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Reorienting Pedagogical Attention: Attunement, Participation and the Poetics and Politics of Infant-Toddler Play in ECEC

Abstract

Infant–toddler play and participation in Danish early childhood education and care (ECEC) often unfolds through fleeting movements, sensory orientations, rhythms and material relations that remain difficult to sustain within everyday institutional practices increasingly organized around documentation, coordination, and measurable outcomes. This article explores how pedagogical attention might be reoriented toward the poetics and politics of infant–toddlerplay and participation within everyday ECEC life. Drawing on a design-based collaboration with pedagogues in four Danish ECEC centers, the study examines three experimental interventions: Sense Expeditions, Living Go-Pros, and the Play Mixer. The interventions temporarily shifted sensory, bodily, and material arrangements, shaping how pedagogical situations became perceptible and inhabitable within everyday practice.

The analysis demonstrates how these altered conditions created new possibilities for pedagogical attunement to ordinary forms of collective life often overlooked within institutional routines, including rhythmic movement, fluctuating proximity, sensory atmospheres and quiet forms of »wildness«. The article conceptualizes attunement as situated sociomaterial accomplishment emerging through changing sensory, material and institutional arrangements. Methodologically, the study demonstrates how sociomaterial interventions can create opportunities for pedagogues and researchers to collectively explore how participation becomes perceptible, inhabitable, and pedagogically consequential within everyday ECEC practice. The article contributes to affect-oriented and sociomaterial approaches to infant–toddler participation by exploring how experimental pedagogical interventions can reorganize

attention toward the sensory, relational and material dimensions of everyday collective life in ECEC.

Danish Abstract

Småbørns leg og deltagelse i dansk dagtilbudspædagogik udfolder sig ofte gennem flygtige bevægelser, sanselige orienteringer, rytmer og materielle relationer, som kan være vanskelige at fastholde inden for hverdagslige institutionspraksisser, der i stigende grad er organiseret omkring dokumentation, koordinering og målbare resultater. Denne artikel undersøger, hvordan pædagogisk opmærksomhed kan reorienteres mod småbørnslegens og deltagelsens poetiske og politiske dimensioner i dagtilbuddets hverdagsliv. Med afsæt i et designbaseret samarbejde med pædagoger i fire danske daginstitutioner undersøger studiet tre eksperimenterende interventioner: Sense Expeditions, Living Go-Pros, og Play Mixer. Interventionerne forskød midlertidigt sanselige, kropslige og materielle arrangementer og påvirkede dermed, hvordan pædagogiske situationer blev mulige at få øje på, og beboelige i hverdagspraksis.

Analysen viser, hvordan disse ændrede betingelser skabte nye muligheder for pædagogisk attunement til almindelige former for kollektivt liv, som ofte overses i institutionelle rutiner, herunder rytmisk bevægelse, skiftende nærheder, sanselige atmosfærer og stille former for »vildskab«. Artiklen begrebsliggør attunement som en situeret sociomateriel tilblivelse, der opstår gennem foranderlige sanselige, materielle og institutionelle arrangementer. Metodologisk viser studiet, hvordan sociomaterielle interventioner kan skabe muligheder for, at pædagoger og forskere sammen kan udforske, hvordan deltagelse træder frem, og bliver beboelig og pædagogisk betydningsfuld i dagtilbuddets hverdagsliv. Artiklen bidrager til affektorienterede og sociomaterielle tilgange til småbørns deltagelse ved at undersøge, hvordan eksperimenterende pædagogiske interventioner kan reorganisere opmærksomheden mod sanselige, relationelle og materielle dimensioner af kollektivt hverdagsliv i dagtilbud.

Keywords: attunement; sociomaterial world-making; pedagogical attention; infant–toddler play; child culture; sensory methods; design-based research; affective arrangements; early childhood education and care (ECEC)

Introduction

Infant–toddler play and participation often unfold through fleeting movements, sensory encounters, rhythms and material relations that remain difficult to notice within everyday institutional life in early childhood education and care (ECEC) (Stewart, 2007; Skriver et al., 2026). A child circling repeatedly on a walking bike, pausing with a leaf, tracing condensation on a window, or lying quietly on the forest floor may participate intensely in shared situations without necessarily entering recognizable play activities, verbal interaction, or pedagogically valued forms of engagement. Such moments are often brief and difficult to stabilize within institutional languages of learning, assessment and development, yet they remain central to how infant–toddlers participate in shared worlds (Jagger, 2025; Corsaro, 2003, 1988) with others, materials, and environments.

Building on earlier work conceptualizing infant–toddler play as participation in collective child communities (Skriver et al., 2026), this article approaches infant–toddlers' participation

in collective life as unfolding through sensory, relational and material engagements with bodies, materials, movements, sounds, spaces and atmospheres (Blomgren, 2023; Skovbjerg et al., 2025a; Skovbjerg et al., 2025b; Skriver & Skovbjerg, 2026) as children help compose shared everyday worlds together (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2018; Corsaro, 2003, 1988). Within this understanding, play is approached not as a separate activity category, but as a sociomaterial and relational way of participating in shared collective life within ECEC. This makes it possible to approach play as both central to infant–toddler collective life and intertwined with forms of participation that exceed recognizable play activities or clearly bounded play situations.

The poetics of child cultures refer here to the rhythms, textures and atmospheres (Stewart, 2011) through which participation becomes felt, shared and sustained within everyday collective life. The politics concern how institutional arrangements (Churcher et al., 2022) shape what forms of collective, sensory and playful participation can be sustained, valued and given space within everyday ECEC life. The article therefore approaches the poetics and politics of child cultures through the question of how pedagogical attention is institutionally organized and how other forms of participation might become noticeable within the lived realities of pedagogical work.

