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Editorial: Approaching the Poetics and Politics of Child Culture(s) in the Nordic Context

Building on the *BIN (Børnekultur forskning i Norden)* conference of 2025, the *BUKS Journal of Child and Youth Cultures* hereby presents the special issue: *The Poetics and Politics of Child Culture(s)*. This issue highlights the aesthetic, practical, economic, and ideological possibilities and challenges facing child and youth cultures today, where »child and youth culture« refers to culture by, for, and among children and young people in the broadest sense. The conceptual framework for this issue is built on two pillars that are often pitted against each other yet remain deeply intertwined. *Poetics* serves as a collective term for the promises and opportunities created through culture, pointing to the material, artistic, sensuous, and semiotic side of form—the *how* of things. *Politics*, on the other hand, gestures at the *why* of things, referring to the conditioning and discursive nature of representation and cultural exchange that often hinders the full potential of child culture (Hall 2013, 6).

While talk of poetics often echoes the modernist distinction of art for art's sake, in which the arts are seen as an autonomous field separate from moral or political goals, the addition of »politics« stresses that cultural expression never occurs in a vacuum. It is always interlaced with questions of power, a reality that children's cultures exemplify perfectly as both terms trace their lineage back to Aristotle's foundational works on *Poetics* and *Politics* and have been utilised widely across drama studies, anthropology, and cultural studies (Larkin 2013; Bernhart et al. 2018; Lidchi 2013).

Historically, the Nordic countries have been distinguished by a strong consensus regarding the rights of children and young people to express themselves and access diverse forms of culture, media, and art (Alminde & Warming 2024, Johanson 2010). In recent times, however, this field has undergone major changes and now faces significant challenges, including substantial funding cuts, the rise of AI, unequal access, and a growing disregard for leisure cultures. We are also seeing a rise in moral panics and increasing adult control, where conservative attitudes gain ground in times of crisis. The globally networked nature of cultural exchange has seen the spread of culture wars into the equality-oriented Nordic countries, deepening divides between liberal and conservative views and leading to »smokescreen« campaigns against minorities that instrumentalize culture and implement censorship and/or self-censorship in the name of protection. As noted in the 2025 BIN conference keynotes, this political climate directly impacts the production of children's culture, specifically through politicians' desire to cut funding for public service stations that serve as vital hubs for creative output. At the same time, the importance of child and youth culture is perhaps greatest in times of uncertainty marked by the climate crisis, the threat of war, and increasing violence. This raises questions about whether an educational »child-as-redeemer« stance is implied, or if the proclaimed importance of child and youth cultures points to the inherent value of culture in encouraging empathy, equity, and involvement. When we discuss poetics and politics in this context, we inevitably evoke a discussion of the Nordic values and public funding models for libraries, theaters, and museums that guide our practices.

The Scope of Poetics within Child Cultures

To understand the power of poetics, we must acknowledge it as a complex concept that refers to both theory and practice. Aristotle's *Poetics* does not only describe how good storytelling is constructed in practice, but it also provides an inquiry into how emotions are evoked. It is a foundational work of dramatic theory, because it is one of the first philosophical inquiries into why audiences enjoy depictions that arouse pity and fear, leading to *catharsis*, the cleansing or clearing of emotions. As such, it deals with a significantly larger field of art and culture than what we narrowly conceive of as poetry today. In literature studies, the term 'poetics' may refer narrowly to poetry or broadly to literary theory (Bal 2000), but in children's culture research, we align ourselves with the Aristotelian view and opt for an even wider view. Here, poetics encompasses the creative input of the artist or creator, the form of the object, and the process of transmission and reception as well as the surrounding cultural contexts of these processes and objects. For us, the term 'poetics' thereby captures the meaningful »messiness« of cultural production at large.

Literary scholar Roni Natov (2006, 2) describes the »poetics of childhood« as a process where childhood memories—the images, voices, smells, and textures of our earliest states of mind—are artistically transmitted to others. However, current Nordic inquiry does not settle for this adult-centered conception. There is an increasing focus on culture created and curated by children themselves. This shift in focus, based on a central paradigm of childhood studies, illustrates the intertwined and overlapping nature of poetics and poetics. Jacques Rancière's (1994, 2013) writing on both the politics of aesthetics and the poetics of knowledge, serves as a vital bridge here, as it shows how aesthetic experience is inseparable from the political sphere, including histories and pedagogies.

