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Approaching the Poetics and Politics of Child Culture(s) in the Nordic Context: Voices from the BIN conference 2025

Editorial: Helle Marie Skovbjerg, Niels-Peder O. Hjøllund, Susanne Ylönen, Marleena Mustola, Yelyzaveta Hrechaniuk and Malena Janson





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Helle Marie Skovbjerg, Niels-Peder O. Hjøllund, Susanne Ylönen, Marleena Mustola, Yelyzaveta Hrechaniuk and Malena Janson

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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Biographies

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).

Niels-Peder Osmundsen Hjøllund works as senior consultant at the University College Copenhagen. He has a PhD from the University of Copenhagen in information studies, where his research revolved around the influence of social media on teaching practices and how information literacy can be viewed through the lens of psychoanalysis. His work focuses on children, youth, and their use of technology and media. For the last eight years he has worked with research and professional development within the areas of technology comprehension in public schools, tinkering, and playful approaches to teaching and learning. He is a co-author of the book »Tinkering in School – a playful and practical approach to learning«, which was published in Danish in the spring of 2026.

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Mette Amalie Bundgaard og Thomas Roed Heiden

Fagdidaktiske legeprocesser i indskolingen – at inddrage børns legeerfaringer med tøjdyr i matematik og dansk

Resumé

Artiklen undersøger, hvordan tøjdyr kan fungere som medierende artefakter i fagdidaktiske legeprocesser i dansk og matematik i indskolingen. Med en sociokulturel ramme introduceres fagdidaktiske legeprocesser som en integrativ tilgang til undervisning gennem børns legeerfaringer. To mikroetnografiske cases viser, hvordan tøjdyr aktiverer børns legekultur. Den voksne initierer legen ved at inddrage tøjdyr, hvorefter børnene træder ind og bringer fantasi, kropslige og sproglige udtryk og kulturelle erfaringer i spil. Tøjdyrene fungerer som katalysatorer for en 'som-om'-verden, hvor grænser mellem fantasi og virkelighed, leg og fag midlertidigt opløses, og opstår som fagdidaktiske legeprocesser. Artiklen argumenterer for, at fagdidaktiske legeprocesser med tøjdyr kan transformere undervisning til en mere åben og sanselig læringsform, hvor børns erfaringer får reel betydning, og legen bliver en værdifuld faglig proces i sig selv.

Nøgleord: tøjdyr; fagdidaktiske legeprocesser; som-om-legeverden; børnekultur

Indledning

Den danske indskoling er fyldt med børn fra seks til ni år; i skolen kaldet »elever«. Børn er væsener, der udtrykker sig gennem særlige kulturelle udtryk med krop og sprog, med særlig adfærd og gennem udførelse af særlige interaktionelle, sociale aktiviteter med både andre mennesker og ting. Børn har en særlig udøvende kultur; en børnekultur, der er med til at definere børn som medlemmer af en specifik gruppe mennesker i samfundet (Juncker, 2006; Mouritsen, 1996). En del af børnenes kultur udføres som sproglige og kropslige legeudtryk, der involverer interaktioner med tøjdyr, og som 'pirrer' børnenes (og de voksnes) fantasifulde forestillinger (Sørensen, 2015). Børnene bringer deres legekultur med ind i skolen, når de tager deres egne tøjdyr med hjemmefra. Men hvad sker der, når vi som forskere medbringer tøjdyr i feltarbejdet og gør dem til en aktiv del af undervisningen, så børnene får mulighed for at inddrage deres egne legeerfaringer og kulturelle udtryk i en ellers relativt »voksenkontrolleret« skoleverden? Artiklens omdrejningspunkt er en inddragelse af børns egen legekultur med tøjdyr i de fagdidaktiske voksenstyrede læreprocesser i indskolingens faglige undervisning – her med fokus på skolefagene matematik og dansk, hvor fagdidaktik er relationen mellem de klassiske videnskabsfag (matematik og dansk) og undervisning i faget (Nielsen, 2002). Den faglige undervisning i fagene anskues dermed gennem de fagdidaktiske grundspørgsmål, altså *hvad* der skal undervises i, *hvorfor* der skal undervises og *hvordan* det kan gøres meningsfuldt for børnene (Klafki, 2001). Børnekultur forstår vi som en sociokulturel legeproces med æstetisk-symbolske udtryksformer (Vygotsky, 2002; 1966), hvor legen udfoldes i sociale interaktioner med andre mennesker og ting. Vi betragter således tøjdyrene som interaktionelle 'ting'; altså agenter der medvirker til at lege og sanse på børnenes præmisser. Tøjdyrenes lege-roller i undervisningen forbinder dynamisk det fagdidaktiske indhold og børnenes erfaringer ved at rammesætte det fagdidaktiske spørgsmål om *hvordan* i skolens store fag gennem etableringer af en fiktiv 'som-om'-legeverden (Fleer, 2021; Lindquist, 1995; Sæbø, 2003;). Det betragter vi som *fagdidaktiske legeprocesser*, hvor børns egen legekultur får plads i skolens faglige undervisningen, så den bliver mere meningsfuld ved at inddrage deres hverdagserfaringer. Vi peger således ind i det dynamiske forhold mellem fagdidaktik, børnenes hverdagserfaringer og legeverdenen, for med Vygotsky (1966) at fremhæve legen som en ledende udviklingsaktivitet, der *kan* føre til læring, men også »blot« kan skabe mening og engagement for børnene gennem sin umiddelbare meningsløshed (Fleer, 2021; Juncker, 2006). Vi forstår således denne tøjdyrs-facilitering som en sanselig 'børne-poetik', der på en gang er dybt meningsskabende og samtidig potentielt meningsløs i curriculær forstand (Saugstad, 2017). Det handler om at skabe mere autonome lege- og læringsrum for børns egne oplevelser og erfaringer i skolens politiserede »voksenverden« som en tilgang til det fagdidaktiske spørgsmål om, hvordan undervisning kan gøres meningsfuld for børnene. De voksenstyrede læreprocesser bliver således i den faglige undervisning potentielt forvandlet til mere improviserede legeprocesser med tøjdyrene som meningsskabende artefakter fra børnenes hverdag uden for skolen. Tøjdyrene skaber en større åbenhed for det poetiske, kunstneriske, legende, »barnlige«, sanselige og lidt sære i mødet med skolens politiserede rum. Undervisningens *hvordan* bliver dermed medieret af både faglighed og af børnenes egen legekultur i et fælles møde. Konkret leger børn og voksne i artiklen med tøjdyr i en faglig kontekst. Selvom tøjdyr er velkendte legeartefakter og til tider inddrages metodisk i pædagogisk forskning med børn (Ahlcrona, 2009; Mariegaard, 2021; Petersen,

2017), så er tøjdyrets rolle i skolens faglige undervisning mindre belyst. Vi har begge været på feltforsknings-besøg i indskolingen som en del af vores respektive ph.d-projekter. I vores empiri-indsamlinger anvender vi tøjdyr som interaktionelle artefakter på forskellige måder. Mette er matematikdidaktisk forsker og undersøger i samarbejde med børnehaveklasseledere mulighederne for matematiske ræsonnementer i børnehaveklassefaget. Den faglige undervisning rammesættes af en narrativ fortælling som børnene inddrages i, og som fysisk manifesteres gennem hovedpersonens tilstedeværelse som et tøjdyr (Bundgaard, under udarbejdelse). Thomas er litteraturredidaktisk forsker og følger indskolings-danskundervisning med fortolkning af billedbøger gennem procesdrama (Heiden, 2025). I sin forskning har Thomas anvendt tøjdyr som 'levende agenter' i performative undersøgelser i legeaktiviteter med krop, stemme og materialitet. I begge projekter har tøjdyrene således været vigtige redskaber i feltarbejdet og har vakt interesse for børnenes og de voksnes interaktioner med tøjdyrene i de fagdidaktiske legeprocesser. Artiklen undersøger derfor forskningsspørgsmålet: *Hvad sker der, når tøjdyr inddrages i fagdidaktiske legeprocesser i dansk og matematik i indskolingen?*

Den sociokulturelle legeforståelse og de fagdidaktiske legeprocesser

Artiklen anlægger en sociokulturel forståelse af leg som processuelle, kropslige aktiviteter med kulturelle redskaber i bred betydning, f.eks. legetøj eller sproglige udråb (Bateson, 1955/2001). Leg er en social proces, hvor børn (og voksne) improviserer og viderefører kulturelle traderinger, der er definerende og udviklende for dem som kulturel gruppe (Mouritsen, 1996). I denne optik udgør leg således en samling af meningsbærende aktiviteter, som børn bruger til at reflektere over og kommunikere med omverdenen. Flere sociokulturelle legeforskere (fx Fleer, 2021; Vygotsky, 1966, Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2010) fremhæver betydningen af 'som-om' i forhold til børnenes dannelse af erfaringer med at fastholde og bearbejde oplevelser og udvikle nye erkendelser af verden omkring dem. Legen åbner muligheder for at skabe nyt gennem 'som-om' -dimensionen (Guss, 2000, s. 15; Huizinga, 2002/1949; Skovbjerg Karoff, 2014; Sørensen, 2015). Legen fungerer således som drivkraft for børns læring og udvikling (Vygotsky, 1978). Disse lærings- og udviklingsaktiviteter med redskaber overleveres, repræsenteres og videreudvikles mimetisk i sociale fællesskaber på mere eller mindre 'skæve' og anderledes måder. Læring i et sociokulturelt perspektiv er i dette perspektiv børns (og voksnes) bevægelser fra ydre kropslig eksternalisering til indre bearbejdning af nye erfaringer i samspil med den sociale omverden (Sørensen, 2015, s. 40). Læring *kan* således være guidet og konstitueret af legen, men legen kan ikke styres eller rettes mod bestemte læringsmål – eller intentioner (Broström, 2002). Når tøjdyr, som børnene kender hjemmefra, inddrages en faglig sammenhæng, tages der udgangspunkt i børns egne erfaringer (Dewey, 2005). I praksis betyder det, at undervisningen ikke kun handler om fagligt indhold, men også om, hvordan dette bringes i spil. Det faglige indhold udfoldes og rammesættes således med inddragelse af børnenes hverdagserfaringer og legeskultur – her med tøjdyr. Legen skaber dermed et potentielt og dynamisk udviklingsrum for faglig læring; altså en *fagdidaktisk legeproces*. Med begrebet anskuer vi leg som en rammesættende 'som-om'-aktivitet i fagene med fokus på både læring, indlevelse og forestillingsevne. 'Som-om' forstås her som kropslige handlinger i en fiktiv legeverden med et dramatisk formsprog (Bolton, 2008; Pramling & Samuelsson, 2025; Sørensen, 2016; 2015). En fagdidaktisk legeproces er en mere eller mindre

improviseret leg, der kan rammesætte den faglige undervisning. Det faglige indhold indgår direkte eller indirekte med henblik på at understøtte læring, som kan opstå både planlagt og spontant uden eksplicit målstyring. Legen åbner et dynamisk udviklingsrum, hvor børn og voksne som deltagere bliver agenter i en meningsfuld social og kulturel aktivitet. Legen bliver en fagdidaktisk rammesætning, hvor 'legerne' har mulighed for at opleve »meningsløshed« i curriculær forstand, ved at give sig hen til legens 'som-om'- univers som en værdi i sig selv (Saugstad, 2017). I de fagdidaktiske legeprocesser kan børnene midlertidigt frigøre sig fra skolens voksenstyrede rammer og opnå en relativt autonom frisættelse gennem legen (Sørensen, 2015). Samtidig danner børnene potentielt erfaringer med fagenes indhold gennem legen. Denne 'lege-læring' er noget relativt ikke-rammesat, ikke-styret og lidt vildt, men for os et værdifuldt bidrag til skolens relativt politiserede forestilling om »rigtig« læring som noget logisk-rationelt. Legen fungerer både som rammesætning og som foranderlig og relativt autonom proces i undervisningen, hvor børnenes legeerfaringer inddrages. Tøjdyr fungerer her som en »brobygger« mellem fiktiv og real kontekst i legen (Bolton, 2008; Sørensen, 2016), som indebærer både trading og improvisation med børnenes egne legeerfaringer fra hverdagen (Mouritsen, 1996). I et sociokulturelt perspektiv kan tøjdyret således forstås som et medierende artefakt mellem barnet og den voksne (Ahlcrona, 2009), der bidrager til at opløse grænserne mellem legens agenter og skabe et fælles socialt handlings- og meningsrum. Børnene anvender i den fagdidaktiske legeproces deres forestillingsevne til at træde ind i en fiktiv verden, hvormed tøjdyret potentielt bliver en konkret invitation til legens univers. Når legen – og tøjdyret – bringes med ind i skolens undervisning, er det altså primært med et fagligt sigte. Dette betyder ikke at legen »overskygges« af den faglige læring, men at legen potentielt kan rammesætte læringsmuligheder. Dermed opstår en *fagdidaktisk* legeproces. Med begrebet fagdidaktiske legeprocesser ønsker vi således at fremhæve den rammesatte undervisnings-leg med tøjdyr som en værdifuld del af de faglige læreprocesser i indskolingen.

Nøglecases og mikroetnografi

Metodisk har vi anvendt videoempiri til gentagen iagttagelse af kropslige og sproglige handlinger (Hansen & Carlsen, 2017). Ét til to faste kameraer blev placeret i skolernes undervisningslokaler for at indfange de umiddelbare hændelser, der udspillede sig inden for kameraets synsfelt. Som metodisk analysestrategi til udvælgelse af videodata er vi inspireret af mikroetnografien (Erickson, 1982; Heiden, 2023; Hauer, 2020), hvor mere holistiske processer kan indfanges på mikroniveau og analyseres fra helhed til del (Erickson, 1982, s.218). Vi præsenterer artiklens »hvad sker der...« gennem to situationelle nøglecases (Thomas, 2011). Udvælgelsen af disse situationer er sket med henblik på at identificere, hvordan tøjdyrets tilstedeværelse medfører et interaktionelt samspil mellem objekterne børn-tøjdyr-voksen som en del af legeprocessen på en ikke-intenderet måde. Der er dermed tale om situationer, hvor børnenes legeerfaringer med tøjdyrene medfører noget både uventet og meningsfuldt (Erickson, 1986). Således er de to nøglecases eksempler på hvad der *kan* ske, når man inddrager tøjdyr i den faglige undervisning. Alle deltagere i de to nøglecases har givet GDPR-tilsagn til, at deres data anvendes til forskningsbrug, og alle er pseudonymiseret. Kun Thomas indgår i casen med sit rigtige navn.

