually revise and update* their competences. The increasing focus on the continual development of competence - also conceptualised as “life-long learning” – calls for systematic knowledge of competence and of how children and young people engage in different forms of qualification, personal cultivation¹ and development of competences.

- The tendencies towards *fragmentation of knowledge* about the conditions of development for children and young people, requires new interdisciplinary and holistic knowledge which bridges the particular interests in different areas of policy making, professional practices and scientific disciplines.

- *The explosive development of a media and information society* requires holistic and interdisciplinary knowledge about the ensuing new demands and directions for the qualification and personal cultivation processes which children and young people are involved in.

- The general societal demands for *qualification* and the local expectations for *personal cultivation* increasingly *merge* today. This also actualises the need for new, holistic knowledge about the processes of qualification and personal cultivation which children and young people engage in.

Let us first look at the tendency towards *fragmentation* in the development of knowledge within this area of research. The reasons for this are complex and inter-related. A substantial part stem from the increased complexity in the everyday life of children and from the specialisation and segmentation in the organisation and development of knowledge in this area. The fragmentation has also been caused by the fact that, for a long time, the development of knowledge has been influenced by different interests promoted in *three societal arenas*:

1. The *arena of politics* which is responsible for designing the societal arrangement for the qualification and personal cultivation of children and young people;
2. The *professional fields of practice* where such knowledge is applied, and
3. The *scientific disciplines* in which scientific knowledge about these processes is generated.

In other words, we can distinguish between three types of knowledge development with different associated interests: political, professional and disciplinary development of knowledge. These three forms of knowledge development mutually influence one another. But the knowledge generated within each of these spheres of interest is too narrow and incomplete, and the

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¹ By the concept “personal cultivation” we try to capture in English the meaning of the German word “Bildung” (in Norwegian: “danning”). Although our translation has limitations, the English formulation does cover central aspects of these German and Norwegian concepts.
contributions to knowledge stemming from the three different spheres are difficult to relate to each other.

This difference in knowledge interests is, among other things, a consequence of the particular demands placed upon participation in the particular practices in these different arenas. Child and youth policy under implementation focuses upon particular areas of knowledge while other areas retreat into the background. This is the case, regardless of whether the policy addresses general conditions for growing up, education, social care or treatment. The same is the case with professionals (e.g. film and TV producers, teachers, social workers, special educationalists and journalists) who define the need for different types of knowledge in order to meet the changing challenges they encounter in their professional practice. Likewise, researchers seek knowledge which is framed by the discipline they belong to. A researcher in pediatrics may, for example, focus on the negative, physical and motor skill consequences of a child’s passivity in front of the computer. A researcher in special needs education may, for instance, be interested in obtaining knowledge about the use of new information technology in assisting children in their qualification and personal cultivation processes in various learning practices. Today there is a strong need for a critical analysis and reflection on these different types of knowledge.

The fragmentation of basic knowledge has made it difficult to obtain a comprehensive academic perspective on the conditions under which children and young people grow up. A more complex society, and the more complex practices children and young people participate in, demand knowledge which is of a more holistic character and more complex and interwoven - a knowledge that reaches across the spheres of politics for children and young people, professional practice and academic disciplines. This knowledge is necessary in order to secure a relevant and comprehensive platform for action, for national and local actors in the spheres of politics for children and young people as well as for professional actors who are to realise these policies in practice. This also implies a demand for critical, scientific reflection on the current status of knowledge within this area.

The research program Child and Youth Participation and Competence Development aspires to generate such a holistic and practice-relevant knowledge on an advanced, scholarly and critical level. This knowledge is to be action relevant for political and professional actors on an international, national and local level. It is also to be critical, analytical knowledge about the processes that characterise and shape the everyday life of children and young people and their competence development.

The purpose and goals of the program

The overarching purpose of the research program is to provide a clear profile and focus for research in the field of child and youth development in the society of today and tomorrow, and at the same time to create a scholarly platform for co-operation with external and internal expert groups about teaching and research in the field.

The research activities are organised in the Research Centre for Child and Youth Competence Development at Lillehammer University College (LUC). The research centre is also responsible for developing and running the PhD program Child and Youth Participation and Competence Development.

The research program is intended to draw together and guide the Centre’s activities, creating a scholarly platform for:

- The PhD program Child and Youth Participation and Competence Development
- LUC’s recruitment of doctoral fellows to the PhD program and PhD projects within the research field of child and youth participation and competence development;
- The research centre’s senior researchers in crafting applications for research funding and undertaking large research projects;
- Interdisciplinary national and international co-operation with other researchers in research projects within the field of child and youth participation and competence development;
- Interdisciplinary research co-operation with researchers addressing other research fields at LUC on topics of importance to child and youth participation and competence development;
- The Research Centre’s co-operation with LUC’s master and BA programs with respect to the development of research and teaching;
- The Research Centre’s co-operation with professional practitioners working with tasks of relevance for child and youth participation and competence development.

**Child and youth participation and competence development as an area of research**

Children and youth growing up in contemporary society face new forms of social, cultural and technical complexity. Parents and professionals who work to arrange and facilitate children’s upbringing and competence development in different arenas therefore face new demands. In line with social changes, the competences of adults in the arrangement and facilitation of the competence development of children and youth are becoming more important to study. As a result, studies of child and youth competence development must focus both on the competence development of children and on the competences of adults to understand, arrange and facilitate the development of children and youth (Woodhead 2006, Pomerantz, Grolnick & Price 2007, Urdan & Turner 2005, Dyste 2001, Engeström 1987, 1999). Furthermore, it is important to focus on how the different perspectives from which various institutions and professions approach child and youth competence development interact and are negotiated. And finally, it is vital to pay attention to the ways in which these perspectives may be used as grounds for collaborations which take the perspectives of parents, children and youth on child and youth competence development as their starting point (Højholt 2001, 2005).

The background for the strategic choice of child and youth competence development as a main focus is the need for knowledge about changes in the conditions for growing up of children and youth of today and tomorrow, as well as about the ways in which a society meets these changes. The fact that children and youth participate in many diverse social fields of practice raises higher demands on their ability to master complexity. This calls for a comprehensive approach to child and youth participation in different practices and contexts and to the conditions that enable them to master changes in these practices and contexts. This approach includes a focus on children’s experiences, desires, values and interests in relation to participation, knowledge and competence development.

What is said above highlights some important conditions for child and youth participation and competence development that have affected the articulation of an approach to the program’s central focus:
- Children and youth develop competences in order to be able to master different complexities during the course of childhood and adolescence
- Children and youth develop competences in different practices and contexts, and across their participation in these practices and contexts. Therefore, it is also important to focus on how
children and youth manage transitions and overlaps between these different practices and contexts. This highlights the need for a multi-practice and multi-contextual approach to the study of child and youth competence development.

- Child and youth competence development is also a question of inclusion and exclusion. Participation in one field of practice, for example, school practices, raises specific demands. Lack of opportunities to develop such competences increases the risk of exclusion. It is also important to focus on whether and how children who are excluded from, or unable to adjust to, one field of practice may be included in other fields of practice.

- Adults, parents and professionals have important responsibilities in arranging and facilitating child and youth participation and competence development. The question of child and youth competence development is thus also a question of adult competences in the arrangement and facilitation of child and youth competence development. This program emphasises competence development in professional groups in preschools and schools, but also the competences of those who work in professions that support children and youth at risk of exclusion from participation in important practices (for example, professions in child protective services and other institutions and authorities offering psychosocial support for children and youth).

As a field of research, child and youth participation and competence development is a part of multi-disciplinary studies of children and youth. Academic disciplines such as psychology, pediatrics, education, sociology and social anthropology have focused on various aspects of child and youth development. Gradually, interdisciplinary studies have developed, that is, new perspectives that incorporate insights from different disciplines. The research program Child and Youth Participation and Competence Development is such an interdisciplinary program.

**A broad approach to human development**

Cairns and Cairns point out that within developmental psychology there has for a long time been a “press toward better integrated models of development,” and they present many examples of perspectives that integrate elements from several disciplines (Cairns & Cairns 2006: 156). Richard M. Lerner, who is a central figure in research on child and youth development, argues that developmental psychology in the 2000s has moved towards an interdisciplinary “developmental science.” This developmental science is based on a relational meta-theory that transcends Cartesian dichotomies such as nature – nurture, actor – structure, individual – society, and the like. It does so by integrating the individual and the context as a unit of analysis in the study of human development (Lerner 2006: 3).

One result of this approach is the recognition that child and youth development is part of a material, social and cultural societal context, and that development must be studied from within the specific practices and contexts of which children and youth are a part (cf. Magnusson & Stattin 2006; Lerner 2006, Lerner et. al. 2005). These researchers employ the concept of “context” in a way that posits individuals as interwoven in the social structures and relations of which they are a part. According to this understanding, individuals are not separate from their surroundings, but rather engage in mutual exchange with their surroundings, in which the individual both influences and is influenced by participation in various practices (Sameroff & Chandler 1975; Sameroff 1993; 2000; Benn & Garbarino 1992: 120-21). This is what Richard M. Lerner calls “(a) developmental contextual perspective” (1991).
Sociological research on children and youth has also gradually turned towards interdisciplinarity. For example Anthony Giddens as early as in 1979 highlighted the need for more nuance in the traditional sociological understanding of socialisation (1979: 129 - 30):

_Socialization is never anything like a passive imprinting of ‘society’ upon each ‘individual’. From its very earliest experiences, the infant is an active partner in the double contingency of interaction . . . the socialization involved is not simply that of the child, but of the parents and others with whom the child is in contact._

Later, other sociologists have contributed to a so-called new sociology of childhood and new studies of youth have included insights from other academic disciplines (Bass 2005; Corsaro 2005; Prout 2005; Alanen & Mayall 2001; James et al. 1998; Qvortrup et al. 1994).