These questions unfold within a Danish ECEC context where play has simultaneously become increasingly foregrounded and progressively regulated. In Denmark, children typically enter ECEC at around 10 months of age. In 2022, 81 percent of all one-year-olds were enrolled in ECEC, with 61 percent attending ECEC centers and 20 percent in private home-based daycare. Among staff working in ECEC centers for children aged 0–2 years, 55 percent hold a bachelor's degree in pedagogy (in Denmark called *pedagogues*), while 45 percent are short-term trained assistants (Frederiksen, 2024). Pedagogues working in these contexts navigate a complex policy landscape that shapes what they can notice, prioritize, and act upon.

The role of play within ECEC policy has shifted over time. Historically, Nordic ECEC has been grounded in reform pedagogical traditions emphasizing child agency, democratic participation, community, and, crucially, play. Play in this tradition is positioned in opposition to »instruction, teaching or education« (Bayer, 2015, p. 137, authors' translation). These traditions afforded pedagogues substantial autonomy to develop contextually sensitive practices responsive to children's rhythms, interests, and relationships.

Over the past two decades, however, the Danish ECEC landscape has shifted significantly. The so-called »PISA shock« in 2000 catalyzed a wave of educational reforms, including the 2004 legislation mandating learning plans in all public ECEC centers (Borchorst, 2009). Under this law, each ECEC center is required to work with six predefined learning themes. Despite being oriented toward supporting children's development, the learning plans ushered in intensified documentation and assessment demands, reshaping pedagogical content around learning outcomes and significantly centralizing governance in the sector (Pedersen, 2018).

In 2018, the Strengthened Pedagogical Learning Plan (SPLP) was enacted (Børne- og Socialministeriet, 2018). One of the major changes in the SPLP was a renewed emphasis on play (Toft, 2018). As noted by the union representing ECEC pedagogues, the SPLP represents a »relaunch of play« (Pedersen, 2018, author's translation). A simple word search in the SPLP

document confirms that »play« is a central theme, appearing 104 times. On the other hand, the word »learning« appears 379 times, underscoring the ambiguous political conditions surrounding play in ECEC and the competing expectations placed on pedagogues. They are expected to foster open-ended exploration while simultaneously operating within a structured framework that remains strongly oriented toward learning outcomes and extensive demands for documentation and evaluation.

Another change from the 2004 learning plans to the SPLP in 2018 is the addition of a *common pedagogical foundation*, which all public ECECs are required to work with as the basis for their local practices (Børne- og Socialministeriet, 2018). In 2022, further changes were introduced regarding the requirements for inspection/supervision of ECEC-centers (EMU, 2025). The municipalities must ensure that inspections/supervisions are conducted regularly and systematically and are based on the SPLP's common pedagogical foundation. With this focus on inspection/supervision follows the use of standardized tools to measure quality, for example KIDS, ECERS-3, ITERS or Kvalid (Danmarks Evalueringsinstitut, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c).

Such assessment practices privilege forms of participation that can be stabilized through brief observational categories, making it increasingly difficult for pedagogues to stay with subtle sensory, relational and atmospheric forms of participation unfolding within everyday practice. They also often leave limited room for pedagogues' own contextually grounded reflections on practice. As a result, they risk narrowing attention away from the subtle, sensory and relational processes that constitute much of everyday life in ECEC settings (Togsverd, 2023). The issue is therefore not simply whether play is valued within ECEC, but what forms of collective, sensory and playful participation can be sustained within institutional conditions increasingly organized around coordination, documentation, and measurable pedagogical outcomes.

Play has therefore become simultaneously foregrounded and regulated within contemporary Danish ECEC. Although policy documents increasingly emphasize play, pedagogical practice continues to be organized through demands for documentation, coordination, and measurable outcomes. This article responds to that tension by asking:

How might pedagogical attention be reoriented toward the poetics and politics of infant–toddler play and participation within everyday ECEC practice?

To explore this question, the article approaches attunement as a situated mode of sensory and relational coordination within everyday pedagogical life. Empirically, the article draws on a design-based collaboration between pedagogues in four Danish ECEC centers in connection to the research project Playful Learning Praxis Research (2023-2026). Through a series of sociomaterial interventions – Sense Expeditions, Living Go-Pros, and the Play Mixer – the study explores how altered sensory conditions, bodily positioning and material arrangements reorganized pedagogical attention within the ordinary contexts of everyday practice.

The article proceeds in four parts. First, the theoretical framework develops the concepts of attunement, affective arrangements, and institutional affect. Second, the methodology section outlines the collaborative interventions developed within the project. Third, the empirical analysis examines how the interventions reorganized pedagogical attention within everyday

ECEC situations. Finally, the discussion/conclusion considers the implications of these findings for understanding the poetics and politics of infant–toddler play and participation within contemporary institutional life.

Theoretical Framework: Attunement, Affective Arrangements and the Organization of Pedagogical Attention

Infant–toddler play as sociomaterial world-making

This article approaches infant–toddler participation as unfolding through ongoing sociomaterial engagements among bodies, materials, spaces, sounds and atmospheres (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2017; Blomgren, 2023; Skovbjerg et al., 2025a; Skovbjerg et al., 2025b; Skriver & Skovbjerg, 2026). Within this understanding, play is approached not as a separate activity or category, but as a sensory, relational and material way of participating in and composing shared worlds together within Nordic ECEC life.

This is particularly important for infant–toddler pedagogy because play and participation frequently unfold through subtle adjustments, repetitions, pauses, textures and sensory orientations that remain difficult to stabilize within institutional languages of assessment, documentation and development interpretation. A child circling repeatedly on a walking bike, lingering with a leaf, or lying quietly on the forest floor may be deeply engaged in shared sociomaterial relations without necessarily participating in activities commonly recognized as play or valued within pedagogical frameworks. Such moments are not outside play or pedagogical life but frequently remain peripheral to what institutional arrangements organize as noticeable, discussable, or consequential within everyday ECEC practice.