Analysen af cases gennemføres fra makro- til mikroniveau (Hylander & Guvå, 2009). Hver nøglecase er et snapshot på få minutter af en undervisningssituation på makroniveau,

og vi anvender en åben, eksplorativ tilgang inspireret af grounded theory (Boolsen, 2025). Empirien analyseres på mezo-og mikroniveau gennem åben kodning og kategorisering med henblik på at udvikle teoretiske forståelser forankret i data frem for i ekstern teori (Hylander & Guvå, 2009). Tilgangen bruges til at udvikle begrebet fagdidaktiske legeprocesser som praksisnær teori og som analytisk strategi til at skabe indsigt i, hvad der *faktisk sker* i legeprocessen. Dette sker ved at identificere, beskrive og navngive betydninger, der træder frem i data gennem følgende trin:

- 1) Casene er gennemlæst hver for sig og opdelt i mindre meningsbærende enheder, som vi har forsynet med korte beskrivende stikord, som en del af vores åbne kodning.
- 2) Stikordene har ført os til en videre teoretisk refleksion og analyse, som vi fælles har diskuteret.
- 3) Mønstre og sammenhænge i de teoretiske refleksioner har vi afslutningsvis trukket frem på tværs af de to cases for at illustrere samspillet mellem børn, tøjdyr og voksne.

Rammesætning af case 1

Mette har i samarbejde med syv børnehaveklasseledere designet og gennemført 11 interventioner i forskellige børnehaveklasser over tre år. Otte interventioner var bygget op omkring en fiktiv historie, hvor børnene skulle hjælpe tøjdyrs-dragen Max med at blive klar til at holde fødselsdagsfest, ved at hjælpe med at løse matematiske og ikke-matematiske problemer, og dermed skabe mulighed for matematiske læreprocesser i undervisningsfaget. Børnehaveklasselederen havde en fysisk udgave af Max med i undervisningen; altså et stof-tøjdyr. Børnehaveklasselederen interagerede med stof-Max før og under oplæsningen, og ellers stod Max et sted i klasselokalet og observerede, hvad børnene lavede. Børnene havde i undervisningen mulighed for at opsøge Max og interagere med ham.

I case 1 følger vi børnehaveklasselederen Hanne og fem af børnenes i o.A, som er seks år. Vi kommer ind i casen efter at børnene parvis har opfundet en dans og har vist dansen til et andet par. Hanne har samlet op og er i gang med at oplæse sidste del af fortællingen. Hun har sat sig på en skammel foran tavlen. Max står på et bord, så alle børnene kan se ham. Rikke og Ilse har begge haft deres egne tøjdyr med, som står på bordet sammen med Max og kigger ud mod klassen. Alle børn sidder enten på et gulvtæppe eller lige udenfor det, og kigger op mod Hanne. Vi fokuserer på Hanne og de fire børn: Anne, Rikke, Signe og Lukas og deres kropslige og sproglige handlinger i forbindelse med læsningen af sidste del af dagens afsnit om Max.



Billede 2: Tøjdyrs-dragen Max som skal have hjælp til at planlægge sin fødselsdag (illustration: Falke Bundgaard).

»Du sagde vi skulle sove«

Børnene Anne og Lukas sidder og kigger op mod børnehaveklasselærer Hanne, mens hun læser. Signe sidder og vipper med kroppen, mens hun skiftevis kigger op i loftet og ned i gulvet. Lukas piller ved sine sokker, inden han lægger hovedet ned i sine hænder. Hanne læser de sidste linjer af historien: »Man kunne sikkert finde mange ting, der havde sådan et mønster. Måske på invitationer eller et andet sted i skoven. Ej, nu er det slut for i dag. Max bliver nødt til at sove, så han er frisk til fødselsdagen. Han har fået børstet tænder og ligger i sin seng. Han kan ikke lade være med at tænke lidt på i morgen. Han glæder sig så meget. Men det har faktisk også været ret sjovt at gøre klar til fødselsdagen. Bare han nu kan sove, tænker Max, inden han lukker øjnene i og drømmer om mønstre, der bliver til danse, og danse, der bliver til mønstre.« Hanne vender hovedet og kigger over på Max, mens hun siger: »Så godnat og sov rigtig godt«. Børnene begynder straks at rykke stille på sig. Anne kigger op mod Hanne: »Du sagde, vi skulle sove«. Anne læner sig op ad Rikke og lukker øjnene. Der kommer en høj snorkelyd et eller andet sted fra. Signe vælter stille og roligt til siden, lukker øjnene og ligger nu med bøjede ben og en knyttet hånd oppe foran hovedet. Imens har Lukas også lagt sig ned på siden med lukkede øjne. Hanne siger i et helt stille toneleje: »Ja, godnat med jer«. Rikke krøller sin trøje sammen og lægger den på gulvet foran sig. Hun lægger sig på maven med hovedet på trøjen, som var det en hovedpude. Imens har Anne lukket øjnene og lagt sit hoved på Rikkes ryg.

Rikke: »Av, Anne«.

Anne: »Du er bare en hovedpude«.

Lukas vender sig om på ryggen, ligger med lukkede øjne og griner stille. Lyden af snork og mund-prutter bliver højere. Signe ligger helt stille og smiler. Rikke forsøger at rejse sig på albuerne, og Annes hoved rykker sig. Rikke: »Anne, stop«. Rikke forsøger at rejse sig op, men Annes hoved ligger oven på hende. Anne: »Jeg snorker ikke«. Rikke: »Anne, det er ikke sjovt«. Anne: »Okay«. Hun sætter sig op og vender blikket mod Hanne. Rikke lægger hovedet på sin krøllede trøje igen. Der bliver stadig snorket højlydt. Lukas kommer med et højt snork og strækker armene op over hovedet. Signe ligger helt stille med bøjede ben og lukkede øjne og ligner en, der sover. Hanne: »Så må man godt lige vågne, fordi det aller, aller sidste...«. Anne: »Jeg var allerede vågen«. Lukas vender sig om på maven og sætter sig op, imens han siger: »Godmorgen«. Rikke bliver liggende og siger: »Jeg er træt«. Signe bruger hænderne til at skubbe sig selv op i siddende position, mens hun siger: »Kykyliky«, og kigger lidt rundt i klassen. Rikke rejser sig op og hvisker til Anne: »Godmorgen, Anne«.

Analyse

Casen starter voksenstyret med Hanne, der læser højt, mens børnene lytter. Oplæsningen rammesætter legeprocessen gennem skabelsen af en 'som om' fiktion. Et skift opstår, da Hanne kigger på tøjdyrs-Max og siger »Så godnat og sov rigtig godt«, hvormed hun træder ind i fiktionen gennem sin fysiske og sproglige interaktion med tøjdyret. Hanne indlever sig i den 'som om' verden hun lige har beskrevet; ikke kun gennem oplæsningen, men også via sin interaktion med tøjdyret. Tøjdyrs-Max går fra tilskuer til levende agent i legen. Max' indtrædelse som agent via Hanne skaber en situation, hvor børnene kropsligt initierer en grænseovergang til fiktionen. Herefter følger en sproglig overskridelse af grænsen, da Anne kigger op mod Hanne og siger: »du sagde, vi skulle sove«. Anne tolker Hannes sproglige udsagn til også at gælde hende – altså hvis tøjdyret skal sove skal vi (børnene) også. Annes relativt autonome reaktion »frisætter« børnenes handlinger og meninger. Nu er både tøjdyret, Hanne og børnene til stede i samme 'som om' legeverden, hvor grænserne er 'opløst', og alle er aktive agenter i legen. Legen intensiveres med kropslig og sproglig indlevelse fra deltagerne, hvormed de aktiverer deres forestillingsevne. Gennem dramaturgiske lege-virkemidler som overdreven snorken, mund-prutter og anden kropslig udfoldelse (fx *hvordan* man ligger, når man sover), så viser børnene, at de nu er i 'som om'-verdenen sammen med tøjdyret, som jo selvsagt også skal sove. Børnene er i legeproces med tøjdyret, som dermed er katalysator for børnenes indlevelsessevner. Samtidig giver det børnene mulighed for at bringe deres egne legeerfaringer i spil; både gennem anderledes kropslig udfoldelse og ved verbalt overdrevne lyde.

Hanne bekræfter sin deltagelse i legen, da hun i et stille toneleje siger: »Ja godnat med jer!«. Når hun henvender sig til børnene, agerer hun på legens præmisser og giver plads til deres indlevelse og forestillingsevne, hvilket øger deres autonomi i læringsrummet. Grænserne mellem legens aktører opløses, og legen bliver fælles som en del af det faglige handlings- og meningsrum. Børnene udvider legen ved at opfinde nye lege-elementer, som udspringer af deres autonome improvisationer, og samtidig forstærker deres indlevelse. Fx når Anne opfinder en Rikke-hovedpude, der i »virkeligheden« bruges ved sovning, men i legen er det Rikke, som forvandles. Da Rikke får nok af at være hovedpude, så udfordrer hun demonstrativt Annes forestilling om »hovedpude-Rikke« og uenigheden medfører, at

Anne træder midlertidigt ud af legen, mens Rikke forbliver i den. Dette tydeliggør for os børnegruppens skift mellem 'som om' og virkelighed.

Hanne initierer et nyt skift i legen ved at sige: »så må man godt lige vågne, fordi det aller, aller sidste...«, hvilket udvider rammerne inden for den 'som om', som de agerer i. Hanne vil således ikke afslutte legen, men fortsætte den på en ny måde med børnene. Anne (der gik ud af legen tidligere) siger: »Jeg var allerede vågen«. Hermed genindtræder hun i legen og accepterer de nye præmisser. Det samme gør Lucas og Signe ved højt at sige »godmorgen« og »kykyliky«, som markerer deres indtræden i den nye »morgen-leg«. Signes kulturelle udtryk er symbolsk; altså at når en »rigtig« hane siger »kykyli«, så er det »rigtig« morgen og det betyder, at menneskerne skal stå op. Rikke afviser umiddelbart at træde ind i den nye leg; »jeg er træt« siger hun, og bliver liggende. Hun holder altså fast i sin autonomi og forbliver udenfor legen en stund, inden hun til slut indtræder i den fælles leg ved at sige »godmorgen«.

Opsamling

Selvom casen indledes som voksenstyret, så åbner Hannes interaktion med tøjdyret for en fælles, improviseret legeverden, hvor børnene bringer egne legeerfaringer i spil. De deltager kropsligt og sprogligt, forhandler grænser mellem fantasi og virkelighed og udvikler legens indhold gennem kulturelle udtryk. Tøjdyret muliggør således en 'som om'-verden, hvor mennesker og tøjdyr fremstår som ligeværdige aktører. I takt med at børnene engagerer sig kropsligt og sprogligt i legen, så anvender de forskellige kulturelle udtryk, f.eks. handlinger, lyde og genstande forbundet med det at sove, til at udvide og nuancere legens indhold. Samtidig forhandler børnene aktivt grænserne mellem virkelighed/fantasi. Hanne deltager som medspiller, støtter børnenes initiativer og fastholder rammen. Dermed opstår et fælles menings- og handlingsrum, hvor kulturelle udtryk med krop og sprog fungerer som bærende elementer i meningsskabelsen. Selvom situationen ikke har et eksplicit matematisk indhold, viser den, hvordan børns deltagelse bekræfter konteksten som meningsfuld. Selvom matematik ikke optræder som selvstændigt fag i børnehaveklassen, er der i faghæftet stadig beskrevet matematikkens rolle i børnehaveklassen. Her står beskrevet, at børnene skal møde matematikken i en meningsfuld kontekst (UVM, 2019a). Samtidig er leg en grundlæggende pædagogisk tilgang, der skal gennemsyre al undervisning i børnehaveklassen. Så når børnene leger at de sover, træder de ikke kun ind i en legeverden; deres deltagelse viser også en accept af den fiktive historie som en meningsfuld kontekst som en del af undervisningens *hvordan*. Dermed er historien og dens manifestation ved tøjdyrs-Max rammesættende for at børnene anvender deres forestillingsevne ind i legens univers, og den giver herigennem børnene mulighed for at engagere sig i matematiske læreprocesser gennem leg. Legen bliver dermed et potentielt fagligt læringsrum – en fagdidaktisk legeproces, hvor børnene gennem indlevelse, forestillingsevne og voksen-interaktion 'opløser' grænserne mellem voksen- og børnekultur.

Rammesætning af case 2

Thomas har som litteraturredidaktisk forsker fulgt to indskolingsklasser i folkeskolens danskfag gennem tre undervisningsforløb, hvor børnene arbejder med fortolkning af billedbøger gennem procesdrama (Heiden, 2025). Efter hvert forløb har tre børn meldt sig frivilligt som deltagere i en performativ undersøgelse, hvor de arbejder videre med fortolkninger af den udvalgte billedbog fra forløbet (Heiden, 2024; Heiden & Jensen, 2025). I casen performer

Victor, Lone og Isabella på 8 år fra 2. klasse udvalgte procesdrama-aktiviteter med Thomas. Thomas har medbragt billedbogen *Tork & Hest: Den sovende prinsesse* (Jensen, 2021), en tøjdyrs-abe, en tøjdyrs-hest og en tøjdyrs-kanin; som alle tre er repræsentative karakterer fra billedbogen. Han har skabt en teaterscene med gaffatape på gulvet, hvor børnene på skift opsætter tøjdyrene på en stol til interview. I casen leger børnene og Thomas »den varme stol«; en oversætter-spørgsmåls-dramaleg, hvor tøjdyret sidder i stolen midt på scenen og svarer på spørgsmål fra deltagerne. »Den varme stol«-aktiviteten i casen er en rammesat procesdramaleg med roller (Sæbø, 2003), hvor eleverne på skift kan være i rolle som »tolke«, der oversætter tøjdyrenes dyre-sprog til menneskesprog, som alle deltagere kan forstå(!).