There is a persistent and still on-going discussion about the meaning of the term “development” and about how to understand child and youth development (Lerner et. al. 2005). Even if researchers have different views on what development is and how it should be understood, a basic agreement exists about some main characteristics. At the most general level, scholars agree that development has to do with change, but that not all change is development. Development requires systematic change, and the changes have to be successive, in the sense that they build on each other. This type of change is also transformational, leading to the emergence of something new, and, except in some special cases, it is irreversible. At the same time, child and youth development is characterised by variation and plasticity. Plasticity is used to denote that a developmental trajectory is not pre-determined. This is precisely due to the fact that an individual’s development interacts with that individual’s surroundings (Lerner 1984).

In these interdisciplinary approaches, scholars do not distinguish between different kinds of development in the way earlier research often did. As Michael Cole suggests, three dualistic positions have traditionally dominated the way development was understood. The two first positions are biological development and learning, and the third position is represented by Piaget who emphasises internal as well as external factors while maintaining a dualistic position (Cole 2005: 48 – 49). But the interdisciplinary approach rests on a relational meta-theory which replaces the traditional dualistic frameworks, and an implication of this is that it is no longer fruitful to distinguish between development and learning. The research conducted at the Centre for Child and Youth Competence Development has developed an approach that focuses on competence development, and this approach draws from this kind of relational meta-theory. According to this approach child and youth competence development refers to _those processes and mechanisms that to varying degrees, and as a result of human activity, enable children and youth to participate fully in social practices in various contexts and to reach specific goals and master specific tasks associated with participation in these practices._

This understanding draws from and further develops earlier central contributions to research on _competence_. An influential contribution to the understanding of competence is Robert White’s article _Motivation reconsidered: The concept of competence_ (1959), in which he argues that human beings are oriented towards effective interaction with their surroundings. He claims that this orientation is one of the most fundamental processes in an individual’s development. In the wake of this article, several scholars continued the discussion on competence. One example is Martin E. Ford, who defines competence as “attainment of relevant social goals in specified social contexts, using appropriate means and resulting in positive developmental outcomes” (1982: 324). Another is Everett Waters and L. Alan Sroufe who define a competent individual as
“one who is able to make use of environmental and personal resources to achieve good developmental outcome” (1983: 81). In this way, “development” is understood as “development of competence”.

The research program defines competence broadly, so that it encompasses different theoretical perspectives. At the same time, we use the concept with a strong focus on *those conditions that enable children and youth to participate fully in practices within and across different contexts.*

As such, competence development must be understood in a larger context and should be associated with belonging, identity and meaning making. In this framework, ”participation” and ”development” are major principles, that is, there is a focus on the individual’s desire to participate in and belong to social communities of practice which are experienced as meaningful (Wenger 1998, Mead 1932). The individual’s self-understanding and competences are developed in relation to these communities. The individual subject is thus not an isolated unit of analysis, but a subject in relation to the practice and context in which he or she participates. The drive for change is located in participation in social practices in which we seek meaning together with others (Wenger 1998, Tanggaard 2007).

The research centre’s broad approach to competence development includes perspectives on human change from many academic traditions. This is apparent in the program’s open and holistic understanding of the elements included in the development of competences among children and youth. The process of competence development implies among other things that children and youth:

- acquire identities, values and ideologies (socialisation)
- acquire knowledge and abilities (learning)
- develop readiness to act in different practices and contexts (development)

*Learning* and *development* are probably the most common traditional academic concepts in discussions of child and youth competence development. In psychology and education, scholars frequently argue about what should be understood as learning and what should be understood as development, and there are often disagreements as to how to interpret the two concepts and the relationship between them. Some argue that a final theoretical conclusion about the relationship between learning and development is no longer necessary and refer to, for example, the oft-quoted Vygotsky-phrase: “any learning worthy of the name leads to development” (Newman and Holzman 1993: 75). Others state that a theoretical clarification of the two terms is very important. The PhD fellows in our program will be confronted with such debates and others like it and they will thereby receive training in how to reflect critically on central questions in the field.

**A multi-practice oriented and multi-contextual approach**

Child and youth competence development takes place within and across different *practices* related to family, preschool, school and so forth. These practices also take place within particular *contexts* which affect the participation (and thereby the competence development) of children and youth in these practices.

In this research program, *seven fields of practice* for child and youth participation are singled out as central in the competence development of children and youth. Which fields of practice will be emphasised in particular studies of child and youth competence development will, however, *vary over time* depending on developments in a society and on research priorities made
by society at large and by specific researchers and research groups. Our research program will continually be up-dated about which practices are central in child and youth participation and development of different competences. Research on child and youth competence development should focus on these practices. Our program has identified several fields of practice in focus in the study of child and youth competence development (in what follows, abbreviated as “fields of practice”). Today, the following fields of practice appear central in the study of the competence development of most children and youth in our society:

- Family practices
- Peer practices
- Media practices
- Preschool practices
- School practices

However, some children and youth also need professional support in developing and mastering the demands of everyday life. Professions in the welfare state’s support system then offer these children (and in some cases, their parents as well) opportunities to participate in certain professional practices. The purpose of these practices is, first of all, to help these children and young people to become able to participate in society’s different practices and master their lives in a better way. The following two are examples of such competence developing practices in professional fields of the welfare state:

- Professional practices within the field of social work (e.g. child welfare)
- Professional practices within the field of psycho-social health (e.g. child and youth psychiatry)

In addition to such independent areas of professional practices aimed at supporting child and youth development, society has developed practices for special professional services that are directly linked to the general practice areas mentioned above. For example, professional practices within family protective services offer an arena for participation for parents and children with special needs, such as competences in handling a divorce. Other examples are special education efforts in preschool and school settings.

To identify such fields of practice is a way to focus in on some of the areas in the lives of children that are important for their competence development. The term “fields of practice” is not be understood as a theoretical concept with scientific ambitions. The seven fields of practice are not a construction of a set of mutually exclusive theoretical categories that refer to separate “levels” of reality but fields that may serve as basis for focal points. In “real life,” elements of a child’s participation in, say, media practices will be interwoven with his or her participation in other family practices. In a similar way, professional practices within child welfare, may “move in with” a family and its practices. Recognising this complexity in the lives of children and youth is the starting point for a holistic approach to child and youth competence development. But in such a holistic approach there needs to be areas of focus, and in identifying these we use the term “fields of practice.” The use of this term is a pragmatic way to focus in on some areas of child and youth participation in practices that appear central in the development of competences in contemporary society. The seven fields of practice will be described in more detail in a later section.
But how should the term “practice” be understood and how should the term “context” be understood? And how might one understand the relationship between practice and context? Below, we illustrate a few different approaches to answering these questions.

The research program’s basic assumption about the nature of the object of study (see below), holds that the phenomenon that is studied – child and youth participation and competence development – should be studied in relation to the practices and contexts in which the participation and competence development takes place. The seven fields of practice that the research program singles out as central are not an exhaustive list of all fields in which practices of relevance for child and youth participation and competence development appear. But the practices that are highlighted by the program seem particularly pertinent in the study of child and youth participation and competence development in contemporary society. The adoption of “child and youth competence development” as the core of the program is based on the assumption that studies of this phenomenon should address the significance of children’s and youth’s participation in and across pertinent practices for their competence development.

In social scientific approaches we often see attempts to divide reality into different “levels.” An influential researcher in child and youth development, Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1981; 1996), for example, uses micro-, meso-, exo- and macro levels in his framework of an ecological systems approach to child development. Like our research program, Bronfenbrenner emphasises children’s participation in and across different practices and contexts. For example, he claims that children’s development is stimulated by the number of structurally different neighborhoods in which the child may be a part and in which the child may be included in a varied set of common activities with other people. Though our research program in some respects uses an approach similar to Bronfenbrenner’s developmental ecological approach, it is not based on a “leveling” of reality. The selected fields of practice should not be perceived as a definition of different realities that may be divided into “levels.” The program does not understand the division of practices into different fields as if these fields were related to one another by way of pre-defined logical “levels.” The question of how the practices associated with the fields of practice in focus may relate to one another and to child and youth competence development when children and youth participate in and across these practices, should itself be part of the research agenda. Such an open theoretical attitude about the role of practices is important, particularly because participation in and the influence of these practices will change over time when society and the demands for competence that different generations of children and youth are facing change.