From interpersonal attunement to affective arrangements

Within developmental psychology, attunement is understood as embodied synchronization between infant–toddlers and caregivers through rhythm, timing, gesture, voice, movement, and facial expression (Stern, 1985). Stern’s work remains important because it foregrounds the bodily affective dimensions of infant–caregiver relations and demonstrates how coordination unfolds through temporal and sensory adjustments rather than verbal communication alone (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007). However, such accounts largely position attunement within already formed subjects (Mühlhoff, 2019).

This article approaches attunement as situated sensory and relational coordination emerging within changing pedagogical situations. Here, attunement does not unfold solely through interpersonal exchange, but through ongoing coordination among bodies, materials, movements, spaces, and institutional conditions (Steffensen & Fill, 2014; Pennycook, 2018). Attunement therefore concerns how bodies orient and adjust within unfolding sociomaterial and institutional relations (Ahmed, 2006, 2010; Stewart, 2011).

To conceptualize these conditions, the article draws on Slaby et al.’s (2019) concept of affective arrangements. Affective arrangements refer to shifting constellations of bodies, objects, norms, spaces, and rhythms that orient attention and organize what becomes perceptible, actionable, and valuable within distinct situations. Such arrangements are not neutral backgrounds for action (Slaby, 2019; Slaby & Von Scheve, 2019). They shape pedagogical attention by privileging certain forms of participation, movement, and

communication within institutional situations (Skovbjerg et al., 2025a; Skovbjerg et al., 2025b; Skriver & Skovbjerg, 2026).

Attunement therefore does not describe an individual pedagogical competence possessed by adults, but a situated pedagogical orientation emerging within altered conditions of attention. Within this framework, perception is not understood as an individual cognitive act, but as relationally and institutionally organized through situated affective arrangements. What becomes perceptible and possible to remain with within pedagogical life emerges through ongoing coordination among bodies, materials, rhythms, spaces, and institutional expectations.

Institutional affect and pedagogical attention

This understanding of attunement foregrounds the institutional organization of pedagogical attention. What pedagogues notice, stay with and respond to is not solely a matter of individual sensitivity or professional competence. Attention and perception emerge within institutional arrangements that orient pedagogical bodies toward specific objects, responsibilities and expectations while rendering other aspects of everyday life more difficult to sustain within attention (Ahmed, 2006, 2010).

Following Churcher et al. (2022), this article approaches these conditions through the concept of institutional affect. Institutional affect concerns how institutional life is organized and inhabited through sensory, affective, and temporal conditions as much as through formal regulation. Within contemporary Danish ECEC, pedagogical work is increasingly shaped through learning goals and policy frameworks, but also through temporal pressures, routines, habitual orientations and implicit expectations concerning what requires intervention, documentation and coordination. These conditions organize how pedagogical situations are sensed and navigated from within.

From this perspective, some forms of infant–toddler participation stabilize more easily within institutional life than others. Activities that can be documented, categorized and linked to developmental outcomes often become more sustainable within pedagogical routines, while fleeting sensory encounters, repetitions, pauses or atmospheric forms of participation risk remaining peripheral within everyday practice. The political question is therefore not simply whether play is valued within ECEC, but how institutional arrangements organize what forms of collective life contemporary institutional conditions make possible, sustain, or constrain.

Attunement as methodological intervention

The interventions explored in this article were developed as practical methodological devices for reorganizing pedagogical attention within everyday ECEC practice. Rather than functioning as techniques for assessing children or evaluating pedagogical quality, the interventions temporarily altered sensory conditions, bodily positioning, and material arrangements within pedagogical situations. The Living Go-Pro, Sense Expedition, and Play Mixer each intervened differently into habitual forms of sensory orientation, movement, and pedagogical overview. By altering how pedagogues moved, sensed and coordinated within situations, the interventions temporarily loosened habitual institutional orientations (Gunderson, 2020) to forms of infant–toddler practice that would otherwise remain peripheral within everyday institutional routines. The interventions therefore did not seek to stand outside institutional

practice in critique, but to experimentally cultivate other possible ways of sensing, inhabiting, and composing pedagogical situations from within everyday practice.

The interventions share affinities with what Jensen (2025) describes as *aesthetic suspension*, where habitual interpretations are temporarily delayed in order to linger with sensory impressions and explore alternative possibilities for understanding practice. While Jensen approaches aesthetic suspension through phenomenological and action-research traditions, the present study examines how such openings emerge through altered sociomaterial arrangements that reorganize pedagogical attention. From this perspective, the interventions functioned not primarily as reflective techniques, but as practical reconfigurations of sensory, material and institutional conditions through which other forms of participation could become perceptible.

Methodology: Design-Based Collaboration and Sensory Methods

The empirical material stems from the *Playful Learning Praxis* project, a design-based (Ejsing-Duun & Skovbjerg, 2019; Burr & Degotardi, 2025) collaboration with pedagogues in four Danish ECEC centers. The project explored how everyday pedagogical attention toward infant–toddler participation might be reorganized within everyday institutional life.

The research was organized as a collaborative and iterative process (ibid.) involving children, pedagogues, institutional leaders, and researchers. Across one year, recurring workshops were conducted in each institution approximately four times annually. Between workshops, researchers participated in everyday activities through field visits, informal conversations, and on-site experimentation. The workshops functioned as shared spaces for experimentation, reflection and collective analysis, where pedagogues and researchers explored how participation unfolded within everyday pedagogical conditions (Skriver et al., 2026).