*Billede 2: Tøjdyrs-kaninen (som i Tork & Hest-fortællingen faktisk er en hare-skurk!)
(Illustration: Ronja Roed Heiden)*

»Jeg har ikke lyst til at tænke på det mere«

»Er der nogen, som kan finde ud af kanin-eller hestesprog« spørger Thomas. Han sidder på et bord foran teaterscenen sammen med Lone, mens Victor kaster rundt med tøjdyrs-aben på scenen og Isabella sidder på en stol ved siden af og griner skælnsk. »Jeg kan kaninsprog« siger Lone begejstret, griber tøjdyrs-kaninen fra bordet og placerer den på den varme stol på teaterscenen. »Men Lone, hør lige, jeg havde tænkt, at den kunne sidde sådan her«, siger Victor og piller med kaninen sammen med Lone, så kaninen sidder klar til at blive interviewet. »Hvem har spørgsmål til kaninen?« spørger Thomas, mens han kigger rundt. »Hvor har kaninen lært at blive spion?« spørger Isabella listigt. Lone lytter grundigt og længe til kaninen, mens hun kigger ud i luften. »Den har lært det af aben«,

siger hun så. »iiiiiiw« fløjter Victor og ser fiffig ud. »Den er rimelig snedig, den abe« siger Thomas, mens han og Victor kigger på hinanden, og Isabella fniser. Lone styrer grundigt samtalen, mens hun kniber munden sammen og ser alvorlig ud. Victor, Isabella og Thomas skiftes til at række fingeren op og stille spørgsmål, og Lone oversætter kvalificeret kanin-sproget. Hvis spørgsmålet er lidt uklart for tøjdyrs-kaninen, så oversætter hun til kaninsprog med et »mf, mf« og sammenkneben mund. »Er det kaninlyde?« spørger Isabella nysgerrigt. Lone nikker afmålt, og Victor afprøver et kaninspørgsmål med et højlydt »mf, mf«. »Altså jeg har jo haft en kanin« siger han så pludselig, og kigger ned i gulvet. »Det har jeg også haft!«, siger Lone entusiastisk, mens hun smiler til tøjkaninen. »Nåh, tror I at de kender kaninen der?« spørger Thomas og peger på tøjkaninen. »Det tror jeg!«, siger Lone. »Altså min kanin, den flyttede hjemmefra« siger Victor så alvorligt og kigger rundt. »Den gik op i skoven og så....« »Ved tøjkaninen, hvor den er, tror du?« spørger Thomas mere alvorligt og kigger på Victor. »Du kan spørge den, om den ved, hvor...« siger Isabella engageret og peger på kaninen, men stopper så sig selv. Victor bliver helt stille og forknyt. Han sænker hagen ned på sit knæ og kigger ud i luften. »Jeg har ikke lyst til at tænke på det mere«, siger han hæst. »Nu er den væk«.

Analyse

Thomas indleder casen ved at spørge: »Er der nogen, som kan finde ud af kanin-eller hestesprog?«. Han inviterer således til en fælles 'som om' legeverden med enten kaninen eller hesten i »hovedrollen«. Dermed bliver både tøjdyr, børn og den voksne agenter i et fælles handlings-og meningsrum. Lone er den første, der overskrider grænsen fra virkeligheden og træder ind i 'som om' med krop og stemme. »Jeg kan kaninsprog« siger hun og placerer tøj-kaninen i den varme stol. Lone accepterer rammerne for legen, og hendes sproglige og fysiske udtryk gør tøjdyret til en 'levende' agent. Herefter aktiverer både Victor og Isabelle deres forestillingsevner og indtræder i legen; Victor med rammesætning af, hvordan kaninen skal 'sidde på stolen', og Isabella med et spørgsmål. Dernæst faciliterer Thomas børnenes spørgsmål og deltager selv ved at spørge. Lone indlever sig dybt i rollen som tolk, der kan kaninsprog, og trækker på sin forestillingsevne for at komme med et svar på det, som de andre deltagere spørger kaninen om. Grænserne mellem legens agenter er således 'opløst', og der er skabt et fælles menings- og handlingsrum. Når Lone kniber munden sammen og ser alvorlig ud, så kan det være hendes kulturelle forståelse af, hvordan man »bør« se ud, når man er tolk. Lone oversætter ikke kun, hvad kaninen svarer, men snakker også med kaninen på kaninsprog. Her trækker hun på kulturelle forståelser af, hvad det vil sige at kunne et sprog og forstærker sin lege-rolle som den, der mestrer kaninsprog. Lone bruger altså relativt autonomt lege-rollen til at udvide den oprindelige ramme. De andre deltagere både udfordrer og spiller med på udvidelsen. Viktor bryder fiktionen og træder ud af legen, da han siger: »Altså jeg har jo haft en kanin«. Lone kobler sig på denne refleksion, og et øjeblik virker det, som om legen slutter. Så siger Thomas: »Nåh, tror I at de kender kaninen der?« Thomas forsøger at ændre legen i forhold til Victors udtryk; ved at tale ind i den kulturelle forståelse af, at man potentielt kan kende andre, der ligner en selv (når man er kanin, så kender man selvfølgelig mange andre kaniner!). Spørgsmålet trækker Lone ind i den nye leg, når hun siger: »Det tror jeg!«. Victor derimod afviser kropsligt den nye indtræden ved at forblive alvorlig. Thomas forsøger igen at trække ham tilbage i legen ved at inddrage tøjdyret og sige

»Ved tøjkaninen, hvor den er, tror du?« Isabella tager imod Thomas' invitation og forsøger at trække tråde tilbage til den tidligere leg, men hun stopper. I situationen relaterer Victor altså lege-virkeligheds-erfaringen til sin egen erfarede virkelighed, og bevæger sig således fra legen over i en mere 'virkelig' position. Victor er til slut ude af legen, mens resten forbliver i den.

Opsamling

Det er den voksne, der rammesætter legen og inviterer både børn og tøjdyr med ind i det fælles handlings-og meningsrum. Børn og voksen engagerer sig i legeverdenen, hvor tøjdyret som »patient« markerer overgangen fra virkelighed til fiktion. Legeprocessen giver legens agenter mulighed for at indleve sig i 'som om' og samtidig bevares deres autonomi i forhold til udvidelser af legen. Børnenes kropslige og sproglige deltagelse viser, hvordan de bruger deres forestillingsevne og legeskulturelle erfaringer til at skabe mening. Undervejs skifter rollerne; Victor bevæger sig ud af legen ved at relatere situationen til sin egen virkelighed, og markerer en overgang mellem leg og virkelighed. Legen fremstår som en faglig proces, hvor deltagere kontinuerligt forhandler roller, grænser og betydning i forhold til billedbogen som indhold, deres egne legeerfaringer, 'skole' og den voksnes forståelser. Den viser, hvordan børn gennem kropslige udtryk og kulturelle erfaringer aktivt skaber og opretholder en fælles 'som om'-verden, hvor grænserne mellem voksen/skolekultur-og børnekultur opløses. For Victor sker en form for empatisk »med-læring« gennem mediering af virkelighed og legefiktion med tøjdyrs-kaninen, der mimetisk repræsenterer tabet af hans kæledyrs-kanin, som forsvandt i skoven. Med henblik på danskfagets formål i folkeskolen om at fremme elevernes indlevelsessevne og æstetiske forståelse (UVM, 2019b), så forstår vi Victors samtale med tøjdyrskaninen som læring gennem en eksternaliseret oplevelse, hvor indlevelse er grundlæggende for den potentielt internaliserede nye erfaring.

Sammenligning

Begge cases viser, hvordan tøjdyret fungerer som et centralt omdrejningspunkt i etableringen af en fælles 'som om'-verden, hvor grænserne mellem børnenes og den voksnes forestilling om »skole« opløses. Det er den voksne, der skaber kontakten til tøjdyret og dermed åbner for en fiktiv legeverden. I case 2 med Thomas sker det eksplicit gennem spørgsmålet om, hvem der kan tale kanin- eller hestesprog, mens det i case 1 med Hanne sker mere implicit, idet hendes henvendelse til tøjdyret bliver fortolket af børnene som en invitation til leg. I begge cases fungerer tøjdyret som mediator, der inviterer børnene ind i det fælles legerum. Dermed fremstår tøjdyret som en præmis for legen, ikke en konsekvens. Børnene reagerer på invitationerne ved at trækker på egne legeerfaringer, hvor de inddrager særlige legeskulturelle elementer, indlevelse og forestillingsevne – fx når Lone opfinder et kaninsprog, og Anne en Rikke-hovedpude – og udvider dermed legens rammer og faglige muligheder gennem improvisation. I begge cases bevæger børnene sig mellem virkelighed og fiktion, foranlediget af tøjdyrets tilstedeværelse. Tøjdyret fungerer altså som et meningsfuldt bindeled mellem virkelighed og fantasi, når børnene inddrager elementer fra både deres lege- og virkelighedsverden: Snorkelyde, bevægelser, kropssprog, egne tøjdyr og personlige legeerfaringer. Det er gennem tøjdyrets tilstedeværelse, at 'som om' legeverdenen bliver »virkelig« for deltagerne. Samtidig er fysisk interaktion med tøjdyret ikke en forudsætning

for, at tøjdyret er meningsskabende; dets symbolske rolle er tilstrækkelig til at aktivere børnenes forestillingsevne. I case 1 er det faglige indhold ikke tydeligt, men eleverne oplever rammesætningen som meningsfuld, hvilket er centralt for at realisere intentionen om leg som en integreret del af undervisningen i børnehaveklassen, og dermed engagere børnene i matematiske læreprocesser med afsæt i deres hverdagserfaringer. I case 2 er det faglige indhold mere direkte koblet til danskfaget, men det er fortsat den fagdidaktiske legeproces, der forbinder fag og børnenes virkelighed. Begge cases viser, at børn udfordrer hinanden, når legens retning ændres – som når Rikke afviser Annes brug af hende som hovedpude, eller når Victor bevæger sig ud af legen ved at relatere til »den alvorlige« virkelighed. Trods brud fortsætter legen, og der er plads til, at nogle midlertidigt træder ud, mens andre forbliver. De voksnes roller har også fællestræk: Begge initierer legen, men deltager derefter på børnenes præmisser og fastholder en ramme, der lader legen udvikle sig. Denne vekselvirkning mellem voksenstyret initiativ og børnestyret udfoldelse skaber et læringsrum med relativt ligeværdige agenter; en kerne i den fagdidaktiske legeproces.

Diskussion: De »levende« tøjdyr?

Hvad sker der så, når tøjdyr inddrages i fagdidaktiske legeprocesser med børnene i dansk og matematik? I artiklen tildeler vi tøjdyrene et børnekulturelt æstetisk erfaringspotentiale, der inddrager og styrker børnenes forestillingsevne og egne handlemuligheder i den faglige undervisning. Det bliver på sin vis tøjdyrene, som faktisk faciliterer de fagdidaktiske legeprocesser, selvom de »blot« er taktile materialiteter. I case 2 er det f.eks. kaninen, som i legen taler »rigtigt« gennem Lone i den sociale praksis-interaktion mellem børnene, tøjdyret og Thomas. Tøjdyrene fremstår således som 'næsten-levende' agenter placeret i skolens politiserede praksisser i bred betydning, hvor også rum, ideer om leg og skole, genstande som borde, stole og penalhuse, forestillinger om dyr, mennesker, monstre og sociale diskurser indgår i komplekse, betydningsskabende og 'næsten-levende' poetiske sammenvævninger omkring tøjdyrene (Heiden & Jensen; 2024; Jørgensen & Nielsen, 2023). Dermed trækker vi på inspiration fra nymaterielle perspektiver (se f.eks. Fawns, 2022; Niccolini & Pindyck, 2015; Schröder et al, 2022; Toft, 2021) i forhold til at forstå leg med tøjdyrene som poetiske animeringer af det ikke-menneskelige gennem deres sociale relation med mennesker; altså gennem børnenes og de voksnes konkrete lege med tøjdyrene. Når børn indgår i en voksenkontrolleret situation, så opstår en umiddelbar barriere for, at børnenes egen »hemmelige« kultur kan inddrages. I de to cases er det voksne der har kontrollen, når der initieres kontakt til tøjdyret og dermed åbnes der op for den fiktive 'som om' verden. Trods denne voksenkontrol er det *ikke* den voksne, der kontrollerer legen – det sker i et fællesskab mellem børn-tøjdyr-voksne. Inddragelsen af tøjdyrene som legekulturelle objekter i forskningen er således vores poetiske greb til at opretholde børnenes (og måske de voksnes) indre legekultur ved at udfordre den voksne skoleverdens politiserede og »kedelige« diskurser med børnenes egne, mere frie og poetiske legeerfaringer. Gennem inddragelsen af tøjdyret i den faglige undervisning sker der samtidig et brud med forståelsen af legekultur som noget, der kun tilhører børnene. Da børnene og de voksne i rummet interagerer med tøjdyret, så skabes der fagdidaktiske processer i undervisningen, hvor legekulturen bliver fælles for alle. Er artiklens implicite nymaterielle epistemologi om tøjdyrs 'levende' agens så umiddelbart forenelig med den sociokulturelle forståelsesramme, hvor menneskers udvikling og læring

primært forstås som målrettede aktiviteter i socialt samspil med *andre mennesker* (se f.eks. Dalsgaard, 2007; Saljö, 2003; Wertsch, 1994)? Som vores sociokulturelle analyse viser, så skaber tøjdyrene gennem deres tilstedeværelse aktiv deltagelse for børn og voksne i den faglige undervisning, uanset om der i situationen er et specifikt »menneskeligt« fokus gennem faget. Tøjdyrets tilstedeværelse skaber nye muligheder for børnenes indlevelse i legeverdenen gennem tøjdyret som 'antropomorf agent'. Således skabes en interaktionel forbindelse mellem faget og børnene egne legeerfaringer. Dermed mener vi ikke, at vi nedtoner børnenes eller lærernes oplevelse af menneskelig agens med anvendelsen af tøjdyrene. Vi optoner derimod børnenes menneskelige agens ved at inddrage deres kulturelle praksisforståelser af verden i undervisningen; gennem tøjdyrene som antropomorfe repræsentanter for en mere medmenneskelig fælles eksistens. Således inddrager vi børnenes legeerfaringer i undervisningen, og søger dermed at bidrage til nye faglige forståelser ved at præsentere kulturelle udtryk og materialiteter i mere »levende« former (Ingold, 2024; Jørgensen, 2019; Mouritsen, 1996). Det ses f.eks. i case 1, hvor eleven Ilse på eget initiativ selv medbringer to af dragen Max' særlige tøjdyrs-gæster til fødselsdagen, og er dybt engageret i den faglige undervisning gennem tøjdyrene som stoflig erfaringsform.

Konklusion

Når tøjdyr inddrages i en fagdidaktisk legeproces, så åbner det muligheder for at inddrage elevernes legeerfaringer i undervisningen, og dermed skabe rammer for nye legeprocesser. Tøjdyret bliver en katalysator for relativt autonome åbninger i den faglige undervisning, der giver plads til børnene legeerfaringer og improvisationer. Børnene tager selv initiativ til at udvide og ændre legens rammer, fx ved at opfinde nye børnekulturelle udtryk, der relaterer sig til den fiktive situation. I legeprocessen bringer børnene altså deres kulturelle forståelser og hverdagserfaringer i spil. Tøjdyrene fungerer som et medierende og meningsskabende objekt, der muliggør skabelsen af en fælles 'som om'-legeverden, hvor både børn, tøjdyr og voksne deltager næsten ligeværdigt, og som samtidig er med til at skabe en meningsfuld ramme for det fagdidaktiske indhold. Der opstår altså et særligt fagligt læringsrum, hvor grænserne mellem leg/læring, fantasi/virkelighed og voksen/barn midlertidigt opløses, og hvor den fagdidaktiske legeproces folder sig ud. Samtidig viser casene, at børnene har en fleksibel tilgang til legens grænser uden at fællesskabet brydes. I legeprocessen er der således plads til forskellige grader af deltagelse og fortolkning. Når den voksne går med i legen på børnenes præmisser, så opstår et fælles handlings- og meningsrum. Den voksne bevarer sammen med tøjdyret en rammesættende funktion, men giver også plads til børnenes fortolkninger og kreative bidrag. Inddragelsen af tøjdyr bidrager til at transformere undervisningen fra en traditionel voksenstyret aktivitet til et fælles lege-lære-rum, hvor børnenes hverdagskulturelle erfaringsverden får reel indflydelse på, hvordan den faglige situation udspiller sig. Kort sagt: Legens egenverdi bliver essentiel; både i forhold til børnenes engagement i at 'lege for at lege' og også til at fremhæve de fagdidaktiske muligheder for nye forståelser af skolens store fag gennem rammesat leg med noget umiddelbart »sært og mærkeligt« og samtidig hverdagsagtigt som tøjdyr.