The statement that child culture is political requires little introduction, but the idea of politics may be interpreted in various ways. In broad strokes, politics concerns the power imbalances, hierarchies, and stakes involved in child culture (Kallio & Häkli 2011). This lens allows us to interrogate who decides what counts as »child culture« and who wins or loses when certain versions dominate while others are dismissed (Mol 1999; Woolgar 2012). Politics provides the very conditions for culture to exist, ranging from the high-level provision of children's rights to the practical, mundane realities of funding—or the defunding currently seen across the Nordic region. In a narrower, but equally relevant sense, »politics« may refer to subversive children's literature, theatre, film etc. which often hides its subversiveness in a cloak of innocence, but which nevertheless presents "a seed of radical potential that *may* be put to radical use« (Brown 2025, 14, italics in original). Simultaneously, »the political« can also refer to children's and young people's own political engagement and activism in and for culture.

While overtly political productions and practices may dominate the field, we must not overlook the politics of the mundane and taken-for-granted cultural practices, such as children's silences, or the act of children carrying stones or collecting objects for their own archives (Spyrou 2016, Rautio 2013; Orrmalm & Tesar 2024). While these practices may be less visible and the stakes may not seem high, they comprise the everyday lives of children and families and are essential to highlight as acts of agency. By combining these three perspectives—the scene-setting of the current Nordic crisis, the aesthetic depth of poetics, and the structural power of politics—this special issue seeks to provide a holistic view of children's culture, including their creative and democratic use of digital technologies and narratives, to formulate critical perspectives on the possibilities of supporting child cultures in society and education today.

The Methodological and Political Promise of the Poetic

Movements that threaten the relatively high status of children's culture in Nordic societies make us look for conceptual and methodological opportunities to address the actualized concerns and looming dangers; and to strengthen our understanding of the obvious transformative potential of children's culture in these times. In a methodological sense, the »poetic« offers a conceptual opening; it attends to textures, atmospheres, gestures, and temporalities, and invites an ontology that acknowledges the more-than-verbal and more-than-intentional, the fleeting and uncertain, the sensuous (Frosh, 2019). As such, the poetic can help unsettle established assumptions about what children are and how their worlds come into being.

One concern in the field of childhood studies and child culture research is the insufficient articulation of widely adopted research practices. The fields have distinguished themselves internationally through extensive and rigorous ethnographic work, detailed analysis of children's everyday lives, and a strong normative commitment to children's participation, agency, and voice. These empirically rich accounts constitute one of the field's most significant strengths. However, because much of the research is driven by practice inquiry and institutionally embedded fieldwork, these commitments often operate as implicit assumptions rather than as explicitly theorised foundations. This dynamic has created a tension between the field's substantial empirical contributions and the need for more developed methodological and theoretical frameworks through which knowledge about children's lives is conceptualised and produced.

A central assumption within the field is the notion of the child as competent, participatory, and inherently agentic. While this has produced a counter-narrative to deficit-oriented, it has gradually become a naturalised ontology. Such an assumption risks obscuring the heterogeneity of children's lives and bodies, as well as the socio-material conditions that contour their possibilities for action. Furthermore, although recent work has acknowledged the significance of atmosphere, materiality, and spatiality, empirical analysis often remains grounded in an anthropocentric focus on intention and communication. This is not enough in the current context, where we need to acknowledge and respect planetary boundaries. This requires reconsidering our perception of relationality and our relation with more-than-human actors, also in the methodological choices (see e.g. Haraway 2006, Lenz Taguchi 2010, Mazzei 2013, Murris 2025). We claim that reflection on taken-for-granted methodological choices and onto-epistemological commitments, as well as renewed methodological openings, will offer essential possibilities to strengthen our future work on children's culture.