Methodologically, the project combined participatory design and sensory inquiry approaches (Akama, 2014; Anderson & Ash, 2015; Knudsen & Stage, 2015). Relatedly, the interventions share affinities with Jensen's (2025) notion of *aesthetic suspension* as a pause in established interpretive habits that makes alternative forms of noticing possible. Rather than locating this process primarily in reflective experience, the present study investigates how altered sociomaterial conditions help produce such openings by reorienting attention and engagement. The interventions therefore did not reveal participation as such but reorganized the situated perceptual conditions (Anderson & Ash, 2015; Gunderson, 2020; Schmidt, 2025) through which participation could be sensed, attended to, and collectively discussed.

Three experimental modes of intervention (Knudsen & Stage, 2015) were developed collaboratively during the project: *Sense Expeditions*, *Living Go-Pros*, and *The Play Mixer*.

- *Sense Expeditions* invited pedagogues to accompany children through everyday activities while selectively focusing on certain sensory orientations such as hearing or vision. Some pedagogues used noise-cancelling headphones or closed their eyes temporarily while remaining within ongoing pedagogical situations. The intervention explored how altered sensory conditions changed pedagogical orientation and attention within everyday practice.

- *Living Go-Pros* involved pedagogues following individual children while filming directly behind the child's head. The aim was not to reproduce »the child's perspective«, but to redistribute adult bodily orientation and movement within the situation. By following closely behind the child, pedagogues became required to move according to the child's pace, direction, and sensory orientation within the environment.
- *The Play Mixer* functioned as a material and conceptual device for experimentally adjusting pedagogical conditions such as noise, wildness, mess, materiality, and adult scaffolding. During these experiments, pedagogues reorganized material arrangements and pedagogical expectations within everyday situations to explore how different conditions shaped possibilities for participation.

The purpose of the interventions was not to evaluate practice, but to collectively explore how alternative sociomaterial arrangements might shape pedagogical engagement. Rather than focusing on what was lacking in practice, the interventions invited practitioners to experiment with alternative ways of attending to and engaging in pedagogical situations through modified material and relational arrangements (Raffnsøe et al., 2022). This created opportunities for pedagogues and researchers to attend differently (Gunderson, 2020; Schmidt, 2025) to forms of participation that would otherwise remain peripheral within institutional routines characterized by accelerated institutional rhythms (Stengers, 2018).

Empirical material consisted of video recordings, photographs, field notes, workshop conversations, and pedagogues' written reflections. Across the project, workshops and field visits supported an ongoing collaborative analysis between researchers, pedagogues, and institutional leaders. Video clips and written reflections were revisited collectively to explore how participation unfolded within the situations documented. Knowledge therefore emerged through collective engagement with altered sensory, material, and institutional conditions rather than through detached observation alone (Gherardi, 2017, 2019). Rather than coding predefined developmental categories or behavioral indicators, the analysis focused on moments where the interventions appeared to shift how participation became perceptible (Schmidt, 2025) within practice.

Ethical considerations were approached as ongoing and emergent within the unfolding sociomaterial situations of the project rather than as fully resolved through procedural approval alone. Because the interventions actively altered sensory, bodily, and material conditions within everyday pedagogical practice, ethical attention continuously concerned how children, pedagogues, and researchers participated in, responded to, and inhabited the situations together (Gherardi, 2017, 2019).

Empirical Examples: Attuning to Playful World-Making

The next sections explore how the interventions created altered conditions for pedagogical attunement within everyday ECEC practice, changing how situations were inhabited and how participation unfolded through sensory, material and relational arrangements.

1. Living Go-Pro: Orienting to the Child's World

1.1. Reconfiguring the adult vantage point

The following example stems from one of the short videos created through the Living Go-Pro experiment. In this intervention, pedagogues followed individual children while holding a phone just behind the child's head. The purpose was not to capture »the child's perspective«, but to immerse pedagogues in the spatial and temporal dynamics of children's encounters with the environment.



Figure 1.-2. Living Go-Pro: Circling and encounter. Ink and pencil illustrations generated from Living Go-Pro video stills.

Walking closely behind the child, the pedagogue slowed when he slowed, turned when he turned, and gradually became drawn into the shifting rhythms, pauses, and sensory orientations unfolding along the path. The wider playground receded as attention gathered around passing encounters, gestures, and movement. In this way, the intervention altered how participation became possible to sense and inhabit within everyday pedagogical routines.

At the subsequent workshop, the pedagogues brought these short recordings (2–5 minutes) for collective exploration of other possible ways of sensing and inhabiting pedagogical situations. Together, we watched the videos and discussed how movements, sounds, pauses, and material surroundings shaped the situations unfolding on the screen. The following traces one such moment of collective analysis.

1.2 The scene: the boy, the bike and the trail

The video was recorded on the outdoor playground, and follows a young boy (here given the pseudonym Jason) riding a walking bike along a paved path winding between the institution's two playground areas. The camera remains positioned just behind his head. As Jason turns, the pedagogue turns with him, allowing the recording to follow his shifting orientation toward the environment.



Figure 3.-4. Jason participating through movement, proximity, and return. Ink and pencil illustrations generated from Living Go-Pro video stills.

As the bike moves forward, movement continually reorganizes the playground into passing fragments: sandboxes, plastic toys, swing sets, slides, tires, children, and pedagogues appearing briefly before disappearing from view around the curve of the path. The rhythmic sound of wheels against the hard surface of the path continues underneath the video, punctuated by greetings, voices, and passing conversations.

Jason approaches two children on walking bikes. They move slightly aside to let him pass.

»Hiiii«, he says.

»Hiiii«, they reply.