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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–toddler play 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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Black Pedagogy and the Limits of Control: Childhood, Agency and Resistance

Abstract

What happens when childhood is framed not as a space of possibility, but as a domain governed by adult authority? This article examines the concept of Black Pedagogy and its enduring logics of discipline, showing how they have historically constructed childhood as an object of control, obedience, and moral formation. Drawing on educational history, philosophy, childhood studies, literature, and contemporary media, it develops a twofold argument. First, it reconstructs the genealogy through which pedagogical and institutional forms of authority have constituted childhood as an object of governance. Second, it examines how literature, cinema, and children's everyday practices reveal that these logics of control are continuously negotiated and partially reconfigured from within. Rather than treating resistance as external opposition to power, the article conceptualises children's agency as emerging through play, imagination, cultural narratives, and everyday practices embedded in relations of authority. Accordingly, the article argues not that childhood exists beyond control, but that pedagogical control is never complete because it continuously generates possibilities for negotiation and reinterpretation.

Keywords: childhood; black pedagogy; cultural erasure; resistance; agency.

Introduction

What does it mean to conceive childhood not as an autonomous space of possibility, but as a domain shaped and regulated by adult-defined norms? Modern educational, legal, and cultural frameworks have long been grounded in the assumption that childhood is marked by vulnerability, dependency, and moral incompleteness. These assumptions have legitimized discourses and practices that limit children's voices, constrain their agency, and frame subjectivity primarily in terms of future development rather than present experience.

This article takes as its starting point the concept of *Schwarze Pädagogik* (Black Pedagogy), introduced by the sociologist Katharina Rutschky and later developed by the author and former psychoanalyst Alice Miller. The term designates a tradition of upbringing based on repression, emotional control, and the systematic production of obedience, in which coercive practices are justified as necessary for moral and social formation. While often associated with historical educational models, this article argues that its underlying logics persist in contemporary institutional and cultural settings in more subtle forms.

The central research question is how historical and cultural narratives of control have contributed to the marginalization of children's agency, and how such forms of domination are challenged through practices of resistance in symbolic and everyday contexts. Drawing on a genealogical and interdisciplinary approach, the paper examines how discourses of authority, innocence, and obedience have structured modern conceptions of childhood, while also tracing counter-narratives through which children reclaim voice, space, and autonomy across literature, media, and daily life. Instead of treating these dimensions as separate, the article explores how children's agency emerges within, rather than despite, relations of power.

The article advances a twofold thesis. First, it argues that dominant cultural narratives, from moralistic children's literature to institutional schooling, produce an epistemic and political marginalisation of childhood by naturalising adult authority. Second, it contends that fiction, contemporary media, and practices of play function as sites in which these logics are reworked from within, generating forms of agency that emerge immanently within relations of power rather than outside them. Taken together, these two strands demonstrate that pedagogical control is historically persistent yet structurally incomplete, since the very relations that seek to govern childhood simultaneously create possibilities for negotiation, reinterpretation, and everyday resistance. Resistance therefore emerges not as external opposition to authority, but as immanent to the very processes that seek to regulate childhood. From this perspective, the present work calls for moving beyond paternalistic models of care toward pedagogies grounded in recognition and relationality (Freeman, 2020).

In contemporary contexts, marked by digital mediation and performance-driven education, the tension between control and agency persists in reconfigured forms. This is particularly evident in digital surveillance and data-driven education, where children's behaviours are continuously monitored and translated into performance metrics. Artificial intelligence and platform governance, particularly through learning analytics systems, intensify these dynamics by organising learning through prediction, classification, and adaptive structuring. Educational decision-making becomes partially delegated to opaque computational logics, shifting surveillance toward anticipatory regimes based on profiling. Learning is therefore not only monitored but pre-structured through statistical expectations, where deviation risks being treated as noise rather than expression. These developments suggest not a departure

from earlier pedagogical logics, but their reconfiguration within computational environments, where control increasingly operates through anticipation rather than correction. In this context, the question of children's agency shifts: it concerns not only resistance to visible authority, but the ways in which subjects navigate, reinterpret, and at times displace systems that shape the conditions of their participation, thereby anticipating the forms of negotiation and displacement analysed in the subsequent sections of this paper.

The article develops this argument in three stages. It first reconstructs the historical genealogy of Black Pedagogy and the broader discursive formations through which childhood has been constituted as an object of governance, thereby developing the first strand of the article's argument. It subsequently analyses literary, cinematic, and popular cultural narratives that complicate these constructions by revealing alternative configurations of childhood agency, thus advancing the second strand at the level of cultural representation. The final section shifts from representation to practice, exploring how play, imagination, and selective disobedience operate as everyday forms of negotiation within adult-centred relations of authority, thereby completing the second strand through the analysis of lived experience. Together, these stages progressively develop the paper's central claim that the logics of pedagogical control are historically persistent but never complete, as children's agency emerges through everyday forms of resistance that are immanent to the very relations of power that seek to regulate it.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of childhood, far from being natural or universal, is historically and culturally constructed. A key framework for understanding how childhood has been shaped through adult authority is provided by Katharina Rutschky's notion of Black Pedagogy. Introduced in the late 1970s, the term designates a tradition of educational thought grounded in repression, emotional manipulation, and the systematic production of obedience. As Rutschky writes, her genealogical project aims to document «the consequences and collateral phenomena arising from the forms of attention to which children have been subjected since the eighteenth century» (Rutschky, 1977, p. 171), thereby revealing how pedagogical practices have contributed not only to the formation of childhood, but also to broader configurations of modern subjectivity. Within this framework, bourgeois educational practices relied on humiliation, the denial of empathy, and strict disciplinary control, all justified as necessary for moral development and social order. Black Pedagogy can thus be understood as a repertoire of techniques aimed at producing compliant and emotionally regulated subjects.

Alice Miller extends Rutschky's critique by linking these pedagogical logics to the psychic constitution of adults shaped by early experiences of coercion and emotional suppression. In *Am Anfang war Erziehung* (1980), she describes a »chain of obedience«, whereby children required to repress anger, fear, or grief internalize these affects and may later reproduce similar dynamics of domination in adult life (1980; 1989; 2004). This process is not merely behavioural, but deeply affective and relational, as it concerns the reorganisation of emotional life under conditions of authority. As Miller argues, «the child's dependence on parental love makes it impossible later in life to recognize these traumatizations, which remain hidden behind early idealization» (1980, p. 6). Education, in this sense, appears as

a key mechanism through which subjectivity is shaped, stabilised, and transmitted across generations.

The critique of Black Pedagogy intersects with broader genealogies of childhood. Philippe Ariès has shown how childhood, as a distinct and socially valued life stage, emerged in early modern Europe through transformations in family structures, literacy, and forms of social regulation (Ariès, 1960). This emergence is inseparable from new regimes of supervision and moral differentiation that increasingly distinguish children from adults while subjecting them to intensified forms of control. The modern child thus emerges as a dual figure: an object of protection and, simultaneously, of governance.

This ambivalence is further developed in Michel Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), institutions such as schools are described as paradigmatic sites for the production of docile bodies through surveillance, normalisation, and the regulation of time and space. These techniques do not operate solely through external coercion, but also through internalized self-regulation, shaping how subjects learn to observe, evaluate, and correct themselves. In this sense, modern discourses of protection do not eliminate control, but rather reorganise it within pedagogical and institutional frameworks that govern childhood in increasingly subtle ways.

Contemporary childhood studies have challenged earlier models that positioned children as passive recipients of socialization, instead emphasising their role as active participants in social and political life. Scholars such as Leena Alanen, Berry Mayall, Allison James, Alan Prout, and Jens Qvortrup argue that childhood should be understood as a generational and relational category rather than a natural stage of development (Alanen & Mayall, 2001; James & Prout, 1997; Qvortrup et al., 1994). At the same time, this emphasis on agency has been critically reconsidered. Erica Burman's deconstruction of developmental psychology shows how »the child« is often produced through normative frameworks that define what counts as proper development (Burman, 1994). Similarly, Karen Barad's notion of »intra-action« complicates any clear separation between subject and structure, suggesting that agency emerges within material-discursive configurations rather than as an individual attribute (Barad, 2007). Taken together, these perspectives show that childhood cannot be understood either as a natural developmental stage or as a passive object of socialisation. Rather, it emerges as a historically produced and relational field in which authority, subjectivity, and agency are continuously co-constituted.

Historical Construction of Childhood as Control

The cultural and institutional construction of childhood as a domain to be governed and disciplined by adults has deep roots in Western history. From early modernity onward, emerging forms of state authority, bourgeois family structures, and capitalist modes of production reshaped not only labour and domestic life but also the meaning of being a child (Cunningham, 1995, 2006; Heywood, 2001). This section traces a genealogy of these transformations, showing how educational, legal, religious, and scientific systems progressively configured childhood as an object of regulation and moral formation under the discursive guise of protection.

As Michel Foucault and Norbert Elias have shown, schools, orphanages, and reformatories developed alongside broader processes of rationalisation of bodies and behaviours required

by modern states and industrial capitalism, through distinct but complementary accounts of disciplinary and civilising processes. Schooling becomes a *dispositif* for the production of disciplined subjects defined by punctuality, obedience, and self-regulation. The silent classroom, the regimented desk, and the strict timetable exemplify what Foucault describes as the »microphysics of power«, through which bodies are made visible, comparable, and governable (1975). Foucault's notion of biopolitics (2004) further extends this analysis, showing how power invests life itself, positioning children as both individual and collective objects of governance (1976).

This rationalisation is reinforced by moral and cultural discourses that construct childhood as simultaneously innocent and deficient. Within Protestant-inflected frameworks, children are imagined as fragile subjects in need of continuous correction. As Foucault observes, disciplinary moralities persist beneath apparently modern forms of social regulation, revealing how historical regimes of normativity continue to structure contemporary subjectivities (1976). The bourgeois family, idealised as a space of intimacy, functions in this sense as a site of emotional discipline, where obedience is naturalised as love and deviation reframed as moral failure.

As Elias argues, these dynamics are embedded in broader processes of social regulation characteristic of modernity. The »civilising process« describes the gradual internalisation of external constraints, whereby affect, gesture, and bodily conduct become increasingly self-regulated according to socially imposed standards (Elias, 1939). Childhood occupies a central role in this process as a privileged site for the formation of self-control, where external discipline is transformed into durable dispositions. Such forms of governance extend beyond the domestic and European sphere through colonial regimes of knowledge and power. Within »civilising missions«, European constructions of childhood intersect with racialised hierarchies that position both colonised populations and children as subjects in need of moral and epistemic guidance (Said, 1994). Childhood thus becomes a symbolic register through which imperial authority is legitimised, reframing domination as education and intervention as care. This extension of pedagogical logics into colonial contexts further underscores the structural entanglement between education, governance, and power. The historical dynamics outlined above also become visible in nineteenth-century cultural and legal representations of childhood. In works such as *Oliver Twist* (1837-1839) and *David Copperfield* (1849-1850), Charles Dickens depicts children as exposed to both care and institutional suffering, revealing how sentimentalisation coexists with discipline and moral correction. Rather than isolated narratives, these representations can be read as expressing a broader pedagogical logic in which hardship is naturalised as part of development. Legal frameworks similarly consolidate this asymmetry. Modern civil and penal systems do not conceptualise children as fully autonomous rights-bearing subjects, but as dependents whose legal status is mediated through parental authority or state guardianship. The doctrine of *parens patriae* formalises this structure by authorising institutional intervention on the basis of presumed incapacity. Early child protection laws thus embed protection within forms of control rather than separating the two.

Reformist pedagogical thought, particularly that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, attempts to reframe childhood as a distinct developmental stage. In *Émile ou De l'éducation* (1762), however, autonomy is staged within a tightly regulated environment, producing a persistent

ambivalence in liberal pedagogy: the recognition of childhood specificity coexists with its governance through controlled conditions of development structured along gendered lines (Tognon, 2022). Rather than replacing earlier forms of authority, liberal pedagogical thought reorganises them within developmental frameworks that continue to shape modern understandings of childhood. By the nineteenth century, this tension is further reshaped through the medicalisation and psychologisation of childhood. Developmental psychology and paediatrics establish normative frameworks for assessing »proper« growth, transforming variation into deviation and potential pathology. This logic resonates with contemporary forms of educational governance centred on risk management and the modulation of affective and cognitive thresholds in children's development (Lyså, 2021).

Contemporary diagnostic categories such as hyperactivity, oppositional behaviour, or emotional dysregulation do not mark a break with this trajectory, but rather extend it within clinical and therapeutic frameworks. The tension within liberal pedagogy reappears here in a new form: behavioural and developmental norms are articulated through psychological expertise, translating difference into measurable deviation and justifying increasingly fine-grained forms of observation and intervention. In this sense, the governance of childhood is not abandoned but reconfigured, as control operates through the language of care, normalisation, and well-being.

This continuity between pedagogical, medical, and institutional forms of authority came under renewed critical scrutiny in the aftermath of the Second World War. The catastrophic experience of Nazism and Fascism fundamentally reshaped debates on education and political responsibility, bringing questions of obedience, moral judgment, and the legitimacy of authority to the forefront of philosophical and educational reflection. In this context, Hannah Arendt argues that the uncritical reproduction of authority risks producing subjects unable to exercise independent judgment, thereby enabling broader conditions of systemic violence (Arendt, 1961). In Nordic and broader European contexts, the post-war critique of authoritarianism further exposed the dangers inherent in unreflective obedience, particularly by revealing how educational institutions could sustain wider cultures of conformity. The issue, then, is not authority as such, but the conditions under which it is exercised, legitimised, and reproduced. This tension continues to inform contemporary debates on childhood, democracy, and education, where questions of guidance, autonomy, and responsibility remain deeply intertwined.