In this research program, the issue of the potential connections between the fields of practice in focus and their influence on child and youth competence development is viewed as an empirical and theoretical question that should be examined in concrete studies of child and youth participation and competence development. This, however, does not rule out that individual researchers or PhD students may consider it relevant and fruitful to relate practices and their influence on competence development to each other in terms of hierarchical levels for particular analytic purposes. That might be useful in the development of theoretical models illuminating specific developmental processes or the development of specific competences. The program’s emphasis on the fact that the fields of practice in focus and the constitutions and demand structures of various individual practices are important to competence development is primarily motivated by methodological concerns and dictated by basic assumptions about the reality in which child and youth competence development takes place. The research program emphasises seven general fields of practice because the practices in these fields are central in the
lives and competence development of children and youth. In the Centre’s research projects, the emphasis on these fields of practice is dynamic and flexible. Over time, the focus on certain fields of practice, on the combination of practice fields, and on more specific practices will vary, depending on social developments, the research conducted within the field and the competence and academic interests among the Centre’s researchers. Some projects will center on particular practices among the fields of practice in focus, while other projects will center on practices in all fields of practice.

The participation of children and youth in the seven fields is shaped by their varying backgrounds in terms of a range of social dimensions, such as gender, class, and ethnicity. These dimensions are assumed to be influential both within and across the practices that this research program focuses on. The conditions for child and youth participation and competence development in these fields of practice will vary between different groups of children and youth, depending on their combination of biological, social, cultural and economic backgrounds. These differences should be taken into consideration in studies of child and youth competence development.

The concept of practice and the research program’s fields of practice in focus

The term practice has several meanings in everyday language and in various theoretical traditions within academic disciplines such as sociology, education and psychology. One common meaning of the term has emerged in relation to the concept of theory, that is, as one part of the conceptual duo “theory and practice,” in the sense of theory as opposed to practice. Another meaning is seen in talking about professional practices, for example, medical practice or the practice of social work. The academic approaches that emphasise that competence development occurs through practice, address the division between theory and practice by arguing that such development does not happen by internalising knowledge, but through participation in various practices (cf. Sawyer 2002).

An example of this understanding of practice can be found in Wenger et al.’s (2002) definition of the term in their theorising of “communities of practice.” Here they provide a definition that is close to the way practice is used in this research program:

It denotes a set of socially defined ways of doing things in a specific domain: a set of common approaches and shared standards that create a basis for action, communication, problem solving, performance, and accountability. (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder 2002: 38)

In the different branches of cultural-historical psychology the terms “activity” and “practice” have partly overlapping theoretical content, depending on their varying theoretical affiliations. The term “activity” (cf. Leontjev 1978, Hedegaard 2008, and others) tends to be more explicit in relating inner human subjective psychological processes to the outer social, cultural and objectified world, while the term “practice” (cf. Dreier 1997; 2008b; Lave & Wenger 1991) tends mainly to focus on how the actions of subjects are constituted in practice (Nygren 2004).

The relationship between the various activities an individual performs by participating in a specific practice may be understood by way of the theory of the activity system (Engeström 1987, 1990). According to this theory, activities are part of an overarching “system of activities”. This concept opens possibilities for distinguishing between the terms “practice” and “activity.” A specific practice emerges when the participants coordinate their participation in different activities so that these activities are carried out according to a coordinated, recurring pattern over time (Nygren 2004). The coordinated and recurring pattern in these activities across time, is
an important criterion for what should be considered “practice,” as we use the term here. It takes time to establish a coordinated, recurring pattern for activities in the form of a specific practice. To understand a specific practice, for example a practice in a class room, it is important to use a historical perspective to look at the different traditions that together shape this practice.

Adopting the definitions above as a starting point, a particular community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998) can be seen as a community that is established, maintained and developed over time through the participants’ specific ways of coordinating activities in a particular form of collective practice.

In summing up, child and youth competence development takes place through participation in and across different practices. The fields of practice that are central for the competence development of most children and youth in contemporary society, are, as mentioned earlier, family practices, peer practices, preschool practices, school practices and media practices. Some children and youth also participate in professional practices that are organised to support their development. This research program focuses on two of these fields of practice in particular: professional practices within the field of social care (e.g. child welfare practices) and professional practices within the field of psycho-social health (e.g., child and youth psychiatry). But the conditions for participation in all practices included in the seven fields of practice will vary according to, among other things, which context the particular practice takes place in.

The relationship between context and practice
There are obvious differences between the seven fields of practice that are emphasised in the program, first and foremost with regard to whether or not these fields include practices that form particular local institutional frames for the participation and competence development of children and youth. There are also differences with regard to how regularly, and over which periods of time, children and youth participate in the practices in a specific field of practice. But all practices in the seven fields of practice have in common that the participation and competence development of children and youth take place according to specific, internally linked conditions. The internally linked socio-material conditions that constitute a context, emerge as landscapes and rooms that are organised differently in relation to rules and procedures for participation, the use of artifacts and technologies, social positions and relations, demands and purposes – all this affects the participation and competence development of children and youth in and across the practices within the different fields of practice.

At the same time, the context for the practices in one field of practice may vary. Even if the term “context” is not always rigorously defined in the literature, it is used very often in current research, also in this program. It is not a perfect choice of term, but other related terms, such as institution, setting, arena and ecological niche appear less apt. The word context is rooted in “com textere,” which means “to weave together,” and it has two different meanings:

(1) the parts of a discourse that surround a word or passage and can throw light on its meaning and (2) the interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs. (Merriam-Webster’s 11th Collegiate Dictionary, 2005, s. 270).

The latter sense, with its emphasis on the importance of interrelated socio-material conditions for participation, is the foundation for the way in which child and youth competence development is studied in this research program. The choice of the term “context” is also an expression of a methodological approach in that it provides a way of understanding the relationship between individual and society: the individual is studied in relation to a context, not as something out of
context. Below, we provide a few examples to illustrate the importance of considering the contexts of the practices in which children and youth participate.

The conditions for participation in school practices in a class of seventh grade in a school where most children are of non-Western ethnic descent will differ significantly from the conditions for participation in a class of seventh-grade in a school in an affluent community in which all the children are ethnically Norwegian. Differences in the contexts of these practices, that is, differences in the connections between the conditions for participation, may be of great importance for which competences it will be possible to develop. Another example is the participation of children and youth in media practices. Participation in digital practices in the context of the school may promote the development of other digital competences than those developed through participation in digital practices in games framed by interaction with family and/or peers.

In social practices, the actions of individual participants are connected in a way that makes them mutually dependent on one another. To understand an individual’s actions in such practices, one must also have knowledge about the actions through which the other participants realise their activities. One must, in other words, possess knowledge about those connections between the conditions for participation (context) that are called the action context. An action context may be the result of the participants’ organisation of practices in the form of a particular relationship between goals and means (Nissen 1996, Dreier 1997). The way in which the participants in a collective activity connect goals and means when they solve a task, thus structures their individual actions in a particular way. Each participant’s actions are included in a relationship that is structured by the tasks, the goals and the means available. At the same time, this action context influences which social relations the participants develop.

It may seem obvious that the participants’ actions weave together in a common practice in this way. But it is important to take a closer look at “the obvious” in order to understand how the participants’ competences develop and why they develop in a particular way. Each individual participant not only relates to a task that requires a specific competence, but to the set of actions constructed by the actions of all participants. The way in which the participants connect their actions in order to solve practical tasks is in and of itself an essential part of the social context that affects which actions are possible and which are impossible for each individual participant (Nygren 2004). This aspect of the social context also affects which competences it is possible to use or develop. Individual actions and competences are thus embedded in the way in which these actions are related in the social practice at hand. Or to use a concept from situated learning (Lave & Wenger 1991): the actions and the competences are situated in the social practices in which children and youth participate.

**An interdisciplinary approach**

As mentioned earlier, the research program is interdisciplinary in addition to being multi-practice oriented and multi-contextual. The increased complexity in the everyday life of children and in the specialisation and segmentation in the organisation and development of knowledge in this area of research have contributed to the fragmentation of knowledge about children and youth. The fragmentation occurs between different academic disciplines and specialities within these disciplines as well as between three societal arenas:

1. The arena of politics with responsibility for the design of societal framework for the qualification and self-cultivating processes of children and young people;
2. The professional fields of practice where knowledge of such processes is applied, and
3. The academic disciplines in which scientific knowledge about these processes is generated.

We must therefore distinguish between three types of knowledge development with different associated interests: political, professional and disciplinary development of knowledge. These three forms of knowledge development mutually influence one another. But the knowledge generated within each of these spheres of interest is too narrow, and their contributions to knowledge are difficult to relate to each other. Many scholars warn against the consequences of this development and argue for the necessity of interdisciplinary research. An interdisciplinary approach is appropriate for the research areas in our program. Nonetheless, we also see a tendency towards increasing specialisation and fragmentation in our area. Academic disciplines develop more sub-disciplines which produce more and more in-depth knowledge at the expense of more holistic understandings (Bhaskar & Danermark 2006). Interdisciplinarity may be understood as:

“... a process of answering a question, solving a problem, or addressing a topic too broad or complex to be dealt with adequately by a single discipline or profession. ... IDS draws on disciplinary perspectives and integrates their insights through construction of a more comprehensive perspective.” (Klein & Newell 1998: 3)

Interdisciplinary approaches are emerging in research about children and youth. But in some contexts monodisciplinary research seem garners greater recognition than research seeking to integrate knowledge across disciplines and levels. Structural conditions such as monodisciplinary research and educational institutions, recruitment practices and funding agencies demanding unidisciplinary frameworks promote this development.