Further down the path, he sees a pedagogue and starts waving.

»Hiiii«.

»Hi, Jason«.

A little later, another child joins him, running alongside Jason for some time, before jumping onto another bike. For a few moments, the two children move alongside one another before separating again. Jason continues circling the path, drifting between moments of distance, contact, and departure.

He passes more children and pedagogues when the wheels suddenly stop. Jason points toward the ground.

»Oops a branch – no, a leaf«, the pedagogue says while adjusting the camera downward.

The wheels begin again.

A little later, he stops and points once more. The camera turns toward another child nearby.

»There is Daisy«.

Jason continues riding and the video ends.

1.3 Co-analysis: noticing material rhythms

The following description is based on the video recorded co-analysis workshop between pedagogues and researchers. During the workshop three pedagogues and two researchers watched the Living Go-Pro recording together. The room remained quiet as the camera followed Jason's circling movement along the path. After some time, one pedagogue remarked:

»Materiality is a huge part of our everyday practice. It is thought-provoking how little we actually notice and talk about it among us [pedagogues]. It is interesting how the video makes us notice small material details and dig deep into the small sensations when we are with the children«.

Her reflection opened a broader discussion about how movement on the path was shaped by materials and spatial conditions. As the group watched together, attention gradually gathered around movement itself: the slowing wheels, brief greetings, repeated circling, and small pauses that organized the situation.

The bike, the path, the greetings, the stops, and the sounds of wheels organized a shifting pattern of proximity and movement through the playground. One pedagogue described how the movement afforded a way of being »with the others, but not with them«. Jason seemed to move alongside the collective life of the playground without fully settling into any single activity group. Participation drifted through passing greetings, shared movement and brief moments of recognition before loosening again. As the recording continued, the room itself seemed to slow around these small moments which would ordinarily disappear quickly within everyday practice.

The conversations rarely returned to Jason as an individual subject. Instead, the discussion focused on how the situation was organized through movement and materials: how the path offered a route and repetition, how the bike afforded fluctuating proximity to others, and how movement itself created brief moments of contact and recognition. The pedagogues described these as patterns they often sensed in practice but rarely articulated within pedagogical discussions.

The shared viewing also altered our own attention during the workshop. The interventions created temporary openings in habitual pedagogical orientations, echoing what Jensen

(2025) describes as aesthetic suspension, while simultaneously demonstrating how such openings emerge through the reconfiguration of sociomaterial and institutional conditions. By lingering with the recording, pedagogues became attentive to rhythms, movements, material encounters and fleeting forms of participation that would ordinarily pass unnoticed within everyday practice.

1.4 Analytical reading: attunement, poetics and politics

The Living Go-Pro experiment did not produce deeper insight into the child as an individual subject. Instead, following closely behind the child drew the pedagogue more fully into the unfolding rhythm and relational composition of the situation itself. The circling movements, passing greetings, slowing wheels, and repeated returns along the playground path gradually became more experientially present within the co-analysis.

What emerged was an intensified pedagogical attunement toward the ordinary playful, relational, and material life already unfolding within the playground environment. The simple act of riding a bike became connected to the wider sensory ecology of the situation: movement, proximity, passing encounters, sounds, pacing, and shared orientation across the playground.

The poetic significance of the intervention therefore lay in how ordinary collective life became possible to remain with differently within the space of the intervention and the subsequent workshop conversations. Politically, the experiment pointed toward how contemporary institutional rhythms often leave limited space for pedagogical attention to dwell with these fleeting yet meaningful dimensions of everyday collective life.

2. Sense Expedition: Redistributing Attention

2.1 Sensory disruption as methodological intervention

The Sense Expedition invited pedagogues to encounter everyday pedagogical situations through altered sensory exercises. The aim was not sensory deprivation, but to temporarily reorganize the sensory conditions through which pedagogical attention, overview, and coordination are ordinarily maintained within everyday ECEC practice. By unsettling habitual forms of auditory monitoring and spatial orientation, the experiment invited pedagogues to notice aspects of practice that would otherwise remain peripheral or unnoticed.

Written reflections, short video clips, and workshop conversations became occasions for collective exploration. Rather than evaluating pedagogical practice, the experiment examined how institutional arrangements shape what practitioners notice and respond to, and what becomes possible when familiar patterns of attention are momentarily unsettled.

2.2 Losing overview: vulnerability and relational orientation

One pedagogue embarked on her Sense Expedition while moving through the forest with a group of children and another pedagogue, wearing noise-cancelling headphones and holding a child's hand:

»I look and concentrate on the uneven surface... I catch myself walking with my head down«.

With hearing muted, the forest scenario no longer unfolded through the usual sensory organization of overview and coordination. Attention shifted toward the terrain underfoot, bodily balance, children's movements, and the immediate sensory relations unfolding nearby.

She described herself as becoming unusually focused within the immediacy of the situation:

»I find myself being very intense... I try to read the child I am holding hands with«.



Figure 5.-6. Attuning to the sensory and material rhythms of the forest. Ink and pencil illustrations generated from video stills.

Without auditory cues, another child was noticed through movement rather than sound. The pedagogue crouched down to attend to gestures and facial expressions:

»I notice the children's body language and their way of communicating«.

At the same time, the altered sensory condition produced uncertainty and vulnerability. She repeatedly turned around to orient herself toward the wider group:

»It could be uncomfortable if there is a conflict behind me and I cannot hear it«.

The intervention unsettled habitual forms of pedagogical overview and redistributed attention toward local orientation, sensory proximity, and atmosphere. The pedagogue became increasingly dependent on the unfolding relations immediately surrounding her.

2.3 Linger with the situation

Across the workshop reflections, pedagogues repeatedly described how muted hearing altered what became noticeable within everyday situations:

»When the sound is removed the little things become clearer«.