Within this context, Black Pedagogy appears not as a historical anomaly but as a concentrated expression of coercive educational logics deeply embedded in Western traditions. Practices such as corporal punishment, emotional suppression, and enforced obedience are legitimised through discourses that construct children as irrational or developmentally deficient, thereby presenting coercion as a necessary condition of moral formation (Lalatta Costerbosa, 2019). Far from disappearing, these patterns continue to shape contemporary pedagogical cultures (Florio, Caso & Castelli, 2022; Lalatta Costerbosa, 2023). From this perspective, the governance of childhood emerges not merely as an educational concern but as a profoundly political one: it shapes how children encounter authority, internalise social hierarchies, and come to understand freedom itself as something deferred to adulthood.

At the same time, these forms of governance are never totalising. Because they operate through the production of subjectivities rather than external coercion alone, they inevitably

generate tensions, ambiguities, and points of friction. Children are formed within these relations in ways that also enable reinterpretation, negotiation, and selective refusal. What appears as compliance often contains subtle practices that expose the limits of disciplinary ordering. Literature and popular media do not merely depict childhood as governed or resistant; they foreground the ambivalence of this relationship, revealing the unstable boundary between regulation and agency. Within this space, resistance appears not as an external rupture but as a relational possibility that emerges from within the very dynamics of power. Childhood thus becomes a site of continuous symbolic contestation, where authority is neither simply reproduced nor entirely overcome.

Cultural Narratives and the Reconfiguration of Childhood

If educational systems, legal frameworks, and cultural narratives have historically constructed children as passive and malleable subjects, literature and popular media have also been read as counter-sites in which childhood is reimagined through rebellion and subversion. Children's literature, in particular, often oscillates between didactic socialisation and moments of narrative dissent. While frequently aligned with dominant pedagogical ideologies, it nonetheless opens spaces in which alternative forms of childhood subjectivity can emerge. As Jack Zipes argues, twentieth-century children's literature develops a »politics of enchantment«, in which imagination becomes a resource for resisting internalised obedience and reconfiguring social relations (Zipes, 1975).

The cultural texts discussed in this section are not presented merely as illustrations of childhood resistance. Instead, they constitute symbolic sites in which the article's second thesis becomes visible: namely, that children's agency does not emerge outside relations of power, but through their reinterpretation, negotiation, and partial transformation. Accordingly, these narratives reveal not the disappearance of power, but its constitutive incompleteness and the multiple ways in which it can be inhabited, negotiated, and reconfigured.

Roald Dahl's celebrated *Matilda* exemplifies this ambivalence. Here, children's agency takes a primarily intellectual and relational form, grounded in literacy, humour, imaginative intelligence, and telekinesis as symbolic devices that disrupt established asymmetries of authority. Authoritarian figures such as Miss Trunchbull embody institutionalised coercion, against which Matilda's actions reveal the constructed and contingent nature of adult authority. Childhood is thus reframed not as deficit but as cognitive and ethical agency. As the narrator notes, «whatever she needed to learn, she could learn it herself, through books» (Dahl, 1988, ch. 1). Her agency is also relational and collective, emerging through alliances that reshape vulnerability within oppressive environments. As discourse analysis suggests, the adult-child hierarchy in *Matilda* is not natural but socially produced and therefore reversible (Martens, 2015). Rather than escaping adult authority altogether, the protagonist demonstrates that authority itself becomes unstable when its legitimacy is questioned through knowledge, imagination, and collective solidarity.

Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Långstrump* (1945) radicalises this reconfiguration of childhood autonomy. Pippi's portrayal of material, physical, and social independence destabilises normative assumptions about dependency, schooling, and socialisation. Her refusal of institutional discipline, combined with playful inversions of adult norms, constructs childhood as a space of inventive disorder rather than regulated development. Feminist readings have

emphasised how Pippi exceeds the figure of the misfit, instead functioning as a critique of gendered and pedagogical constructions of »proper« childhood. Her exaggerated strength and economic independence operate less as fantasy traits than as narrative strategies that expose the arbitrariness of adult authority and its normative expectations (Fraser, 1977).

A further and distinct configuration of childhood agency emerges in the cinema of Hayao Miyazaki. Rather than staging direct confrontation with adult authority, these films foreground forms of agency grounded in perception, affect, and relational attunement. Across his work, childhood is consistently positioned within worlds that are neither fully governable nor fully oppositional, but structured through shifting relations between human and non-human forces, institutions, and environments. In *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), agency is articulated through sensory openness and ecological receptivity, where the child's experience unfolds in a space that resists clear separation between imagination and material world. *Spirited Away* (2001) reconfigures this dynamic within more explicitly institutional settings, where agency takes the form of navigation through opaque systems of labour and transformation, requiring forms of adaptation that do not coincide with internalisation. In *Princess Mononoke* (1997), childhood is instead embedded in a wider ecological and political field in which conflicting forms of life intersect, and forms of agency take shape through situated positioning within irreducible tensions between human and non-human agencies.

Across these narratives, what is at stake is not opposition to authority but a reconfiguration of action itself: resistance appears as negotiation, partial refusal, and forms of attentiveness that operate through relational rather than confrontational logics. Childhood agency is thus displaced from the register of conflict toward more diffuse modalities of engagement, where perception, adaptation, and co-presence become central epistemic and ethical dimensions. It is noteworthy that, unlike many Western narratives that frame resistance through confrontation with explicit authority figures, Miyazaki's films decentre antagonistic structures altogether. Rather than opposing children to adult power, they dissolve rigid hierarchies into fluid systems in which agency emerges through interdependence and coexistence.

These narrative configurations do not remain confined to literature or cinema, but extend into broader contemporary media ecologies in which childhood is increasingly embedded, reflecting ongoing transformations in childhood cultures (Ødegaard & Spord Borgen, 2021). Recent childhood studies have therefore moved beyond canonical cultural representations to account for how agency is reshaped within hybrid assemblages of media platforms, material practices, and digital infrastructures (Kraftl, 2020). Instead of being located exclusively in narratives of resistance or obedience, childhood today is shaped within conditions where expression, visibility, and participation are simultaneously enabled and structured by technological and institutional logics, increasingly intensified through processes of datafication and algorithmic governance.

Within such contexts, children's actions are translated into metrics of performance, risk, and potential, and are not merely observed but actively structured through predictive systems that shape the conditions under which agency becomes legible. This signals not a rupture with earlier disciplinary formations, but their reconfiguration within computational environments, where governance operates increasingly through anticipation rather than correction (Biswas et al., 2024). Childhood thus emerges as a site in which political, pedagogical, and epistemic categories are continuously negotiated within infrastructures that are at once material, symbolic, and partially opaque to the subjects they govern.

Contemporary popular culture further extends and rearticulates these dynamics across genres and affective registers. In *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), for instance, resistance takes a more ironic and affective form. The family's journey toward a child beauty pageant exposes the violence of meritocratic and perfectionist ideals, transforming failure into a collective moment that can be read as refusal. Instead of celebrating success, the narrative questions normative expectations surrounding achievement, competitiveness, and social recognition. Olive's final performance becomes significant precisely because it refuses to conform to the evaluative criteria that structure the pageant itself. Rather than pursuing recognition through excellence or disciplined self-presentation, she transforms participation into an act of collective affirmation that unsettles dominant ideals of childhood achievement. Resistance thus emerges not through direct confrontation with institutional authority, but through the ironic displacement of the norms governing performance, success, and respectability. In this way, the film shows that children's agency is constituted not outside evaluative frameworks but through their reinterpretation, negotiation, and partial subversion.

Across these narratives, resistance rarely appears as spectacular confrontation or definitive rupture. It is articulated through minor practices – play, humour, secrecy, rule-bending, and imaginative reinterpretation – that unsettle adult regimes of authority from within. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's notion of »minor politics«, these micro-practices do not overturn structures of power but expose their internal tensions, limits, and points of instability (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Their significance lies in reaffirming children not as passive recipients of socialisation but as situated subjects endowed with desires, imaginaries, and capacities for world-making.

Importantly, these narratives do not merely depict resistance; they can also invite adult readers and spectators to reconsider pedagogical relations themselves, opening up the possibility of forms of listening, co-presence, and shared construction that are not separable from play, excess, and affective intensity. As Dahl writes, «never do anything by halves if you want to get away with it. Be outrageous. Go the whole hog» (Dahl, 1988, ch. 12).

Everyday Acts of Resistance: Play, Imagination, and Disobedience

Building on the cultural narratives discussed above, this section completes the article's second line of argument by shifting attention from symbolic representations to the ordinary practices through which children's agency is enacted in everyday life. If literature and popular culture reveal how relations of authority can be reimagined, children's everyday experiences show how they are continuously negotiated in practice. Play, imagination, selective disobedience, and forms of symbolic reappropriation are therefore understood not as exceptional forms of opposition, but as ordinary practices through which children reinterpret, inhabit, and occasionally transform adult-centred environments.

As Huizinga (1950) and Sutton-Smith (1997) have shown, play operates in tension with normative regimes of rationality and productivity. It constitutes a mode of world-recomposition in which relations between objects, roles, and meanings become reversible. Within play, material and symbolic elements are detached from their prescribed functions: objects are re-signified, spatial and temporal coordinates are reorganised, and rules are temporarily suspended or rewritten. Imagination, in this sense, is also a form of structural experimentation with the boundaries of the social order.

In institutional contexts such as schools, resistance often takes ordinary and less visible forms: distraction, silence, refusal to participate, parallel conversations, or the invention of alternative games within regulated time. Following de Certeau (1984), these practices can be understood as »tactics« through which subordinate subjects navigate and rework imposed »strategies« of control. These everyday acts of resistance take the form of micro-gestures – whispered exchanges, invented codes, playful subversions of rules – that do not constitute direct opposition but situated appropriations of institutional space.

The political relevance of these practices becomes clearer when placed in dialogue with pedagogical and developmental perspectives that have sought to reconfigure the adult-child relation. The Reggio Emilia approach, developed by Loris Malaguzzi, conceptualises children as active protagonists of meaning-making through the idea of the »hundred languages of children« (Malaguzzi, 1996). Expression is not reducible to verbal or cognitive performance but distributed across embodied, aesthetic, and relational modalities. Contemporary childhood studies further develop this shift by emphasising children as social and political actors whose practices can unsettle normative assumptions about learning, care, and authority (Biswas et al., 2024; Millei & Kallio, 2018). At the same time, empirical research in educational contexts continues to show how adult-centred logics persist in institutional practices, often limiting spontaneity, expression, and dissent (Florio, Caso & Castelli, 2020; 2022). In increasingly datafied and standardised environments, these tensions are further intensified as children's behaviours become subject to continuous monitoring and evaluation.

These perspectives reinforce the argument that children's agency is not external to institutional settings but enacted through their ongoing negotiation of institutional norms and expectations.

Within this field, Gianni Rodari's *Grammar of Fantasy* (1973) advances a complementary pedagogical insight: children's imaginative deviations are not obstacles to learning but constitutive of it. Similarly, the capabilities approach (Dixon & Nussbaum, 2012) reframes childhood beyond protection alone, emphasising the cultivation of expressive and relational capacities and the conditions for human flourishing. These perspectives converge in challenging models of childhood grounded in passivity, repositioning children as co-producers of meaning within educational and social contexts.

Simultaneously, everyday resistance complicates the tendency to interpret children's actions through pathological frameworks. As Burman (1994) has shown, the psychologisation of childhood often redefines refusal, disruption, or non-compliance as individual deficit, thereby obscuring the structural and relational conditions in which such behaviours emerge. In this framework, resistance is translated into dysfunction, while institutional expectations are naturalised as developmental norms. The political significance of children's actions is thereby reduced to individual pathology.

A complementary perspective is offered by Donald Winnicott, whose work allows these dynamics to be reframed at the level of psychic and relational experience. His concepts of the »true self« (1965) and of »transitional phenomena« (1958; 1971) foreground the role of play, spontaneity, and symbolic continuity as conditions for the integration of subjectivity. In this view, play is not merely expressive but constitutive, providing a space in which the child negotiates the boundary between inner experience and external reality without being fully subsumed by either. Central to this perspective is the notion of the »good-enough

environment« (1965), understood not as the absence of constraint, but as a relational setting that sustains exploration without rigidly predetermining its outcomes. Such an environment does not eliminate asymmetry, but prevents it from becoming intrusive or totalising, allowing external demands to be gradually appropriated and reworked rather than passively internalised.

From this standpoint, gestures such as withdrawal, refusal, or imaginative deviation can be understood not as failures of adaptation, but as attempts to preserve continuity of experience and subjective coherence. Resistance thus appears less as opposition to authority than as a situated mode of negotiating it. From a pedagogical perspective, this implies that educational environments should not aim to eliminate asymmetry or uncertainty, but to sustain conditions in which children can engage with external demands without being fully subsumed by them. Teaching, in this sense, involves an unavoidable exercise of power, yet one that remains open to being reinterpreted, negotiated, or even refused by the child.

Playful inversions, selective non-participation, and imaginative detours do not simply oppose authority but reveal its limits. They expose the fragility of adult-centred regimes of control and show that agency is always exercised within relations of constraint. These practices also invite a rethinking of the adult role as a relational stance oriented toward responsiveness and co-presence (Mullin, 2014). Childhood is thus understood not as a pre-political stage but as a field in which power, imagination, and subjectivity are continuously negotiated. In this sense, the literary and cultural narratives analysed in the previous section do not merely represent these practices; they help illuminate the forms through which children negotiate authority in everyday life. They point toward forms of attention, experimentation, and co-presence that educational practices might cultivate, not by replicating them directly, but by recognising their epistemic value.

Rather than romanticising the child as a figure of pure resistance, these practices point to a more complex configuration in which agency is situational, partial, and relationally produced. Childhood, in this sense, is not defined by opposition to power but by the multiple ways in which power is inhabited, reworked, and occasionally displaced in everyday life.

Conclusion

The historical genealogy reconstructed in this article has shown that the construction of childhood as an object of discipline, moral formation, and adult authority is not an incidental feature of modernity, but a constitutive element of its educational, political, and institutional imaginaries. Black Pedagogy crystallises these logics by revealing how practices of care, protection, and education have often operated through mechanisms of obedience, emotional regulation, and normative control. Yet the analysis has also shown that these processes never fully determine childhood. Across cultural narratives and everyday practices, children do not simply receive adult authority but engage with it through interpretation, negotiation, and creative reworking. Rather than romanticising the child as an inherently resistant subject, this article has argued that resistance is immanent to the very relations through which childhood is governed and formed.

This perspective calls for a rethinking of pedagogy, politics, and ethics beyond the opposition between authority and autonomy. As Gert Biesta argues, education inevitably involves forms of intervention whose meaning cannot be fully predetermined; the pedagogical challenge is

therefore not to eliminate asymmetry, but to inhabit it responsibly, allowing children to take up, reinterpret, or transform what is offered (Biesta, 2020). Likewise, taking seriously what Loris Malaguzzi called the »hundred languages of children« means recognising children's plural forms of expression as constitutive of educational practice instead of subordinate to adult-defined standards of productivity or compliance. Pedagogical and legal institutions should therefore create conditions in which participation accompanies protection and children's interpretations actively contribute to shaping educational processes.