The fragmentation of basic knowledge has made it difficult to obtain a comprehensive perspective on child and youth participation and competence development. But holistic knowledge is necessary in order to secure a relevant and comprehensive platform for action for national and local actors in the sphere of politics for children and young people as well as for professional actors who are to realize these policies in practice. This implies a demand for critical, scientific reflection on the current status of knowledge within this area.

One of the aims of this research program is to contribute to the breaking down of polarities between different research traditions and disciplines. Through interdisciplinary collaboration, we wish to uncover knowledge and insights for ourselves and each other in an ambition to produce integrative knowledge across the field of child and youth competence development. In that sense, the program reaches across disciplines, practices and contexts, history and cultures, and across the biological, social and psychological aspects of human beings.

Child and youth participation and competence development as an object of study

LUC’s previous initiative within the field of child and youth research “Childhood and socialisation” emphasised both a more general approach (childhood) and a more specific focus (socialisation). The Centre’s research and further development of this initiative resulted in a recognition of the field’s complexity in light of social changes and new research about children and youth. Accordingly, the central focus of our approach is the development of competences as a condition for participation in various practices and their contexts. This is in line with recent
research non socialisation that focuses on competence understood as “competent functioning in the culture in which the child is growing up” (Maccoby 2006: 13).

Studies of child and youth competence development rest on certain assumptions in relation to the philosophy of science in general, as well as on particular ontological and epistemological assumptions. Here, we wish to make some of these assumptions explicit in order to identify some of the characteristic features of child and youth competence development as an object of study.

We understand research on child and youth competence development as studies of those processes and mechanisms that to a varying degrees, by virtue of human activity, enable children and youth to participate fully in social practices in and across different contexts as well as to achieve particular goals and master specific tasks associated with these practices.

This definition of the object of study for research on child and youth competence development is, however, just a starting point, a general positioning. While it provides a particular focus which may guide studies within this research area, it is also formulated with a theoretical openness that allows for a diversity of interpretations that may vary depending on theoretical and disciplinary points of view. One goal for the type of interdisciplinary studies that the research program seeks to conduct is to provide researchers and PhD fellows coming from different disciplines opportunities for critical reflection about their objects of study from different theoretical perspectives central to the research area. Such reflections will enable them to contribute to the theoretical and empirical substance of child and youth competence development as an object of study. The program’s approach to the object of study must therefore be sufficiently wide and open.

But in order to reach the goal of making different disciplinary approaches enrich one another and of contributing to foster a more comprehensive knowledge which transcends monodisciplinary approaches, it is important to provide a scholarly platform which frames the area of research by adopting a few, clear and general positions. In fact, the relatively open and general definition of the object of study provided above challenges certain interpretations and approaches. For example, the definition above holds on to the idea that the development of competences is a process that makes children and youth able to master particular tasks or activities in and across specific contexts. This general socio-cultural positioning implies an understanding of the process and result of competence development as being influenced by participation in and across specific practices and contexts. It also allows us to focus on how children and youth experience practices, communities, contexts and competences from the point of view of meaning-making and identity-construction. At the same time, this framing invites more “explorative” studies of competence development, that is, competence development conceived as something that is not a given but created or mediated in and through the relationship between subject, practice, tools, and context. The general socio-cultural approach offers a way to study how children and youth manage, adapt to or resist programs and provisions intended to enable competence development in various practices and contexts. In this way, the approach gives room for a critical discussion of traditional approaches in learning theory which hold that what is learned or developed is more or less universal and therefore might be used in different situations, regardless of the specificities of various practices and contexts.

In articulating the program’s core area of research, we have worked to find the right balance between, on the one hand, openness, affording sufficient theoretical flexibility and encouraging PhD fellows to reflect independently and critically on their objects of study, and, on the other hand, sufficient explicit delineations within which to position the core of our work. In this way,
monodisciplinary limitations may be transcended in an interdisciplinary melting pot for new knowledge that possesses breadth as well as depth.

**Problematising and positioning our approach**

The development of the core, profile and object of study of our research program has been a long process. In doing so, it was necessary to reflect critically on the concept of competence as well as on other key concepts in the program’s profile. It was also necessary to explicate our position in relation to various approaches to our object of study. Such critical reflections on the program’s research agenda and approach to the object of study may be carried out through questions such as:

- What is competence? Should competence development be understood as an individual’s passive adjustment to the demands of his or her environment or as an individual’s or a group’s active mastering of a given environment?
- How do we understand someone as more “developed” or “competent” than someone else? What demands are found in specific social practices, contexts and constellations?
- How should the relationship between learning and development be understood with regards to competence development?
- How should movement and directedness in the concepts competence, development and achievement be understood?

As discussed earlier, an key part in understanding competence development as an object of study may be formulated in this way: “something” enables the subject to do “something,” and this is only possible through the subject’s actions. *To be able to do something* is therefore related to *having the competence to achieve and/or master a particular task*. Those processes contributing to enable the subject to master and/or achieve something are thus the processes that promote the development of competence.

This approach allows us to study competence development as an *active adjustment* to demands articulated and/or defined by the individual’s surroundings, by the individual him- or herself, or through negotiations between the individual and his or her surroundings. This does not preclude to study competence development as active strategies, initiated by an individual or a group, intended to conquer or expand control over certain life conditions. A focus on “active adjustment,” however, should not be taken as an assumption that the individual adjusts to dominant norms and values. Instead, it becomes important to explore the different directions of change, learning, and competence development, that is, the ways in which children and youth handle and negotiate their experiences of demands, tasks, goals, values and expectations associated with a specific practice in a specific context. It becomes particularly important to study these processes in light of the demands, goals and expectation they carry with them from other practices and contexts they participate in. This approach also makes it necessary to recognize that competence development always occurs through participation in practices that are organised in a way which constitutes particular *power relations* which directly or indirectly affect which competences may be developed. These power relations are elements in the mechanisms which contribute to the development of certain competences. This is apparent in certain practices and contexts for competence development, such as preschool and school practices. It is also manifested in the relations between actors belonging to different *social classes, genders, and ethnicities*. Children and youth in different social groups are not only given
different opportunities for developing specific competences, they also have to develop different competences to protect their interests.

On the background of the discussion above, one may question an understanding of competence development that assumes that it is possible to make general assessments of who is more competent or developed than someone else. Competence, according to our approach, is associated with an object, (e.g. a task) and the practice and context in which this task is performed. This means that an individual who is capable of mastering a particular task related to a specific practice in a specific context, is ay not necessarily capable of mastering that task in a different practice in a different context.

In addition, from a scholarly point of view, competence development should not implicitly be seen in a normative perspective. Instead of seeing competence development as positive and desirable in all contexts, we should see it as functional, as situated in specific practices and contexts and as object-related. It is thereby important to stress that tasks and goals may be defined differently by the different participants in a social practice and that these tasks and goals may be contested and subject to negotiation. In research in our program, we wish to shed light on the negotiations of such different points of view and on the consequences of such negotiations for the competence development of children and youth, instead of implicitly taking the point of view of one participant as the norm.

This raises the question of how competences may be understood in relation prescribed goals for participants within given social practices and contexts. We may argue that this question should be treated in the same way as the question of who defines the tasks and demands for participation in a social practice. To address these questions, we should include the issue of power relations in social practices. The power to define the goals for the participants in a given social practice also often includes the power to define the tasks to be mastered in that practice. As such, this much an empirical question: in some social practices participants negotiate how tasks and goals should be defined, while in other practices one person formulates these goals and tasks more or less on his or her own (for example, an authoritarian teacher in a class room).

All the issues problematised above relate to the overarching question of how we should understand movement and direction in relation to the concepts of participation, competence development and achievement. It is problematic to take certain directions and movements in participation, competence development and achievement of goals for granted. But we may say that there always is movement and direction in the participating subjects’ participation, competence development and achievement of goals, whether these goals are defined by the subjects themselves, by others, or through negotiations carried out within certain power relations and contexts. Such movement and such directions may vary, change or contradict one another, but in certain situations they may also be aligned. The direction of social practices is often negotiated by the participants in that practice. Such movement and direction are thus an important empirical question in the study of child and youth competence development. It is also relevant to mention that every practitioner working with children and youth have a direction in his or her work. Within the professions there may be different understandings and perceptions of these directions as well as of which directions are to be considered legitimate. Research about this may contribute to a critical elucidation of and reflection on the development of professional practices in relation to children and youth.

The question of direction indirectly raises the issue of the absence or presence of a normative approach to human competence. Having reviewed the existing literature on social competence, Gundersen and Moynahan (2006) reach their own definition of social competence:
An individual shows social competence when (i) he/she is very likely to achieve his/her own goal and common goals in given social situations and in ways which attend to his/her own fundamental rights as well as to the rights of those with whom he/she interacts, (ii) he/she satisfies explicit cultural and social rules and implicit behavioural norms, which in turn, (iii) results in positive responses from others (op.cit., s. 166, our translation).