One pedagogue described a moment with a child sitting in a forest wagon. The child quietly dropped a small elephant figure into her lap. The pedagogue felt this gesture strongly:

»I felt a sudden warmth... it just hit me«.

The pedagogue described lying on the forest floor while children gradually settled beside her:

»I actually felt incredibly relaxed when I looked up... the children lay down next to me«.

She reflected that, unlike the other adults who were »on the way« she had »landed« in the moment with the children. Because auditory overview was reduced, she remained with the small group longer than usual:

»I kept my focus much longer on the kids I was sitting with... normally I would be further along«.

These situations altered the temporal orientation of pedagogical attention. Rather than moving continuously between transitions, monitoring, and coordination, the pedagogue described lingering within localized situations and sensory relations. Small gestures, textures, rhythms, and bodily proximities no longer disappeared so quickly into the forward movement of institutional life.

2.4 Listening differently: atmospheres and pedagogical care

The Sense Expedition also took place indoors. One pedagogue sat on the floor of the nursery against a wall with closed eyes while everyday institutional life unfolded around her:

»I have a feeling of calm... it's safe for me that there is another adult present«.

Sitting with her eyes closed, she became immersed in a layered institutional soundscape: fragments of dialogue between adults and children, a child's »baby talk«, crying that subsided as an adult intervened, footsteps, chairs scraping upstairs, and voices moving through distant rooms.

She reflected:

»I don't usually think about hearing it. It's usually the kids who say it«.

The exercise also made her think differently about a nonverbal girl with extensive support needs and heightened sensory sensitivities who used a wheelchair and was often positioned in that particular corner of the room:

»She is very affected by all stimuli... she is usually lying right where I was sitting«.

Closing her eyes and relying solely on hearing made the pedagogue newly aware of the layered and continuous sensory environment surrounding the space: voices, crying, footsteps, scraping chairs and sounds moving through adjoining rooms. Unlike the pedagogue, the girl remained exposed to these sensory conditions without being able to withdraw from them. What had previously functioned as an ordinary placement within the room became perceptible as an ongoing sensory exposure organized through the spatial arrangements of institutional practice.

The discussion that followed connected sensory experience to spatial organization and pedagogical care. Noise, movement, and atmosphere were approached not as neutral background conditions, but as conditions actively shaping children's possibilities for comfort, withdrawal, and participation within institutional space. The conversations drew the pedagogues toward quieter corners of the institution where the sensory atmosphere settled differently around the children.

2.5 Analytical reading: attunement, vulnerability and pedagogical orientation

The Sense Expedition altered how pedagogues inhabited everyday pedagogical situations. With hearing reduced or vision temporarily removed, attention no longer stretched as easily across the wider institutional environment through anticipation, monitoring, and coordination. Instead, pedagogues became drawn more fully into immediate sensory and relational textures unfolding around them: uneven ground underfoot, bodily proximity, passing sounds, pauses, movement, and shifting atmospheres within the nursery and a nearby forested area.

Several pedagogues described how »the small things became clearer«. Lying quietly on the forest floor beside children, listening to voices moving through distant rooms, or lingering longer within a localized situation altered the pace and texture of pedagogical presence itself. Ordinary situations became experientially denser as pedagogues remained more fully within the unfolding sensory and relational life of the moment.

At the same time, the intervention exposed how differently institutional atmospheres are lived depending on possibilities for movement, withdrawal, and support. This became particularly tangible in the reflections concerning the nonverbal girl with extensive support needs who remained continuously exposed to the sensory intensities of the nursery space. What had previously functioned as an ordinary placement within the room became newly perceptible as a condition of ongoing exposure.

The poetic significance of the intervention therefore lay in how everyday institutional life became possible to inhabit and sense differently within the workshop reflections. Politically, the experiment pointed toward how contemporary institutional rhythms and spatial arrangements shape what forms of sensory comfort, participation, and collective life became possible to sustain within everyday ECEC practice.

3. The Play Mixer: Quiet Wildness and Material Possibility

3.1 Reconfiguring pedagogical conditions

The Play Mixer was developed as a small wooden prototype inspired by music production soundboards. Made from oak and apple tree, the handheld mixer consisted of five sliders that could be turned »up« or »down« to experiment with different pedagogical conditions. During the interventions, the mixer functioned as a material prompt for reorganizing the sensory, material, and spatial conditions of everyday practice.



Figure 7. The Play Mixer prototype used during the intervention. Ink and pencil illustrations generated from video stills.

For this experiment, the pedagogues worked with boxes and rolls of paper in an otherwise empty room. The sliders were labelled *noise*, *wildness*, *material*, *mess*, and *framing/scaffolding*. The intention was to »turn up« noise, wildness, materials, and mess, while »turning down« pedagogical framing and scaffolding to experiment with how altered material conditions shaped playful participation within the room.

3.2 Material rhythms and unfolding play

During the workshop, we collectively watched videos recorded by one of the pedagogues during the experiment. The first sequence showed children moving among pieces of green bubble wrap spread across the floor. One child repeatedly stepped hard on the plastic, producing loud rhythmic cracks, while others dragged long strips of bubble wrap through the room. Adults remained mostly seated at the edges of the space, observing rather than directing the activity as movement and sound gradually spread through the room.



Figures 8.-9. Tentatively entering the material landscape of the Play Mixer experiment. Ink and pencil illustrations generated from video stills.

As the children gradually discovered the rolls of paper hidden inside the boxes, the atmosphere of the room shifted. Sharp popping sounds gave way to softer rustling textures as paper was unrolled, carried, unfolded and spread across the floor. The children's movements slowed while long sheets of paper extended through the space.