These questions acquire renewed significance in contemporary educational landscapes increasingly shaped by datafication and algorithmic governance. As predictive technologies become embedded in schools, children's actions are translated into measurable indicators of performance, engagement, and risk, while educational trajectories are progressively organised through anticipatory forms of evaluation. Such developments do not replace earlier pedagogical logics; they transform them within computational environments where authority increasingly operates through prediction, optimisation, and continuous comparison.

The analysis developed here suggests that childhood should not be understood as existing beyond relations of authority, but as a relational field of political contestation in which authority itself remains constitutively incomplete. What ultimately connects Black Pedagogy, cultural narratives, children's everyday practices, and contemporary forms of algorithmic governance is not simply the persistence of pedagogical control, but the impossibility of fully governing the meanings that children produce from within these relations. It is precisely this constitutive incompleteness that makes childhood a privileged site for understanding how power, agency, and subject formation remain continuously open to reinterpretation, negotiation, and transformation.

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Biography

Carolina Tognon is a researcher in philosophy of law at the University of Bologna, where she received her PhD in Philosophy, Science, Cognition, and Semiotics (PSCS) and is also a teaching tutor in bioethics. Her research focuses on childhood, children's rights, educational violence, and the moral and political dimensions of adult authority. Drawing on the critical tradition of Black Pedagogy, she examines how practices of education, care, and protection shape children's agency within asymmetrical relations of power. Her broader interests include bioethics, vulnerability, relational autonomy, and the normative limits of authority over children.



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Når normen spænder ben for legen: Poetiske forskydninger og neurodivergent leg

Resumé

Denne artikel undersøger, hvordan neurodivergente børn (særligt børn med diagnoser inden for autisme og/eller ADHD) ofte ekskluderes fra legefællesskaber, fordi leg fortsat forstås ud fra normative og neurotypiske idealer. Med afsæt i crip teori (McRuer & Bérubé, 2006) og neuroqueering (Walker, 2021) udfordres de medicinske og udviklingspsykologiske blikke, der reducerer leg til symptomer eller udviklingsmål. Artiklen foreslår i stedet et poetisk og sanseligt perspektiv, hvor leg forstås gennem et stemningsperspektiv – en måde at være i og erkende verden på. Undersøgelsen bygger på to designbaserede feltarbejder: et empirisk og poetisk bearbejdningsstudie af neurodivergente børns leg, samt fortællinger fra voksne neurodivergente om deres barndoms legeminder. Gennem poetisk skrivning og analyse gives der plads til legens flygtige, rytmiske og ikke-lineære dimensioner, som ofte overses i pædagogiske og psykologiske rammer. Analysen viser, at de legepraksisser, der ofte misforstås eller undervurderes hos neurodivergente børn, ikke afspejler mangel, men derimod andre måder at engagere sig poetisk, sanseligt og materielt i legens orden på; praksisser som også findes bredt blandt børn, men sjældent fremhæves som legitime. Mest af alt viser analysen, at eksklusion i høj grad beror på forkertliggørelse udefra. Artiklen argumenterer for, at legebegrebet er for snævert, og at vi bør udvide vores forståelse af værdifulde udtryk for legens væsen. Afslutningsvis peger artiklen på et behov for at forskyde blikket på leg: ikke at spørge, om barnet lever op til legens normer, men hvordan legens normer kan udvides, så flere måder at være i verden på får plads.

Nøgleord: leg; neurodiversitet; special pædagogik; autisme; inklusion; crip

1. Introduktion

»Jeg legede altid at jeg maskerede mig, for verden, (helt bogstaveligt, forklædte mig) og så ville 'alle' synes jeg var helt fantastisk, og når de opdagede det 'bare var mig' ville alle, accepterer mig, og jeg behøvede ikke at føle mig så forkert«.
(Legeminde fra voksen AuDHD'er)

I legeforskningen er viden om neurodivergente børns leg forholdsvis ubeskrevet. Det får blandt andet den konsekvens, at neurodivergente børns leg ofte misforstås, ligesom, at forventninger til bestemte legeudtryk står i vejen for nye indsigter om leg (Burke & Cloughton, 2019; Calder et al., 2013; Hagen & Kalandadze, 2025; Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010a; Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010b; Morris et al., 2024). Selvom neurodivergente børn i store træk leger lige så forskelligt som andre børn, oplever mange at deres måder at engagere sig på, ikke nødvendigvis stemmer overens med normative forståelser af, hvordan leg »bør« se ud. Alt for ofte bliver leg udelukkende fortolket gennem udviklingsteoretiske rammer, som beror på en neurotypisk og normativ standardisering (Hagen & Kalandadze, 2025). Det kan skabe en hierarkisering, hvor visse legeformer vurderes som mere værdifulde end andre (Lillard et al., 2013). Dette resulterer i, at børn kategoriseres som »bagud« i deres legeudvikling og dermed forstås ud fra en deficit-orienteret optik.

Denne altovervejende udviklingspsykologiske forståelse, der også dominerer den pædagogiske praksisforståelse af leg, medfører, at børn, der er diagnosticeret med, eller identificerer sig som, autistiske, AuDHD eller ADHD, er blevet fejlagtigt karakteriseret som asociale, fantasiforladte eller ude af stand til at lege på en meningsfuld måde. Selvom der findes nyere forskning inden for udviklingspsykologien, så som Besio et al. (2017) *Play Development in Children with Disabilities*, der ønsker et opgør med instrumentalisering af leg blandt børn med funktionsvariation, og netop påpeger vigtigheden af at forstå leg som havende værdi i sig selv, sameksisterer denne anerkendelse ofte med en fortsat systematisering af leg i bestemte typer og i relation til udviklingsmæssige kompetencer. Legepraksisser der kommer til udtryk gennem eksempelvis »gentagelser«, »sensoriske orienteringer« og »objektfokuserede aktiviteter«, bliver stadig karakteriseret som »repetitive«, »begrænsede« eller som praksisser, der muligvis ikke opfylder kriterierne for leg. (Besio et al., 2017). Disse antagelser afslører, hvordan leg stadig struktureres og forstås gennem neurotypiske normer (Hagen & Kalandadze, 2025; Garland-Thomson, 2011; Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010a). Hvor en social model primært retter opmærksomheden mod adgang til leg og de barrierer, der begrænser denne adgang, anlægges der i denne artikel et crip-informeret perspektiv, hvor fokus i højere grad rettes mod selve genkendelsen af leg (McRuer & Bérubé, 2006; Walker, 2021). Det indebærer et opgør med forestillingen om, at leg kan defineres gennem faste kategorier eller udviklingsmæssige trin, og en åbning for at forstå leg som en poetisk, sanselig og situeret praksis, der ikke nødvendigvis lader sig indfange gennem etablerede begreber.

I pædagogisk praksis har dette væsentlige implikationer. Pædagoger designer og fortolker leg ud fra egne erfaringer og kulturelt forankrede forståelser af, hvad leg er og bør være. Dermed får de også magt til at definere, hvilke legeformer der anerkendes som værdifulde. På den måde bliver spørgsmålet ikke alene, hvordan børn får adgang til leg, men også hvordan bestemte praksisser overhovedet kommer til at fremstå som leg og hvilke former for leg der

risikerer at forblive underkendte, fordi de ikke passer ind i eksisterende forståelsesrammer. Der er derfor brug for, at vi skaber sprog for et bredt spektrum af legefertolkninger, og at den pædagogiske praksis går på opdagelse i legens mange udtryksformer.

Denne artikel er et bidrag til BUKS' special issue om *The Poetics and Politics of Child Cultures*, idet den undersøger, hvordan leg både formes af og forhandles gennem kulturelle, normative og materielle rammer. Artiklen taler dermed ind i en igangværende diskussion om inkluderende legepraksisser og de blikke, der regulerer, hvilke legeformer der anerkendes som legitime, herunder *Legende sociale læringsmiljøer* (Paldam et al, 2024) og *Deltagelsesmuligheder i kreativ leg* (Jensen et al, 2022). Hvor tidligere bidrag har fremhævet betydningen af didaktiske strukturer, der kan understøtte deltagelse, argumenterer denne artikel for et udvidet blik på legens poetiske og sanselige dimensioner. Med denne forståelse vil vi forskyde udviklingspsykologiske perspektiver på leg og insistere på mangfoldige legeudtryk.

Artiklen bygger på feltarbejde fra det igangværende PhD-projekt *Unmasking Play*, der er en del af Bevica Fondens *Leave no one behind*-dagsorden. Det empiriske materiale består af indsamlede legeminder fra neurodivergente voksne, autoetnografiske refleksioner og feltarbejde fra Drakonheart¹, med udgangspunkt i en tryllestavworkshop. I denne workshop lå der en indledende antagelse om, at børnene efter tryllestavworkshopen ville anvende tryllestavene i mere traditionelle legeformer som rollespil eller fælles fortællinger. Da sådanne aktiviteter opstod i mindre grad end forventet, blev forløbet i første omgang forstået som mindre succesfuldt. En efterfølgende og mere langvarig analyse viste dog, at legen var til stede – men i former, der var mindre synlige for et konventionelt legebegreb. Legen manifesterede sig som en opbyggende, rytmisk og materielt orienteret praksis. Denne iagttagelse rejser spørgsmålet om, hvordan leg kan forstås, når den ikke viser sig gennem de socialt genkendelige former, men gennem mere subtile, sanselige og rytmiske udtryk. På baggrund heraf arbejder artiklen med følgende forskningsspørgsmål:

Hvordan kan vi forstå neurodivergente børns leg som en poetisk og sanselig praksis, og hvordan udfordrer dette pædagogiske forståelser af, hvad leg og fællesskab er?

Bidraget: Artiklen giver et teoretisk og praksisnært bidrag til både legeforskning og den pædagogiske praksis ved at undersøge, hvordan neurodivergente børns leg kan udvide forståelsen af, hvad leg er, og hvordan fællesskab kan tage form. Gennem et poetisk og stemningsbaseret perspektiv viser artiklen, hvordan leg kan udfolde sig på mange forskellige måder, uden at disse former nødvendigvis kan knyttes til bestemte børnegrupper. Neurodivergens forstås her ikke som en kategori med én særlig legestil, men som en optik, der gør det muligt at få øje på legens mangfoldighed og de former for deltagelse, som ofte overses i både teori og praksis. Artiklen peger dermed på behovet for legeteoretiske og pædagogiske tilgange, der rummer legens poetiske og sanselige kompleksitet, og som anerkender, at børn leger på mange måder – også når legen ikke umiddelbart genkendes.

2. Teoretiske orienteringer – Stemningsperspektivet og normative forventninger

»Jeg husker en leg med min storesøster, hvor hver gang jeg trykkede på lyskontakten, kom jeg ind i et parallelt univers, hvor resten af min familie var, men jeg ikke var blevet født, og min søster lod som om hun aldrig havde set mig før«.
(Legeminde fra voksen autist)

Denne artikel tager udgangspunkt i stemningsperspektivet (Skovbjerg, 2021; Skovbjerg & Sand, 2022) for at kunne anlægge et kritisk blik på den medicinske forståelse af neurodivergens, hvor leg ofte reduceres til symptomer på afvigelse. Artiklen anerkender, at vi som samfund gradvist bevæger os mod en social model for forståelsen af handicap og forskellighed, men argumenterer for, at vi må tage endnu et skridt videre mod en *crip model* (McRuer & Bérubé, 2006, Walker, 2021), der ikke blot søger inklusion, men aktivt udfordrer og omskaber selve normalitetsbegrebet. Disse perspektiver muliggør et skifte fra at se neurodivergente legepraksisser som afvigende, til at betragte dem som et udtryk for mangfoldige måder at være, sanse og skabe på.

Stemningsperspektivet er et eksistentielt perspektiv på leg (Sutton-Smith, 2021; Schiller, 1996), der arbejder med en række teoretiske begreber om børns leg, udviklet gennem nærempiriske analyser (Skovbjerg, 2021). Eksistentielt i den forstand, at legen knytter sig til livet i bredeste betydning og dermed udgør en værensform, der ikke alene angår barndommen, men menneskelig tilstedeværelse generelt. I denne forståelse bliver leg en praksis, der forbinder mennesket med verden gennem sansning og gøren. Den er ikke rettet mod et bestemt mål, men mod en måde at være i verden på, hvor det kendte kan træde frem på nye måder, og hvor mening opstår i handlingen selv. Perspektivet har rod i Martin Heideggers forståelse af *det poetiske* (Heidegger 1971); en måde, hvorpå mennesket bor i verden gennem skabende og ikke-instrumentelle praksisser. Denne poetiske dimension i leg kan dermed forstås som en særlig måde at erfare og artikulere verden på. Ved at forstå stemningsperspektivet som en poetisk praksis opstår et teoretisk blik, der ser leg som både eksistentiel og æstetisk praksis; et sted, hvor mennesket gennem krop, materiale og stemning skaber midlertidig orden i verden.

I artiklen anvendes særligt tre begreber fra stemningsperspektivet: *legeorden*, *legemedie* og *legepraksis* (Skovbjerg, 2021; Skovbjerg & Sand, 2022).

- *Legeorden* betegner den logik, der organiserer en leg, og som samtidig formes af det, der sker i legen. En dukkeleg kan eksempelvis være styret af omsorgshandlinger som at vugge, klæde på og putte, mens trampolinlegen har en helt anden logik, præget af hop, kollisioner og uforudsigelighed.
- *Legemedie* henviser til de materialer, børnene engagerer sig med i legens orden. Det kan være fysiske objekter som dukker, sten og legoklodser, men også immaterielle elementer som fortællinger, tv-sange eller et bandeord. Legemedierne udgør både legens *råstof* (Mouritsen, 1996) og dens drivkraft – de bevæger legen steder hen, man ikke kan forudsige.
- *Legepraksis* betegner de konkrete handlinger, der udføres, når børn interagerer med legemedier inden for en bestemt logik. I Barbielegen kan det være at klæde dukken på, sende hende i byen eller bygge et hus til hende – handlinger, der både definerer og formes af legeordnens logik.

Dynamikken mellem legeorden, legemedier og legepraksis peger på, at leg altid er i bevægelse (Skovbjerg et al., 2025), hvilket indebærer, at legens form og retning ikke kan fastlægges på forhånd, men altid er situeret i det relationelle. Når leg kobles til udviklingsperspektiver og faste kategoriseringer, etableres der samtidig implicite forestillinger om, hvad der tæller som »rigtig« leg. Som det fremhæves inden for crip teori og critical disability studies, er sådanne forestillinger tæt forbundet med normative forståelser af krop, tempo og deltagelse (Garland-Thomson, 2011; Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2010a; 2010b; Hagen & Kalandadze, 2025), hvilket medfører, at visse måder at lege på ikke blot risikerer at blive marginaliseret, men også at forblive uerkendte som leg.