Such a definition can be seen as prescriptively normative (see the third characteristic above in particular). It seems to rule out that an individual also may display part of his or her social competence in behaviour in which the deployed competences challenge certain social rules and norms. The approach to competence development in our research program, however, allows for an analysis in which, for example, drug addicts are seen as deploying parts of their social action competences when they collaborate effectively to obtain drugs – in fact, even when they smuggle drugs. The motives for and results of their actions may represent values and ideologies that are not accepted by general social values, rules and norms. Yet, the values, rules and norms guiding the interpersonal interactions and collaborations between drug addicts in their practices, may represent high-level social competences, and even be in line with general social norms and rules regarding how to form social interactions between human beings that are characterised by mutual care. From this point of view, the drug addicts’ social competences may be “well-developed.” The question about their social competences should thus not be answered normatively, but examined empirically. From this perspective, the “goals” of participants are not given, but need to be understood in relation to their desire for belonging and to concepts such as meaning and identity. The theoretical concepts guiding research about human competence development should, then, not be normative. As emphasised above, competence development should be understood as functional, as situated in specific practices, as contextual and as object-related, and it should be seen from the perspective of the participating subjects themselves.

Child and youth competence development, as we have presented it, is a fairly complex area of research. Some research projects in our program will contribute knowledge about the results which the competence-generating processes and mechanisms produce. These studies should not merely be descriptive, but also seek to propose explanations. To that end, the generative mechanisms behind the development and use of human competences will be part of our object of study.

But these mechanisms may only be mobilised and may only produce results through the activities of those who participate. The program adopts a conception of children and youth as subjects in their own competence development as its starting point. On the other hand, a child obviously does not develop or use competences without being influenced by specific practices and social, cultural and material surroundings. The processes and mechanisms which generate the development and use of competences in children and youth are based on a dynamic interplay between internal and external conditions. This interplay involves the individual child’s bodily and mental conditions and processes and the external world’s social, cultural and material conditions and mediating artifacts.

Many social institutions and actors play an important role in child and youth development and uses of competence. Child and youth competence development takes place both within and across practices and the socio-cultural and material contexts in which children and youth take part. In a socio-cultural approach the content and form of the competences, as well as the ways in
which they are used, are *situated* in these practices and contexts. Consequently, child and youth competence development cannot be understood apart from those *practices* and *contexts* in which they are developed and used. Studies in the area of our program thus need to examine the various practices and contexts within which the development and use of competences take place (cf. Dreier 2008a, Hedegaard 2008: 10-18, Goncu 1999).

This understanding of competence development as anchored or situated in specific practices and contexts, also has consequences for studies of the generative mechanisms behind competence development. It challenges approaches which only examine individual children’s mental processes and conditions. The elements of the mechanism that *enables* a child to solve a certain task in a certain practice and context usually make up a fairly complex configuration of elements and they are in dynamic interplay with one another. But, most importantly, the elements in the generative mechanism reside *both inside and outside* of the individual child’s mental processes.

Furthermore, the approach in this research program emphasises the importance of adopting both a *historical perspective* and a *holistic and interactional understanding* of human competences. This entails a way of understanding and studying child and youth competence development that transcends a mentalist, individual-oriented, or essentialist understanding of competence.

From a socio-cultural perspective, scientific approaches to child and youth development and uses of competences require recognising that human competences are object-related, that is, that the pertinent *tasks* (and other parts of the objects of a competence) play a role in determining the content and shape of the competences. The tasks which a child is more or less able to master in a specific practice, are defined by the child him- or herself, by his or her surroundings, or through a negotiation between the child and his or her surroundings. Defining the task and arranging the practice and the context in which the task is to be performed, also largely defines the demands for competence, which affect the child’s possibilities of mastering the task. The term “task” is here understood broadly, and tasks can be of various kinds but always have to do with producing or constructing a certain *result which are* expressed in different ways. Such results may, for example, be:
1. Certain actions that fulfill certain criteria, for example, solving a math problem.
2. A concrete physical product such as a chair or a table.
3. Mental states, for example, subjective experiences, ideas and understandings.
4. A certain social reality, for example, specific social relations

The socio-cultural perspective allows for an approach which does not understand or measure the tasks and the various results of resolving them atomistically, separated from the dynamic relation between actor, task and tools available in the context (jf. Säljö 200; Wertsch 1998).

The suggested understanding of the object of study in child and youth competence development also has other implications for research in this field. For example, it is important to consider *changes and variations in those practices and demands for competence* which children and youth are facing, at an individual as well as at a structural level. The tasks which children and youth are facing vary through childhood and adolescence. This is a natural part of their personal development. Moreover, the tasks they face vary depending on which practices and contexts they participate in. In other words, the demands for competences *vary both over time, during the personal life course, and between different practices and contexts*. In addition, social development at a structural level will recurrently confront young generations with new tasks,
forms of practice, tools and contexts. The new information technologies are a striking example of this. Studies of child and youth competence development should therefore also reflect the fact that different generations of children and youth face different demands for different competences. Studies in this field should also consider that variations in demands for competence may be related to a child’s gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background.

**Relevant fields of practice in the study of child and youth participation and competence development**

The seven fields of practice described earlier are often emphasised as relevant in the study of child and youth participation and competence development. But the emphasis on these seven fields is not static. The main focus of studies - in terms of specific fields of practice, specific practices, and specific combinations of practices within and across relevant fields of practice - will vary over time depending on social developments, research in the field and the competences and academic interests represented in the academic staff at LUC. Some projects will focus on practices within selected fields of practice and contexts, while other projects will focus on practices within all fields of practice. The courses in the PhD program will be updated recurrently according to available knowledge about the implications of the practices and contexts for child and youth competence development.

In what follows, we briefly describe the relevant fields of practice. The fields of practice are only intended to provide a general focus on the practices associated with areas of the lives of children and youth that are important to their overall development including their competence development in contemporary society. Our focus on field-specific practices does not obligate the centre’s researchers and PhD fellows to study child and youth competence development only in relation to the participation of children and youth in these practices. While the description below is not meant to be too detailed and controlling, it is a reminder of an important, overarching normative methodological principle, that is, the importance of studying child and youth competence development in relation to the children’s and young people’s participation in and across the concrete practices and contexts that are important to their competence development.

The fields of practice may be tentatively described as follows:

- **Family** practices largely take place within the socio-material context of the home. Homes are usually partitioned into rooms with specific amenities and technologies, and most families have time in the morning and at night for establishing and developing family relations, activities and competences. Traditionally, the parent-child relationship has been in focus, and we often think of families within the framework of the nuclear family. This form of partnership is today one of many. Research about child and youth competence development as a result of, and a condition for, children and young people’s participation in family practices in various contexts should take into account the diverse family structures and partnerships as well as how differences related to gender, ethnicity, and class make the conditions for growing up more complex.

- The term **peers** refers to children and youth who are in the same age group. The social relations within this group are important for socialisation and competence development. We focus on the social practices of the peer group and on the contexts for competence development it provides because children and youth develop competences while interacting with peers within the family, school or preschool as well as elsewhere beyond the influence of their parents. Children and young people do this by moving through landscapes of social practices and different contexts, and they often do so with their peers. By moving around with their peers, children and youth develop new qualities in their peer relations and
competences (Dreier 2009). The conditions for these movements and relations form a loosely anchored context for child and youth competence development, and these movements and relations take on various forms due to differences in gender, ethnicity and social class.

- Practices organised by *preschools and schools* contain both formal and informal learning and competence development in social institutions that are arranged for children and youth. Formal education includes compulsory schooling as well as preschool and higher education. Informal education covers several institutions and can be understood as co-learning/or as learning under the influence of the so-called hidden curriculum. Outside of the school, informal education takes place in the leisure activities of children and young people, in the home sphere and in the part of the labour market in which children and young people participate. This program will focus especially upon the formal part of education. It is, however, important to take into account how children and young people’s participation and learning in these practices are shaped by their participation in other practices and contexts, as well as on how gender, ethnicity and social class affect how children relate to their participation and competence development in school practices.

- **Media practices** and contexts are frameworks for children’s and young people’s use of media such as newspapers, film, TV, video, cellular phones and the Internet. These media, and digital media such as cell phones and the Internet, significantly contribute to societal complexity. At the same time, these media represent tools which make it possible to communicate and deal with this complexity. Many young people use digital information and communication technologies to establish and maintain friendships and communities and to coordinate activities across practices and contexts. In this way, new competences are developed. The competence development emerging from such uses of media is also reflected in all the other fields of practice for child and youth competence development. Efforts to enable children and youth to develop digital competences must take into account the specific demands of the various practices and contexts in which participation takes place (Sørensen, 2009).

- **Professional practices** within the field of *social care* are practices organised to provide professional care for children and young people by child welfare officers and other forms of social work with children, young people and families, e.g. educational psychological services, social workers in school, out-reach youth workers and family protection officers offering services to families with children. Within this field, both the competence development of young people and the competence development of professionals are central. Our program also focuses on how these efforts are organised to contribute as effectively as possible to the participation of children and young people in their everyday fields of practice.

- **Professional practices** within the field of *psychosocial health* encompass the physical and mental health of children and young people as well the first and second line health services. In the first line we find health stations and GPs; in the second line we have, for example, specialists within pediatrics and child and youth psychiatrists. The field also includes preventive social work and other preventive initiatives. In this field, competence development refers to the competences of professionals as well as those of children and youth. As in the case of professional practices in the field of social care, the efforts in this field must be understood in light of their impact on children’s and young people’s participation, competence development and feelings of mastery in other fields of practice in the everyday lives of children and youth.
Within all the seven fields of practice, the research should produce knowledge about what impedes and what fosters “normal” competence development among children and youth as well as competence development associated with dysfunctional behaviours. As a consequence, knowledge about which competences are required of parents and professionals to be able to participate in the various practices of child and youth competence development is also essential.