Soon the sound of small feet stepping across paper-covered floors filled the room. Movement continued circulating through the room, but the atmosphere no longer carried the sharp intensity that had accompanied the bubble wrap. The room settled instead unexpectedly into softer textures punctuated by scattered laughter and brief squeals.

Eventually the paper rolls were completely unwound and stretched across tables, chairs, floors, and bodies. Attention shifted toward the boxes themselves, which children climbed into, crawled through, and shared with one another. One pedagogue reflected:

»When the children were allowed to look at the things, starting to touch, feel, play with, and unfold, they embraced it«.



Figures 10.–11. Quiet forms of wildness emerging through boxes, paper and movement. Ink and pencil illustrations generated from video stills.

As we watched the videos together, the pedagogues became increasingly aware of the mismatch between their expectations and what had emerged. Although they had intentionally »turned up« noise, the situation unfolded quietly:

»There isn't that much noise, is there? I just thought of that«.

»It's very quiet«.

»The thing with the noise, that's not true at all«.

What had initially been anticipated as noisy and overwhelming unfolded differently. The room did not escalate. The altered material arrangement generated slower forms of collective participation as paper spread across surfaces, and children's bodies moved quietly between boxes and one another.

3.3 Co-analysis: experimenting with wildness

During the workshop discussions, the conversations increasingly centered around how the experiment had unsettled pedagogical expectations around noise, control, and activity. One researcher remarked:

»It doesn't seem wild like that, where they are completely hyped up, it's more like they get permission and they are not stopped (...) it's a quiet wildness«.

A pedagogue responded:

»I think this concept of wildness... I think that it was also for me to experience it as wild, because where does it end? (...) Where does it go? I didn't try to control a lot, so it's also a matter of where the children take it«.

The discussion shifted away from the children alone toward the pedagogues' own experience of loosening pedagogical control and remaining with the uncertainty of not fully knowing where the situation might lead. One pedagogue reflected:

»Some of what surprised me was that it happened in a period where we were a bit stressed (...) but then I was like, no, we'll do it. That idea of just jumping into things despite feeling that it might not be ideal. I think that is something I will take with me; it is so easy to feel limited in the everyday«.

As the discussion continued, the pedagogues repeatedly returned to how the boxes, paper rolls, and reduced adult direction appeared to reorganize participation within the room. One pedagogue pointed to how a boy who would usually »float around alone«, but who was now participating alongside the others:

»He managed to join in the interplay (...) in that chaos«.

The pedagogues discussed how altered material conditions changed the feel and movement of the room itself. Playful participation drifted across paper, boxes, sounds, and shifting bodily proximities. At the same time, the experiment subtly altered the adults' own orientation toward noise, movement, and uncertainty within the unfolding atmosphere of the situation. The expected intensity never fully arrived. Instead, the room settled into quieter more uncertain collective rhythms than the pedagogues had anticipated.

One pedagogue remarked:

»It's fun to be able to experiment with this wildness, also in different rooms and different contexts«.

Both pedagogues expressed a desire to continue working with this form of »wildness« in their everyday practice. The Play Mixer became more than simply a new activity. It opened a shared pedagogical space for loosening control, remaining with uncertainty, and experimenting with how collective life might unfold differently through altered material and sensory arrangements.

3.4 Analytical reading: attunement, poetics and politics

The Play Mixer foregrounded how pedagogues could actively experiment with sensory, material, and organizational conditions of everyday institutional life. By intentionally »turning up« noise, wildness, materiality, and mess while reducing pedagogical framing, the pedagogues designed conditions through which the atmosphere of the room might unfold differently. Yet what emerged surprised them. Rather than escalating into noise or overstimulation, the room gradually settled into slower rhythms as paper spread across

floors, boxes, and bodies. The sharp intensity of the bubble wrap softened into quieter rustling textures, scattered laughter, and children drifting between materials and one another.

During the workshop conversations, the pedagogues repeatedly returned to this mismatch between what they had anticipated and what unfolded. The significance of the experiment therefore did not lie in producing a predetermined pedagogical outcome, but in opening shared sensitivity toward how institutional atmospheres and playful participation might be composed differently through material arrangements, pacing, and degrees of adult coordination. Wildness no longer appeared simply as noise or loss of control, but as an uncertain and experientially adjustable condition within collective life itself.

The poetic significance of the Play Mixer lay in how altered textures, rhythms, and material relations made ordinary collective life differently perceptible and inhabitable within the room. Politically, the intervention repositioned pedagogues not simply as coordinators of predefined activities, but as active composers of the institutional arrangements through which sensory atmospheres, participation, and possibilities for collective life continuously take shape within everyday ECEC practice.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article began with the question of how the poetics and politics of infant–toddler child cultures might be approached within contemporary ECEC institutions increasingly organized through documentation, developmental assessment, coordination, and measurable pedagogical outcomes. Across the analyses, the study demonstrated how such institutional arrangements do not simply regulate pedagogical work externally, but shape how pedagogical situations become perceptible and inhabitable from within. What pedagogues become able to notice, remain with, and sustain as meaningful emerges through ongoing sociomaterial coordination among bodies, materials, movements, sensory orientations, spaces, and institutional expectations.

Rather than approaching participation as an individual quality located within the child, the article explored how playful participation continuously unfolded through these shifting sociomaterial relations. Across the interventions, participation emerged through rhythms of movement, passing encounters, sensory exposure, fluctuating proximity, material textures, and changing atmospheres. A child circling repeatedly on a bike, children drifting quietly between boxes and paper, or a pedagogue lingering longer beside children on the forest floor did not become meaningful because hidden perspectives were revealed, but because altered pedagogical conditions made these playful forms of collective life possible to remain with differently within practice.