Set i dette lys kan stemningsperspektivet og den poetiske tilgang forstås som måder at åbne for det endnu-ikke-genkendte og samtidig fastholde legens bevægelighed og sanselige karakter uden at reducere den til på forhånd definerede kategorier. Her bliver leg ikke blot en social praksis, men en poetisk og eksistentiel væren, hvor forskellighed ikke fremstår som afvigelse, men som en del af legens egen orden.

3. Metode: leg som poetisk og politisk praksis

»Husker bedst leg ude. Græs under bare fødder. Hånd hen af murstensvæg.

Røre træ. Sol. Lys. Luft«.

(Legeminde fra selvdiagnosticeret voksen)

Artiklen bygger på et performativt forskningsdesign og anvender metodologier fra Design- og Art-based Research (Barrett & Bolt, 2007; Frayling, 1993; Haseman, 2006; Østern et al., 2023), hvor viden opstår gennem praksis og sansning. Forskeren er derfor aldrig en neutral observatør, men en del af det fænomen, der undersøges.

Feltarbejdet er udført i regi af PhD-projektet *Unmasking Play* og omfatter tre typer materiale: (1) indsamlede legeminder fra neurodivergente voksne, (2) deltagerobservationer fra en tryllestavworkshop i Drakonheart-regi, hvor 14 børn i alderen 10-13 designede og skabte deres egne tryllestave, belyst gennem (3) autoetnografiske refleksioner bestående af vignetter (Faulkner, 2020; Holman Jones, 2016) og tegninger (Balmer, 2021; Fredriksson 2023; Taussig 2011).

Analysen af materialet er inspireret af en poetisk tilgang (Haraway, 2016; Heidegger, 1971), der ikke søger at kategorisere eller klassificere praksisser, men at fastholde deres sanselige og stemningsmæssige kvaliteter. En sådan tilgang kan ses i forlængelse af kvalitativ forskning, hvor skrivning og analyse forstås som praksisser, der åbner for erfaringens ikke-reducerbare karakter (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2018; Stewart, 2007). Den poetiske tilgang fungerer her som en analytisk strategi, der gør det muligt at få øje på det, der ellers risikerer at fremstå som uden retning, og som i stedet kan forstås som meningsfulde og relationelle processer.

For at konkretisere denne tilgang anvendes netop stemningsperspektiv (Skovbjerg, 2021) som analytisk greb – hvorved analysen er struktureret omkring Skovbjergs tre begreber: legeorden, legemedie og legepraksis (Skovbjerg, 2021; Skovbjerg & Sand, 2022). Begreberne fungerer som analytiske optiker, der gør det muligt at undersøge, hvordan leg organiseres (legeorden), hvordan materialer indgår og bevæger legen (legemedier), og hvordan de legende handler og responderer i situationen (legepraksis). Gennem disse begreber bliver det

muligt at se, hvordan legen hele tiden bevæger sig i mødet mellem mennesker, materialer og stemninger.

Ved at rette opmærksomheden mod de intensiteter og stemninger, der opstår, bliver det muligt at analysere leg som noget, der udfolder sig i relationer og er meningsfulde i sig selv, frem for noget, der kan vurderes ud fra bestemte kriterier eller kompetencer. Det poetiske greb skal derfor forstås som en både undersøgende sensibilitet og en æstetisk form. At arbejde poetisk indebærer at dvæle ved det, der sker (Haraway, 2016), at være opmærksom på stemninger og bevægelser i materialet (Skovbjerg & Sumartojo, 2023); at lade forskerkroppen blive et redskab for at mærke, snarere end forklare. En poetiske metode gør det muligt at forholde sig åbent til det uforudsigelige, og til det som måske netop ikke viser sig som »leg« i klassisk forstand. I stedet for at reducere empiri til data, bliver analysen en dialog mellem krop, tekst og materiale – en koreografi af tænkning.

3.1 Metodologiske refleksioner

I en indledende fase blev materialet forsøgt organiseret gennem mere traditionelle analytiske greb, herunder kategorisering og opdeling i temaer. Denne tilgang viste sig imidlertid at reproducere de samme udviklings- og kategoriseringslogikker, som artiklen søger at udfordre. Som alternativ blev materialet i stedet arbejdet med som et formgivende og undersøgende materiale gennem vignetter, tegninger og visuelle udfoldelser. I denne proces er materialet bevidst fastholdt i en rå form, hvor sproglige ujævnheder og stavfejl ikke korrigeres, men indgår som en del af materialets tilblivelse. Dette muliggør en fastholdelse af det situerede og sanselige, frem for en efterfølgende sproglig »oprydning«, der risikerer at udviske dets kompleksitet. Tilsammen muliggjorde dette en åbning af materialet, hvor fokus blev på, hvordan situationerne kunne foldes ud snarere end fastlægges. På denne baggrund blev materialet efterfølgende læst gennem et stemningsperspektiv, ikke som en fast kategorisering, men som en måde at skabe analytisk sammenhæng og formidling, samtidig med at materialets kompleksitet blev bevaret.

4. Analyse – At opdage det, som hele tiden var der.

Nedenfor udfoldes tre analytiske spor: 1) *At være i legens orden – men ikke at lege*, handler om at se ud som om man leger, men ikke at være i legestemning. 2) *At være i legens orden – men på den forkerte måde*, handler om at være involveret i legens orden, men blive mødt som ikke legende. Og 3) *At være på kanten af legen orden – men faktisk at lege* tematisere børnenes oplevelser af at være dybt involveret i leg, også selv om det foregår på kanten.

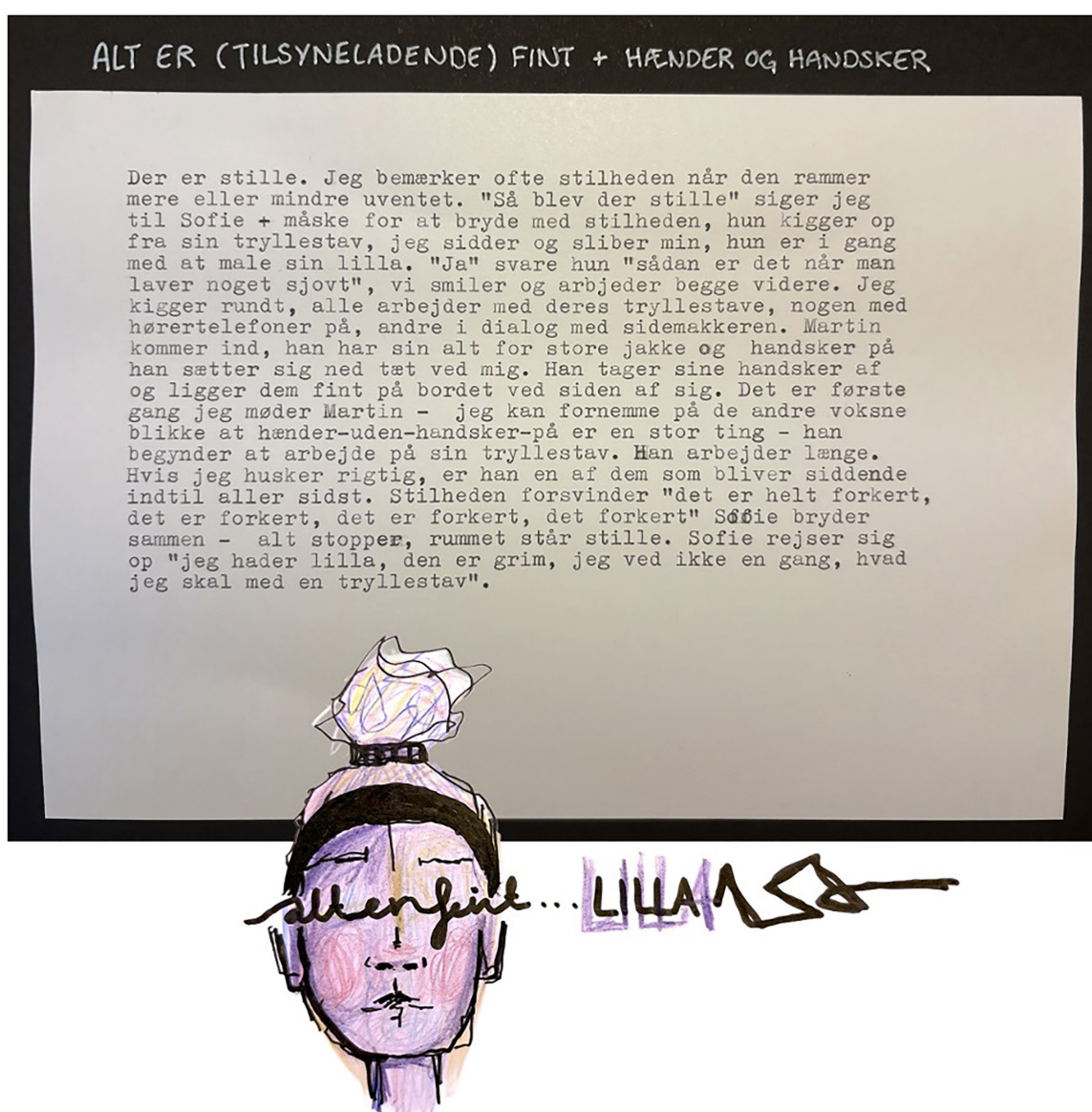
4.1 Spor I: At være i legens orden – men ikke lege

Legeminder:

»Jeg efterlignede meget andres lege i skolen, og legede det som de andre ville lege. Hjemme kunne jeg være mere mig selv og lege, som jeg havde lyst, men hvis mine forældre kom ind på mit værelse, kunne jeg godt blive flov/pinlig over min leg og stoppe«.

»Jeg følte mig ikke ekskluderet, fordi jeg tilpassede mig, men jeg følte mig ikke godt tilpas. Ville hellere snakke med pædagogerne end lege med de andre børn«.

Vignette fra Drakonheart:



Nøglebegreber: maskering; stille sammenbrud; en orden der ikke giver plads

I dette første spor åbner materialet for en særlig type leg og deltagelse, hvor barnet tilsyneladende befinder sig midt i legens orden, men uden at opleve at være forbundet til dens stemning. Legens orden fremstår i disse eksempler både som en kraft, der organiserer og begrænser. I legeminderne fremgår det, hvordan de som børn lærte at følge denne orden uden faktisk at opleve at have adgang til legen selv. De imiterede legepraksisserne så godt, at ingen kunne se, at noget manglede – det som vi også kalder for maskering. Kroppen gjorde det rigtige, stemmen sagde det rigtige, men legen oplevede de ikke. Her peger legepraksis på selve denne imitation: de korrekte fraser, de velkendte mønstre, den sociale koreografi, som udføres. Legen bliver til en serie af handlinger, som barnet gentager for at undgå at falde udenfor. Legemedierne er ligeledes til stede, men ikke som motor for leg; de er snarere redskaber for at maskere fraværet af leg. Barbiedukken, gyngen, tuschen, klodsen – alt med for at holde facaden.

I vignetten fra workshoppen ser vi et bristepunkt. Sofie sidder med sin lilla tryllestav, omgivet af et rum, der er fyldt med kreativitet og fordybelse. Alt synes roligt, næsten harmonisk – »sådan er det, når man laver noget sjovt« parafraserer hun, men farven lilla bliver pludselig en udløser, en destabilisering i hendes opretholdte deltagelse: »det er forkert, det er forkert«. I det øjeblik afsløres maskeringen. Det der skulle være en leg, bliver i stedet til et pres for at passe ind, for at gøre det rigtige. Den forestilling hun havde om hvad der var rigtig og forkert, bliver der pludselig sået tvivl ved, og legen bliver usikker for hende og bliver noget, hun må flygte fra.

Samlet viser de to empiriske eksempler os, at maskering kan få børn til at fremstå deltagende i legens orden, selv når de reelt står uden for dens stemning, men eksemplerne viser samtidig, vigtigheden ved at have *micro-interaktion* (Wilson et al. 2019) for øje. I Martins tilfælde ser vi dette i det næsten ubemærkeligt øjeblik, hvor han tager handskerne af; et lille kropsligt tegn på, at rummet er sikkert nok til, at han kan være til stede uden »beskyttelse«. Hos Sofie ser vi det modsatte udtryk: hendes sammenbrud kunne umiddelbart tolkes som tegn på utryghed, men viser sig i stedet at være den første ægte reaktion, der bryder igennem den maske, hun nok længe har holdt. Det er først da rummet bliver tilstrækkelig trygt, at hun kan give slip, blive grebet og til sidst i workshoppen ender hun faktisk med at skabe en tryllestav, der afviger markant fra de andres og som hun er glad ved.

Spor II: At være i legens orden – men på den forkerte måde

Legeminder:

»Ja, en stor del af legene for mig var opstilling/opbygning af universer. Og legen sluttede lidt for mig når det praktiske var gjort. Og fx var blomster fine damer og ikke blomster. Hvor fx veninder brugte blomsterne aktivt i legen, som blomster der fx blev sat i håret eller lavet til buket«.

»Husker at det var klargøringen til leg jeg var mest interesseret i. »Så nu siger vi at jeg bor her og du bor der«. Det var det med at finde den Barbie man ville være og hendes tøj, 'bygge' hendes hus. Når mine veninder så begyndte på: »og så kom jeg og besøgte dig... Hej« så stoppede jeg tit legen og gik, det sagde mig intet«.

Vignette fra Drakonheart:

PORTALER TIL EN VERDEN, HVOR KONGER MODTAGER TRYLLESTAVE
FRA EN MAGISK SKOV.

"Min tryllestav skal være grøn" siger Benjamin. "Kan du hjælpe mig med at tegne et ræve- og hjorteansigt? Jeg elsker naturen, ved du" Og ja, Benjamins tryllestav - og alt andet han laver - bærer et strejf af grønt, en fornemmelse af naturen og ånden fra en bordeauxrød ræv. Da hans tryllestav er færdig, stikker han den i lommen og begynder at fortælle mig en historie om en konge, som engang modtog en tryllestav fra skoven. Han går videre med tryllestaven, stadi i lommen, nu bærende den med sig overalt hvor han går ~~hen~~. Senere samme dag, leger nogle af børnene, at en konge skal krones. Benjamin spørger mig, om jeg kan tegne et kongeportræt. "hver en konge har et" siger han overbevist, som om portrættet var lige så nødvendigt for kongeriget som kronen selv. Så går han afsted, med portræt og tryllestav, klar til at blive konge, bærende med sig portaler til en verden, hvor en konge en gang modtog en tryllestav fra en magisk skov.