The practices within these seven fields of practice are interwoven in ways that have consequences for child and youth competence development. For example, children’s participation in family practices is influenced by their participation in school and preschool practices, but also by the way the family attempts to gain insight into and influence on children’s participation in practices associated with other social institutions. A further layer of complexity is added by the fact that there may be conflicts and negotiations between various parties in these different fields of practice. These conflicts may involve the direction and content, as well as the form of the child’s or young person’s participation and competence development.

Traditionally, studies of child and youth development within these seven fields of practice are often carried out within one discipline. In such monodisciplinary studies, discipline-specific aspects of child and youth development are addressed. Often, these aspects of child development are studied with a main focus on practices related to one of the fields of practice described above, even if some studies may include additional variables from other practices and contexts. While developmental psychology traditionally has approached child development through studies of relations and interactions between parents and children in the practices of the nuclear family, for example, in studies of different forms of attachment between mothers and children, family sociology has tended to focus on the significance of the social conditions of the family for the development and socialisation of children. Using social practices involving children and youth as a starting point, the field of sociology has, for example, examined the significance of peers in socialisation, while the field of social psychology has shown more interest in the significance of a young person’s handling of peer pressure in terms of the development of social deviance and criminal behaviour. Media research, on the other hand, has examined the role of media in peer-relations and communication between peers in addition to studying how media may influence violent attitudes and behaviours. Within education and educational psychology, there have been studies of educational practices in preschools and of how these practices affect child development and later performances in school and other social practices and contexts. Within education, several research traditions also examine the significance of the organisational frameworks of schools as well as of the didactic strategies in educational practices on learning and on the development of social competences. Social education, sociology and psychology have, each from their disciplinary approaches, addressed important questions about the causes of social problems among children and youth and about how social institutions established to attend to such problems may succeed both in terms of prevention and rehabilitation/treatment.

In these types of research, the practices and contexts of the family, peers, preschool and school are identified as significant in the social efforts of prevention and rehabilitation. Likewise, from their respective disciplinary orientations and traditions, treatment practices within psychology and child and youth psychiatry have focused on the psychosocial health of children and youth, emphasising interactions with family members and peers (cf. Lee 2008).

In distinction from frameworks focusing on practices and contexts, this research program adopts a multi-practice oriented and multi-contextual approach. The starting point for this approach is the assumption that in their everyday lives, children and youth participate in and across several practices and contexts belonging to several fields of practice. It follows that child
and youth competence development is not a result of participation in an isolated practice within one of these fields of practice. Competence development in specific fields is aided and impeded by experiences gained from participating in specific practices and contexts and from comparing and integrating experiences across practices and contexts e. Experiences about relationships between specific practices and contexts, which children and youth incorporate into their development, are important in the study of child and youth competence development. Such studies must consider that a child’s or young person’s participation in one practice in one context is influenced by his or her participation in other practices and contexts. In addition, such studies should consider how gender, ethnicity and social class influence the participation of children and youth in different practices and contexts.

In contemporary society, participation in practices of family, preschool/school and peers makes up fairly long-term and regular elements of the everyday lives and competence development of children and youth. Participation in these practices, including the mutual influence of participating in and across these practices, is important for the development and competence development of all children and youth. Participation in practices of psychosocial health, social care and media, however, give rise to experiences in the everyday lives of children and youth that intersect with their participation in practices of family, preschool/school and peers. The practices of these three fields of practice are equipped to assist children’s and young people’s participation in the other fields of practice.

The practices within the seven fields of practice in focus may, in different constellations, serve as starting points for designing studies of competence development. Such constellations illustrate different combinations of issues of significance for competence development in children’s and young people’s participation in different social practices. Using a child’s participation in family practices as a starting point, one may focus on how the combination of the child’s interactions with other family members and the child’s use of media impedes or fosters the child’s development of specific social competences. It is then also possible to bring in practices from the other seven fields of practice, for example, by examining how the child’s use of media in peer practices forms a basis for its development of social competences. How do digital artifacts, such as the Internet, cell phones, on-line games, mediate the relations and communication between child-parent and child-peer, and what are the consequences of this for the development of social competences? Adding some of the research program’s core theoretical concepts, we may, still using the example above as a starting point, articulate questions such as:

- What kind of practices and relations within the family and among peers are central in relation to children’s and young people’s development of competences that impede or foster different psychosocial dysfunctions, for example, competences associated with developing and sustaining video game addiction and other health-related issues and social problems?
- What ideals of personal cultivation do children and youth develop as a part of their competence development through participation in peer practices, and how do these ideals differ from those of their parents?
- Which aspects of the digital competences that children and youth develop in their leisure time and among peers, may qualify them for success in future participation in school and labour practices?

**An interdisciplinary, multi-practice-oriented and multi-contextual approach**

Our platform for research is interdisciplinary with a focus on child and youth participation in several different practices (multi-practice-oriented,) and it is multi-contextual. But, we would like to stress that the Research Centre for Child and Youth Competence Development does not
exclude the use of results from traditional monodisciplinary and mono-contextual research in the various areas. On the contrary, the Centre’s research is anchored in pertinent areas of traditional research. Traditional research within the seven fields of practice for child and youth competence development thus forms an important starting point for our research. What distinguishes our approach from the traditional approaches is first and foremost:

- A combination of an interdisciplinary, multi-practice oriented and multi-contextual approach in order to match challenges facing research about the complex realities in child and youth development
- A delineated common focus – child and youth competence development – which in a stringent and fruitful way may coordinate and integrate mono- and interdisciplinary practice-oriented research contributions within the framework of a larger whole.

In short, what distinguishes the research proposed in this program is an interdisciplinary, multi-practice-oriented and multi-contextual approach with a delineated common focus: child and youth competence development.

Such an interdisciplinary, collaborative framework means that the researcher in his/her pursuit and dissemination of knowledge, selects and further develops monodisciplinary and interdisciplinary research about child and youth development within the seven fields of practice where pertinent research results are of relevance for our clearly defined focus: child and youth competence development. Our research centre seeks to further develop and accumulate results from previous research in the field. In this way, results from previous research and the centre’s own research, including the work of our PhD fellows, are brought into a new context with a strategic sharpening of the field of study. Such an effort will be highly relevant for the need for new knowledge about the development and participation of children and youth in contemporary society, as well as in the society of tomorrow. The development of such research will also critically examine how the professions understand the participation and competence development of children and youth, how the professions interact with one another, and how the professions are significant for child and youth competence development beyond their practices and institutional boundaries as professionals. This program may thus contribute to the development of a more realistic and integrated understanding of the possibilities and limitations of professionals. It may also contribute to improved cooperation between professionals, parents and children and youth about children’s and young people’s participation and competence development.

**A unifying general socio-cultural approach**

The research program’s multi-practice-oriented, multi-contextual and interdisciplinary approach requires a unifying profile and a set of unifying general theoretical concepts that can bridge studies focusing on competence development in different practices in different contexts from the perspective of different disciplines. We have chosen a general socio-cultural approach in the social sciences as a foundation for such a unifying theoretical profile. This approach emphasises, among other things, the importance of social and cultural practices and contexts for child and youth development, learning and competence development, and it leaves room for specialisations in various scholarly traditions and questions (cf. Bruner, 1990; Cole, 1996; Forman, Minick, & Stone, 1993; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990; Stigler, Shweder, & Herdt, 1990; Suchman, 1987; Valsiner, 1998b; Wertsch, 1995; Archer 1988; Giddens 1979; 1984; Bourdieu 1977).

With such an approach, children and youth are understood as competent agents. It also has implications for how the perspectives of children and young people are understood. In a socio-
cultural approach, children and young people are seen as active participants in their own competence development and, at the same time, this development is seen in relation to the practices and contexts in which children and young people live their everyday lives. The issues which this approach brings to the fore have been central in research about children and youth during the last decades.

While the program’s profile is to be unified by core concepts, it should also be able to contain *broadly-conceived* interdisciplinary research. Neither the term “competence” nor the term “development” are “owned” by any particular discipline. Representatives from disciplines such as psychology, pediatrics, sociology, anthropology, history of ideas, philosophy, education, or psychiatry may, based on their disciplinary traditions, offer specific contributions to the exploration of phenomena addressed by these two concepts. A unifying profile, in this case a general socio-cultural approach, increases the likelihood of profiting from the benefits of an interdisciplinary approach.

Below we present the general socio-cultural approach and the core concepts that serve as a foundation for the program’s core area. By choosing a socio-cultural approach the program is open to many theoretical traditions in different academic disciplines (for example, cultural studies, developed by Williams 1961 and colleagues, such as Hall, 2000; phenomenology of the body, inspired by Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1968; postmodern educational philosophy, such as Steinsholt and Dobson, 2009). At the same time, the approach ensures the necessary demarcation of a distinct area of research. This approach and its core concepts were primarily chosen because they are well-suited for interdisciplinary, multi-practice oriented and multi-contextual studies of child and youth development and because they ensure coherence within the research program. In addition, much research and many researchers at the research centre are inspired by this approach.