The study therefore reconceptualizes attunement away from interpersonal synchronization or empathic access to children's inner experiences. Instead, attunement emerged as a situated sociomaterial accomplishment produced through altered sensory, material, and institutional conditions. The interventions did not provide more accurate representations of children's perspectives. Rather, the Living Go-Pro, Sense Expedition, and Play Mixer each slightly displaced habitual pedagogical orientations toward overview, anticipation, and coordination, creating temporary openings where pedagogues and researchers could collectively explore how participation was already unfolding within everyday institutional life.

Importantly, these altered conditions did not simply reorganize pedagogical attention passively. Within the Play Mixer experiment, pedagogues actively engaged with the material and sensory composition of the room itself. By intentionally adjusting noise, wildness, materials, mess and pedagogical framing, the pedagogues explored how collective atmospheres and playful forms of participation might unfold differently. What became significant was not the production of predetermined pedagogical outcomes, but the opening of practical pedagogical possibilities for experimenting with uncertainty, pacing, atmosphere, and collective participation within institutional life. The interventions therefore suggest that playful pedagogy might be approached less as the implementation of activities and more as an experimental engagement with the sociomaterial conditions through which collective life takes shape.

Rather than positioning critique outside institutional practice, the interventions worked affirmatively (Raffnsøe et al., 2022) within everyday pedagogical life by cultivating experimental openings toward other possible forms of playful participation, sensory attunement and collective world-making. Together, the interventions created temporary openings in habitual pedagogical orientations, resonating with Jensen's (2025) notion of aesthetic suspension. However, this study has shown how such openings emerge through altered sociomaterial arrangements that reorganize pedagogical attention.

Following Churcher et al.'s (2022) concept of institutional affect, the study further demonstrated how pedagogical attention is continuously organized through institutional rhythms and affective arrangements. Maintaining overview, coordinating transitions, anticipating conflict, and sustaining institutional tempo are not neutral professional competences, but ordinary orientations that shape how participation becomes perceptible and discussable within practice. The interventions temporarily unsettled these orientations. Through altered bodily positioning, sensory disruption, and material experimentation, pedagogues became differently attuned to forms of participation and collective life that often remain difficult to stabilize within institutional languages of assessment and developmental interpretation. At the same time, the study does not suggest that such attunement produces transparent understanding or complete access to participation. Participation remained partial, shifting and unevenly sensed across bodies, materials, and institutional positions, as understanding itself continuously emerged through incomplete and situated relations (Pennycook, 2018, p. 107).

Methodologically, the study contributes by demonstrating how sociomaterial and design-based methods can function as interventions into pedagogical attunement rather than primarily as techniques for representation or data extraction. Cameras, headphones, bubble wrap, boxes, and paper did not simply document practice, but actively participated in reorganizing how pedagogues sensed, inhabited, and coordinated situations together. Knowledge emerged through collective involvement in altered sensory and material conditions rather than through detached observation alone. The workshops therefore became spaces where pedagogues and researchers together explored how playful participation, atmospheres, and pedagogical life continuously take shape within institutional arrangements.

The poetic significance of the study lies in how the interventions made ordinary collective life differently perceptible through altered rhythms, textures, movements, and sensory orientations within everyday pedagogical situations. The political significance lies in how the

experiments temporarily opened space for pedagogues to question and experimentally rework the sociomaterial and institutional arrangements that shape what forms of participation, sensory comfort, and collective life become possible to sustain within contemporary ECEC practice. At stake, then, is how pedagogical life might remain open to the uncertain, sensory, playful, and relational ways young children continuously participate in and compose shared worlds beyond what contemporary institutional rhythms easily allow pedagogues to notice, coordinate, or sustain.

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Biographies

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Oline Pedersen holds a PhD in Sociology and is an Associate Professor (Docent) at University College of Northern Denmark (UCN). She is affiliated with the 'Research Centre for Inclusion and Exclusion in Educational Practice' and the research programme 'The Good Childhood and Youth Life'. Her research focuses on children's and families' positions and opportunities for participation within the welfare institutional contexts of which they are a part, particularly in early childhood education and care settings. This line of inquiry is exemplified in the project Parental Communities and Social Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Care. In recent years, she has also been concerned with exploring the opportunities for participation that emerge, as well as those that become constrained, when educational and pedagogical practices adopt more playful and experimental approaches. This research has been conducted through her involvement in the projects Playful Learning Research Extension and Playful Learning Praxis.

Julie Borup Jensen holds a PhD in innovative change in education and has a background as a professional, classical violinist (1992-2000) and a nurse (2000-2004). Presently, she is a Professor at Aalborg University and head of the research group CO-LEARN. Her work focuses on action research, education, play and creativity. Through research projects in the educational field, latest within the Playful Learning Programmes in Denmark, her research explores the transformative potential of play and creativity in learning, innovation, and organizational development. Her work examines how playful approaches can foster collaboration, imagination, and new ways of thinking across educational and professional contexts. Through research, teaching, and interdisciplinary partnerships, she contributes to advancing knowledge on creative processes and their role in addressing complex societal challenges. Julie is passionate about creating research environments that encourage curiosity, experimentation, and engagement. Her research combines academic inquiry with a commitment to developing innovative and impactful practices that support learning through play, collaboration, and positive change.

Mathias Poulsen, Ph.D., is a postdoctoral researcher at Lab for Play and Design, Design School Kolding, Denmark. His research engages with the difficulties of living well together, for both humans and more-than humans. He understands play as a mode of democratic participation with the potential to expand our democratic imaginaries. Mathias is a self-proclaimed play activist, who founded the international play festival 'CounterPlay' to cultivate safe, trusting spaces and communities for exploring and sustaining play.

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