Toys, practices, venues: approaches found in this special issue

Papers included in this special issue analyse various objects and practices, and focus on an array of concepts to highlight the political impact of poetics and the material embeddedness of politics. Mette Amalie Bundgaard and Thomas Roed Heiden explore in their article how soft toys can function as mediating artefacts in Danish math in the early years of school. In their analysis, soft toys act as catalysts for an »as-if« and transform teaching into an open and sensory form of learning. This analysis of toys is followed by the article by Jennifer Ann Skriver, Oline Pedersen, Julie Borup Jensen, Mathias Poulsen and Helle Marie Skovbjerg, which uses the notion of attunement to explore infant-toddler play in Danish early childhood education and care. Attuning is a poetic method of turning attention to the fleeting and less visible. By highlighting these fleeting gestures and atmospheres, attuning emphasises their importance in children's everyday play and political practice. Following, Caroline Tognos paper exposes how enduring pedagogical traditions frame childhood as a sit of control, while marginalising children's voices and agency. It argues that children continuously resist and rework these constraints, reframing childhood as a contested and relational space in contemporary datadriven contexts.

The article by Zanitha Hamilton Månegaard and Helle Marie Skovbjerg likewise uses poetic methods, such as design-based fieldwork with children and adults, but it specifically delves into the poetics and politics of neurodivergent play. It explores children's experiences of living with a neuropsychiatric disability and adult memories of their neurodivergent childhoods. By centering the everyday experiences of a group often excluded from play studies, this paper engages in political work.

Then, several articles discuss children's literature and theatre through the lens of agency and subjectivity. Peter Kostenniemi's paper explores the politics of child culture through the concept of *negative* agency. It develops this concept via an analysis of Danish and Swedish children's literature, which, contrary to the mainstream idea of empowerment and emancipation, can also appear dubious and burdensome. Meanwhile, Ellinor Lidén's article looks at young people's self-initiated theatre-going practices. Analysing group interviews with eight Swedish teenagers, Lidén claims that young people's theatre-going practices are influenced by adults even when they take place outside the school. Lidén's discussion is

followed by Paweł Paweł Galkowski's and Michał Wendland's philosophical article, which revisits the concepts of »being« and »becoming« as descriptions of a child's subjectivity by analysing how theatre for the youngest children, aged 0-5, consciously and programmatically strengthens children's subjectivity.

In the special issue two papers tackle the communal place of children's culture. Pádraic Whyte describes the ongoing work on the »cultural archive« at The Ark, a Dublin-based cultural centre for children. A central dilemma within the work of the Ark is its positioning between archive and cultural center. Whyte's discussion shows how the aspiration for openness to visits casts doubt on the cultural archive's archival status, since 'real' archives are often rather closed. Marit Frimanlund's paper, in turn, explores the concept of *community* and its articulations in the Norwegian Framework Plan for Kindergartens. The document analysis shows that responsibility for creating and maintaining community is largely assigned to staff, while children's own communities are rarely highlighted as valuable in their own right. Based on these findings, Frimanslund argues for the need for a more flexible understanding of community in policy documents: one that recognizes children's contributions and cultural practices as meaningful and co-created.

This special issue ends with a beautiful poem by Klaus Thestrup, which were performed at the conference in Stockholm.

These articles provide only a limited example of how the subject of politics and poetics may become visible in studies of children's cultures. We would like to thank all the writers and anonymous reviewers who contributed to this special issue. Moreover, we would like to thank all the colleagues who organised and participated in the conference.

There are many takes on the subject that did not make it to this special issue, and we hope to continue the discussions in the next BIN conference titled »The Invidible, Hidden, and Emerging within children's cultures« to be held at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, May 3-4 2027.

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Biografies

Helle Marie Skovbjerg is Professor at Kolding School of Design in Denmark and Professor II at HVL Bergen, Norway; Helle Marie has researched play in a number of years from the mood perspective, with particular interest in the philosophical origins of the concept of play and how it is possible to use that knowledge when we design for play. Helle Marie leads several large research projects on play and design in a Danish context, including Playful Learning Research (2018-2026) and Legerup: On transitions between daycare and school (2024-2027).

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