The socio-cultural approach and its core concepts will continuously be scrutinised and reflected upon in the centre. This will take place in a dialogue between different variants of socio-cultural approaches and concepts and with a range of other theoretical approaches of relevance to studies of child and youth competence development. Theoretically and methodologically rooted in a general socio-cultural approach, our program seeks to expand and supplement this theoretical perspective. We also find it enriching that researchers and PhD fellows associated with the research centre are inspired by and draw on other general theoretical approaches to child and youth competence development.

The program’s core concepts
Defining a distinct field of study for the purposes of research and education requires the use of a field-specific terminology. Such terminology will always be theory laden, that is, charged with theoretical content from the disciplines which the concepts are drawn from. In developing and delineating a field for the study of child and youth competence development, we have taken a few core concepts as a starting point to ensure its depth and theoretical focus. These concepts are not neutral in theoretical or disciplinary terms. They are, however, general enough to allow different disciplinary and theoretical approaches, while they help delineate the field of study by directing attention to a specific set of issues. The core concepts form a theoretical map that both delineates the field of study and functions as a tool with which to navigate within the field. This theoretical map is subject to continuous negotiation in line with the principle of theoretical openness and the ambition of developing the conceptual apparatus further based on the different theoretical approaches and empirical findings of various research projects.
The core concepts that were selected to delineate the program’s core area of research are: complexity, participation, practice, context, competence development, action competence, qualification, personal cultivation and mediated childhood.

Several of these concepts were presented at some length above. In the following, we explicate the concepts further and present those core concepts that were not yet discussed. In addition to providing further exploration of core concepts, the purpose is to show how the core concepts together may form a coherent approach which may serve as a fruitful guide to the core of our field of study: child and youth competence development.

To ensure sufficient depth and internal coherence, the selected core concepts are systematically related to one another by way of a general unifying profile: a socio-cultural approach to child and youth development. Even though we employ a general socio-cultural approach with mutually linked core concepts in order to ensure internal coherence in the field of study, this does not preclude that concrete questions in individual research projects and PhD dissertations may be illuminated by other perspectives and approaches. In this way, the various disciplinary traditions informing the broad socio-cultural approach may also be critiqued, revised, enriched and developed further. This may widen and “deepen” the core of our field of study.

Many of the phenomena, which the core concepts are intended to capture, appear together within specific social contexts and relations and they interact with one another. The living conditions and scope for action that frame child and youth competence development are also related to social class, gender and ethnicity. In a socio-cultural approach class, gender, ethnicity and age are related to social practices. Thus, for instance, ge or gender are not studied discretely, but gain meaning and significance within contexts in which children and youth take part. This is often referred to as intersectionality (cf. for example Andersen & Collins 1998; Andersen & Collins 1998; Carbin & Tornhill 2004; De los Reyes & Mulinari 2003; Staunæs 2005). The concepts of social class, gender and ethnicity and their place in relation to the core concepts are briefly described below.

**Complexity and participation in and across contexts**

New forms of social, cultural and technical complexity characterise contemporary conditions for growing up and for child and youth competence development. In the use of digital media, the relationship between complexity and competences may be particularly obvious. Today, children are born into a world characterised by digital information and communication technologies. They live with technologies such as computers, the Internet, social media and cell phones more as a “cultural form” than as pure technologies (Buckingham 2003). Such digital tools increasingly mediate children’s and young people’s relations to each other and their perceptions of themselves and the world. Children and young people reduce the external complexity connected with mastering digital tools by developing an internal complexity as digital action competences which match the demands connected with using these tools. The use of mediating digital tools also contributes to regulate the complexity in the social relations which children and young people develop with each other.

Many social institutions and actors play important roles in children and young people’s development and use of competences. Child and youth competence development takes place through participation in and across different practices within and across socio-cultural and material contexts. The program’s definitions and uses of the concepts participation, practice and context were presented earlier. A fundamental assumption within a socio-cultural approach is that the content, form, and uses of competences are situated in these practices and their contexts.
One implication of this assumption is that child and youth competence development cannot be understood separately from children and young people’s participation in the practices and contexts in which the competences are developed and used. The contextuality of human competence contributes to the diversity and complexity of the competences which children and young people develop. In addition, a socio-cultural approach implies that competence development in a specific practice and context may be directed towards mastering tasks and goals in other practices and contexts. As a consequence, studies of child and youth competence development in one practice and context should consider the significance that this participation and competence development has for the child’s participation in other practices and contexts. For example, it may be important to consider that the facilitation of a child’s competence development within the practices and contexts of child welfare services may ultimately be aimed at assisting the child’s participation in and mastering of family practices and contexts. Another example is that studies of young people’s identity which examine how the competences children and youth acquire in one practice and context, e.g. on the football field or through using digital media in their leisure time, may give meaning, establish belonging and determine the child’s status, in the context of the school.

**A broad conception of competence**

In our choice and development of core concepts for the research program, we emphasised a *broad and open* approach to the concept of competence with a unifying framework provided by the socio-cultural approach. An important part of our position is to tie the conceptualisation of competence closely to the concept of action. The program’s researchers have developed the concept *action* competence as a key term in our research profile (see for example, Fauske & Nygren 2004; Nygren 2004; 2008). A central starting point for a socio-cultural understanding of competence is that human competences are part of an individual’s basis for action and that competences must always be understood in relation to objects: competences *enable an individual to act* (basis for action) in order to solve specific tasks or achieve certain goals (objects) within and/or across specific practices and contexts. The choice of the prefix *action* in the term action competence should be understood in relation to viewing human beings as acting subjects in their development of competences.

In the academic literature there are many ways to *define the concept of competence*, and the research program is open to many approaches. However, because this presentation of core concepts is a theoretical map for our program, we will now account for some socio-cultural approaches to the understanding of competence. Traditionally, socio-cultural research has emphasised three elements of human competence: knowledge, skills and attitudes. In the field of education we find such an understanding, for example, in Bloom’s work on the taxonomy of learning in the 1950s and its later revisions (Krathwohl, 2002). In research conducted by members of the research centre (e.g., cf. Nygren 2008), *control or command over external conditions for action* and *identity* are seen as further important elements in the development of action competences of individuals and groups. Previous research which conceptualised human competences as internal mental conditions, did not recognise that control over conditions for action is an important element in “being able to do something,” that is, being competent. The same can be said about the aspect of identity. Earlier research only to a limited extent included aspects of identity as an integral part of human competences. The few cases which did include the aspect of identity, focused first and foremost on individual identity and, moreover, on a rather limited conception of individual identity in relation to “self-perceived competence.” Concerning “attitudes,” the research program’s theoretical map proposes that it is useful to see them in close
interplay with other aspects of competence, such as knowledge, skills and identity. The theoretical map makes this clear by positioning attitudes as a part of one main element in action competence, which is called “readiness for action.” The approach we suggest allows for studying the various components of competence as parts of a larger dynamic whole. All in all, our centre’s research indicates that it may be fruitful to conceptualise human action competence as consisting of five general, main elements or dimensions: knowledge, skills, control over relevant external conditions, identity and readiness for action. There is a dynamic relationship between these main components, in which these parts mutually affect one another.

By adopting these assumptions as a starting point, it becomes possible to use a general socio-cultural perspective to describe and relate the five main elements of human action competence in the following way: The knowledge component includes the knowledge necessary for a child to master the tasks and demands for action in certain situations and contexts, for example, knowledge about the rules of a game. The skills in action competence refer to knowledge which is relevant for a particular practice and, through practical training, has been transformed so that it becomes functional in practical action as a tool to reach a particular goal or solve particular tasks. For example, a linguistic skill may enable a child to make a successful proposal for a certain play activity. Control and influence over external conditions of action are often preconditions for “being able” to master a particular task. For this reason control over relevant external conditions is one of five main components of action competence. For a child this might be control over or influence on particular tools of play. Human identities also play a role in the development and use of action competences. Children’s understanding and experience of themselves in relation to others – their identities – are a significant prerequisite for acting. Identities provide direction for action and guide participation in different practices. At the same time, they are a motivating force in these forms of participation. The fifth main component in this understanding of competence, readiness for action, develops on the basis of an integration of the other four components. Readiness for action means that the child, as a result of experiences of situated, relevant knowledge, skills, control over external conditions and identities, develops a more or less automated and consistent action tendency, or “standardised” way to act in specific situations. This is the component of human action competence which lies closest to concrete actions in practice. Values and their ideological formations play an important role in an individual’s readiness for action. They possess a guiding (direction-giving) and legitimating function in relation to the practice in which an individual participates.

Earlier we discussed our conception of the relationship between competence and development in comparison with international research. We showed that the research program’s profile has been articulated with a quite open approach to the concept of development in order to encompass theoretical diversity. Yet, the unifying socio-cultural approach helps delineate it from some traditional approaches. For example, it might indeed be difficult to unite the program’s socio-cultural approach with psychological approaches which assume that children and youth develop by moving through a pre-determined set of psycho-social or cognitive developmental stages. An approach dedicated to understand child and youth development only as a result of maturation, or seeing development as more or less biologically programmed, would also be difficult. However, this does not exclude considering the existence of certain biological preconditions in and for the development of specific competences.

As we have stressed previously, key terms, such as action competence and development, are non-normative concepts in the research program: competence development must be understood functionally, contextually, as situated in practices, and as object-related. Within our framework,
one may say that a child has developed, for example, social action competences if that child at a given point in time is able to master certain social tasks in a specific friendship within a certain practice and context in a better way than he or she was able to at an earlier point in time. This leads to some questions: What does the phrase “in a better way” imply? Who makes this judgment? On what grounds is the judgment made? Our non-normative approach combined with an understanding of competence development as functional, contextual, as situated in practices, and as situated in relation to objects, paves the way for exciting research with a range of research designs. In one type of design one may use the child’s experiences and evaluations as a starting point, in another, one may use evaluations made by others, and in a third, one may rely on both to gain new knowledge by comparing the results from these different perspectives. However, our approach to the delineation of the field of study, requires that such premises are made explicit in relation to explorations of child and youth participation and competence development.

In what follows, we present an example of how core concepts, such as “practice,” “context,” “action competence” and “development” may be related to one another in a larger whole within a socio-cultural approach.

**Practice, context, action competence and development**

The action competences of children and youth develop dynamically over time. This development is complex and happens as a result of children’s participation in and across different practices within different contexts. This complexity is difficult to depict visually, but some of its temporal dynamic can be illustrated as in figure 1 (Nygren 2004).

**Figure 1:** The dynamic development of child and youth action competences in which the general, potential form of the competence is transformed to an operative and context-specific form as a result of a child’s and youth’s participation in and negotiations of various practices over time.

This figure illustrates how part of the development process takes place through participation in different practices occurring in different action contexts (cf. practice I, II and III in the figure). In encountering a new practice (practice II), or when an “old” practice changes, a child faces partly
new demands for action which demand a modification and development of the competences which were situated in the “old” practice (practice I) and its context-specific demands. In relation to the demands of the new practice, the previously developed competences represent a general, potential possibility for mastering the new demands. Some aspects of the “old” competences may be relevant for solving tasks in the new practice while others may not. In the new practice, the child is involved in various tacit, implicit or open negotiations in interactions with other participants in the practice community. Which competences are demanded here? Which parts of my competences may I use, or am I allowed to use, in this new context? Which parts of my competences do I have to develop further and how do I do so? In time, the child modifies and develops the “old” relevant competences in order to adapt them to the demands of the new context (practice II). In this way, they are transformed to context-specific operative competences which are developed specifically in and for the new context. When the context changes again (practice III), the context-specific competences from the earlier practice (practice II) make up a general set of potential possibilities for mastering new demands. This is the start of new negotiations in which the general, potential competences are transformed into new operative competences which are specific and functional in the new context (practice III).

Socially vulnerable children and young people often move in the direction of other practices than those recognised as valuable and “normal” in a society. Children and youth, who experience social and/or health problems, often develop alternative strategies and practices. In doing so, they may develop action competences which promote and/or maintain dysfunctional behavior as an alternative way to reduce a stressful complexity. These children and youth often encounter interventions from society, for example, in the shape of special education or social work. The competences promoting and maintaining young people’s dysfunctional behaviors and the professional action competences in the support system are important areas of research for this program.

**Personal cultivation and qualification as aspects of competence**

The overarching concept action competence is a broad conception of competence, which addresses phenomena far beyond the fields of practice and contexts in which competences are typically discussed (for example, at work and at school). The action competence of children and youth constitutes a condition for participation in various social practices and contexts. Focusing on personal cultivation and qualification as important aspects of child and youth competence development makes the program and the Centre’s research sharper and deeper: the active participation of children and youth in various processes of personal cultivation and qualification contributes to the development of action competences and thus enables them to act in different social and cultural practices and contexts.

The term qualification refers to formal accomplishments such as those associated with a particular education. The research program’s approach allows for considering formal qualifications as one of several aspects of action competences. Similarly, this approach draws on the concept personal cultivation as an aspect of child and youth competence development. In what follows, we provide a brief description of qualification and personal cultivation as important aspects in the study of the action competences of children and youth, as well as in the development of these competences.

The terms qualification and personal cultivation refer to two processes which partly overlap and mutually affect each other during the upbringing and development of children and young people. Qualification processes and their results can primarily be understood in relation to society’s different general and formal demands for qualifications for different groups of citizens.
Personal cultivation processes and their results, on the other hand, can primarily be understood on the basis of an individual’s endeavours to constitute individual identities in local practices and contexts.

Personal cultivation is an overarching concept about the particular development of an individual - intellectually and emotionally. At the same time, personal cultivation has a collective side; it is generated in interaction with significant others in different groups and sub-cultures in which individuals consider themselves to be, or desire to be, members. Personal cultivation occurs in a repetitive movement between these poles, the “person” and the collective surrounding world. In their involvement in qualification and personal cultivation processes, children and young people actively relate to the different demand structures of their surroundings, and they develop different action competences.

The concepts of action competence and competence development play an overarching and unifying role in the interplay between qualification and personal cultivation. During their upbringing, children and young people develop various action competences of greater or lesser value in relation to society’s general, formal requirements for qualification and to the local, informal requirements for personal cultivation which young people encounter in various socio-cultural practices and contexts.

**Mediated childhood**

Another core concept in the research program’s platform is mediated childhood. With this concept, the program focuses on the significance of postmodern society’s socio-cultural artifacts which mediate children’s and young people’s participation and competence development in and across different practices and contexts. The term mediation draws attention to the significance of those tools or conditions which mediate children’s and young people’s relationships to the rest of the world. Recently, there has been considerable focus on the significance of mediating tools in the development of children and young people, particularly in relation to new digital tools and demands for digital competences among children and youth. The development of action competences among children and youth should not be seen separately from the characteristics of the tools which mediate their relations to the rest of the world and which they must master in order to solve everyday tasks.

**Intersectionality**

Children’s and young people’s social and cultural positions in terms of a family’s social class as well as an individual child’s gender and ethnicity frame and affect the phenomena which the concepts of practice, participation, context, action competence, competence development, personal cultivation and qualification and mediated childhood refer to. Here we see a complex intersectionality on various levels. The positions which children and youth hold in terms of class, gender and ethnicity shape their negotiations with other parties as well as their perceptions, priorities, connections and separations in their participation in various practices and contexts. They also shape the relations among children and youth and their perceptions of how complex lives should be lived in contemporary society. As such, they shape child and youth participation and competence development in diverse ways. In our research program, class, gender and ethnicity are not treated in isolation. They are considered as essential elements in studies of those phenomena which the research area and its core concepts address.

The positions of these terms in the profile of the research program are in particular due to the following: even though social class, gender and ethnicity have diverse implications for the participation and competence development of children and youth, these implications must,
according to the program’s socio-cultural approach, be understood as *situated*. Class, gender and ethnicity thus have different implications for children and youth in different practices and contexts. As such, they work in and across the practices which the seven fields of practice bring into focus: family practices, preschool and school practices, peer practices, media practices and professional practices within health care and social care. A child or young person understands his or her class position, gender, and ethnicity in a way that is shaped by the practices and contexts in which he or she participates, and also by the way he or she perceives the relationship between the various forms of participation in such practices and contexts. Based on this view, the research program’s approach may contribute new perspectives and new research about the significance of class, gender and ethnicity in children’s and young people’s participation and competence development *without* downplaying the importance of these complex relations.

**Competence development and dysfunctional behaviour**

In our society, the possibilities for developing adequate and functional competences vary for various groups of children and youth according to dimensions such as gender, ethnicity and social class. The lack of opportunities for developing and using functional competences within the fields of practice which are central to their participation may lead to feelings of disempowerment, chaos and personal insecurity. Human competences are, fundamentally, always *functional* in that they contribute to making an individual *able to* participate in different practices in ways that lead to the achievement of goals or mastery of tasks. But it is not unusual that some individuals also develop competences which contribute to maintain dysfunctional behaviours. Examples hereof are competences promoting or maintaining addiction, self-mutilation, violence, deviant behaviour and eating disorders. A child or young person may consider competences which were used to sustain destructive behaviour as functional, and these competences may be an important part of a child or young person’s short-term “survival strategies” within certain practices. Thus, drug-abusing young people are forced to develop certain competences in order to survive in the sub-culture of drug users. These competences may contribute to reduce complexity in the short run in a specific situation, even though they are not relevant for sustaining long-term goals or interests.

The research program also focuses on *changing* dysfunctional behaviour from the point of view of competences and their development. The same competences, or parts of competences, which are connected to dysfunctional behaviour, may under other circumstances be used to support functional behaviour. Interventions from professionals in health care and social work in order to support competence development may build on and sustain the competences of children and youth exhibiting dysfunctional behaviour. The program also focuses on the competences of professionals to contribute to the re-structuring, development and more functional use of competences.

In our research program, producing knowledge about what promotes and impedes socially vulnerable children and young people and their different types of dysfunctional competence development is as important as producing knowledge about what promotes and impedes children’s and young people’s ”normal” competence development. Knowledge about which competences are required by parents and those who work professionally with socially vulnerable children and young people at risk is therefore essential.
Contact information – Research Centre for Child and Youth Competence Development

For more information about research at the centre and the centre’s PhD program, please see [http://www.hil.no/buk](http://www.hil.no/buk).

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