3 måneder senere ... Klokkerne fra det gamle kloster ringer. Jeg ser for mig, hvordan drageungerne stå spændte på den anden side af de tunge trædøre og gør sig klar til at træde ind. Dørene åbnes, og vi klapper. De kommer ind, smilende, med deres kufferter i hænderne. Benjamin har en troldmands kappe på. Da de stiller sig op på række for at aflevere deres telefoner, fanger Benjamin Frederiks blik. Næsten som om de deler en hemmelighed, trækker han forsigtigt kappen til side og afslører tryllestaven, der stikker op af lommen. "rederiks ansigt lyser op. Han løfter hånden - uden at bevæge armen - og lige så tydeligt viser han, at han også har taget sin tryllestav med.



Nøglebegreber: usynlige logikker; stille verdensbygning; leg der unddrager sig normen.

I dette spor møder vi praksisser, der bevæger sig indenfor legens orden, men som overskrider dens tilsyneladende normer. Børnene er i leg men deres leg bliver ikke genkendt og forstået som leg af omgivelserne. De leger »forkert«, ikke fordi deres engagement mangler, men fordi deres legeorden følger en anden logik.

I legeminderne ser vi hvordan legen ofte handlede om at skabe struktur: at bygge Barbiernes huse, at udvælge tøj, at arrangere figurerne som en form for æstetisk orden. Her er legemediet selve drivkraften: materialerne kalder på organisering, sortering og verdensopbygning. Men den normative legeorden forstår dette som forberedelse til »den rigtige leg«, der først starter, når rollelegen begynder. Når barnet ikke følger med over i rollespillet, tolkes det som tilbagetrækning, umodenhed eller usikkerhed. Det, der i virkeligheden var intens og meningsfuld leg for det deltagende barn, aflæses som fravær af leg.

Denne fortolkning af praksis møder vi også hos Benjamin i workshoppen. Tryllestaven bliver ikke et redskab for det dramatisk rollespil, men et anker for en indre fortælling. Han bærer den i lommen som en stille portal til en verden, kun han bevæger sig i. Hans legepraksis er ikke performativ; den er cirkulær, langstrakt, intim. Han bygger videre på sin fortælling om tryllestaven og den bagudliggende historie, og det er selve denne verdensopbygning som vi kan sige er det meningsfulde for ham. Tryllestaven bliver for Benjamin en portal til noget større, og den bærer på mere end en praksis affordance – men bliver et symbol på et fællesskab, som ses gennem en fælles materiale-forbundethed da Frederik og Benjamin deler et øjeblik.

Samlet set viser de to eksempler os konsekvensen af hurtige fortolkninger af leg, forudindtagelser om legens udkomme samt, hvordan sådanne forventninger kan gøre os blinde for de legepraksisser, der faktisk udfolder sig. I tryllestavworkshoppen lå der implicit en forventning om, at tryllestavene ville blive brugt i synligt rollespil. Da dette ikke skete, fremstod forløbet først som mindre succesfuldt. Men set i lyset af både børnenes praksisser og de voksnes legeminder bliver det tydeligt, at legen ofte finder sted i selve opbygningen: i at ordne, designe, strukturere og skabe verdener. Mange voksne beskriver netop, hvordan denne form for leg blev misforstået som 'klargøring' og ikke anerkendt som rigtig leg. Det samme mønster ses hos Benjamin. Hans leg udfolder sig ikke gennem dramatisk brug af tryllestaven, men gennem den stille verdensbygning, der opstår omkring den – legen bevæger sig på mange måder bagud i tiden og rundt om lege-mediet. Eksemplerne viser dermed, hvordan normative forventninger til leg kan medføre, at både faglærte og forskere overser netop de legepraksisser, hvor børn er dybest forankrede.

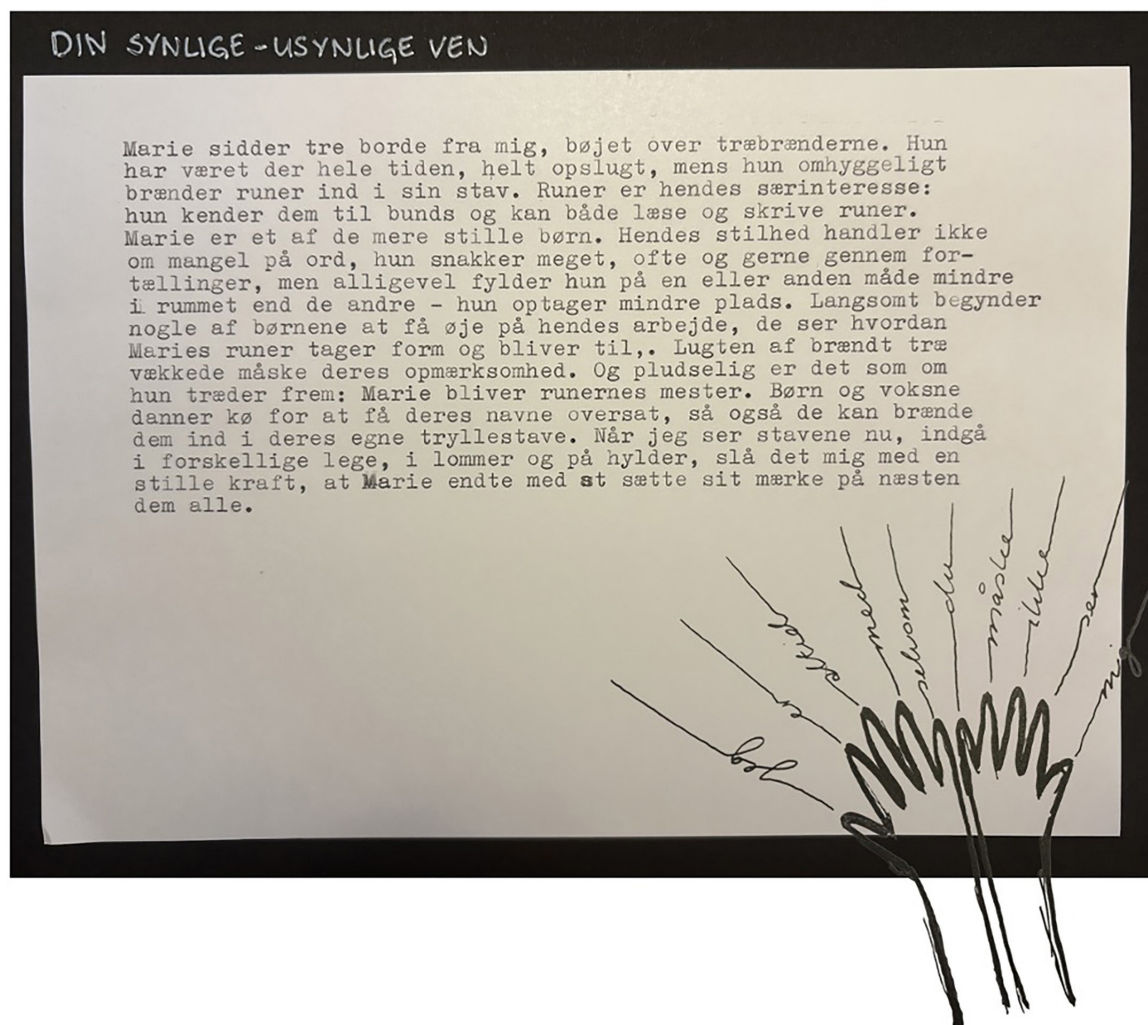
Spor III: At være på kanten af legens orden – men faktisk lege.

Legeminder:

»En følelse af ro og sammenføring, især med min søster, selvom vi oftest lavede hvert sit krea-projekt«.

»Jeg legede helst alene eller med én anden. Og gerne hver sin leg men i selskab med hinanden. Gør det stadig som voksen. En form for at være socialt asocial«.

Vignette fra Drakonheart:



Nøglebegreber: parallelleg; intensitet; og materielle fællesskaber

I dette spor udfolder legen sig i periferien og i det usynlige, her bevæger børnene sig i en fuldt levede legepraksis – blot en der ikke er orienteret mod synlig interaktion. Set gennem et traditionelt udviklingspsykologisk blik kan disse legeformer fremstå som sociale fravalg eller utilstrækkelig deltagelse (Calder et al., 2013, Hagen & Kalandadze, 2025; Lillard et al., 2013).

Legeminderne beskriver parallelleg som en måde at være sammen uden at dele narrativ: »en form for at være socialt asocial«. Dette viser, at legeordenen her ikke handler om fælles entydig praksis, men om fælles rum. Ordenen ligger i nærværet, ikke i fortællingen. Barnet skaber sin egen rytme, sin egen historie, mens det samtidig ankres i fællesskabets atmosfære.

Maries vignet fra workshopen gør dette helt konkret. Hun sidder på en af de yderste pladser, omgivet af duften af brændt træ. Runerne er hendes legemedie: de bærer hendes særinteresse, hendes viden, hendes poetiske blik på verden. Hendes legepraksis er rolig, gentagende, næsten meditativ. Hun er på kanten af den sociale aktivitet, men fuldt ud inde i legen – mange udefra vil måske i denne situation beskrive hende som værende helt væk i sin

egen verden. Det er først da andre børn får øje på runerne, at hendes leg får social synlighed. De samles omkring hende, ikke fordi hun søger dem, men fordi hendes materialer drager dem til sig. På denne måde bliver legens sociale dimension ikke til gennem rollefordeling, men gennem æstetisk tiltrækning. På samme måde som hos Benjamin opstår der materialeforbundethed mellem Marie og de andre børn, et fællesskab som ikke nødvendigvis er synligt udefra.

Samlet set viser de to eksempler os, at de fællesskaber, børn skaber gennem leg, kan tage form på mange måder, også på måder der ikke falder indenfor det normative ideal om et synligt, verbalt og koordineret fællesskab. Legeminderne beskriver dette med stor klarhed: en følelse af ro i et fællesskab, hvor man sidder side om side med hvert sit projekt; eller ønsket om at lege alene eller med én anden, i hver sin leg, men stadig i selskab. Disse beskrivelser vidner om fællesskaber, der ikke bygger på fælles narrativer, men på delt tilstedeværelse. Det samme ser vi hos Marie, hvis fordybelse i runerne skaber et stille, materielt fællesskab omkring hende, uden at hun aktivt opsøger det. Fællesskabet opstår gennem nærvær og atmosfære. Eksemplerne tydeliggør, at når vi fastholder en forventning om et synligt, koordineret fællesskab, risikerer vi at gøre disse mere subtile, parallelle fællesskaber usynlige og negligerede.

5. Diskussion – Når det poetiske bliver politisk

»Jeg husker en hule jeg havde, hvor jeg boede i. Jeg havde min lyserøde forårsjakke på i blødt bomuldscanvas med en lynlås der føltes tung så jakken rigtig kunne være tunge vinger når jeg øvede mig i at brede den ud og flyve. Jeg legede jeg brugte tryllestav til at få magien med. Jeg husker rigtig mange naturhule-lege. Og det føles så trygt og rart at tænke på dem«. (Legeminder fra voksen AuDHD'er)

Analysen, på tværs af de tre spor og øvrigt legeminder, peger på en gennemgående pointe: at selv legeformer der afviger marginalt fra det normative blik er i risiko for at blive kategoriseret som forkert leg eller i værste fald ikke-leg. Disse små afvigelser, som at trække sig, at dvæle ved et materiale, at lege i rytmer frem for roller, at deltage uden at markere deltagelse, er hverken usædvanlige eller patologiske i sig selv. Alligevel oplever børnene sig mødt som forkerte, hvilket er særligt bekymrende, fordi det antyder, at selv meget små afvigelser fra en normativ legeforståelse kan fremkalde mislæsningsprocesser, hvor børn placeres udenfor legens orden, selv når de faktisk leger og oplever sig som en del af legens orden. Børnene fremstår kun som problematiske, fordi de ikke passer ind i de gængse forventninger til legens orden og progression. Her viser det poetiske sig i de immersive legepraksisser, mens det politiske træder frem i de regulerende blikke, der bestemmer, hvilke former for leg der anerkendes, og hvilke der kategoriseres som mangel. Dette er derfor ikke blot et pædagogisk problem, men et politisk og legeforskningsproblem, der peger tilbage på introduktionens centrale pointe: at leg vurderes gennem normer, der privilegerer synlig socialitet, verbal koordination og synlig fantasi. Når leg ikke ligner disse idealer, risikerer den at blive usynliggjort eller fejlfortolket, selv når den faktisk udfolder sig som meningsfulde engagementer.

Denne pointe skaber et tydeligt ekko af både Calder et al. (2013), Lillard et al. (2013) og Paldam et al. (2024), der alle på forskellig vis viser, hvordan voksne overser børns

kommunikative handlinger, fordi de leder efter andre tegn end dem, børnene faktisk bruger. Også i vores materiale opstår misforståelserne ikke som fravær af leg, men som fravær af genkendelse, selvom barnet i realiteten er dybt engageret i en poetisk, materiel og meningsfuld legepraksis. Det dobbelte empati-problem (Milton, 2012; Paldam et al., 2024) bliver synligt her: misforståelsen er gensidig, men konsekvensen asymmetrisk, det er barnet, der kommer til at fremstå som ikke-deltagende. Ligeledes kunne der diskuteres om vi i virkeligheden står over for et 2-dobbeltempati-problem i dét, at mødet allerede er ulige i kræft af barn-voksen-konstellationen. Det er centralt at fastholde, at børnene i vores materiale ikke står udenfor legens fællesskab; de står udenfor en bestemt forståelse af, hvad leg er. Deres praksisser, som at lade hænderne vandre over en murstensvæg, bevæge sig ind og ud og af den sociale sfære, snurre rundt er en poetisk praksis, der ikke nødvendigvis lader sig aflæse udefra.

Trods dette ekko adskiller vores tilgang sig her fra Paldam et al's (2024). Selvom vi deler dens opmærksomhed på misforståelser i mødet mellem forskellige socialiteter, er vores ambition ikke at gøre den »rigtige« socialitet synlig eller at udvikle modeller, der kan indfange, fremkalde eller oversætte denne. Hvor andre tilgange ofte søger at støtte deltagelse gennem strukturerede refleksions- og kommunikationsgreb, viser vores analyse, at leg ikke nødvendigvis bliver mere rigtig eller mere fælles ved at blive gjort genkendelig for det normative blik. Tværtimod risikerer sådanne greb at overse de måder, hvorpå børn allerede er i dialog, gennem sideblikke, parallelle rytmer eller en materielt forankret legepraksis, som ikke har behov for verbal koordinering for at være fælles.

Der ligger således en vigtig forskel i ambitionen. Det handler ikke om at afvise, at strukturer kan være hjælpsomme og bygge bro mellem forskelligheder, men om at synliggøre, hvordan strukturer uundgåeligt medproducerer forestillinger om, hvad der er legitim deltagelse og leg. De tre spor viser, at selv meget små forskydninger, som at være »i orden, men ikke med«, at lege »forkert«, at være »på kanten«, kan blive tolket som tegn på utilstrækkelighed. Det er ikke børnene, der skaber afvigelsen; det er en normativ og rigid forståelse af legeordenen, der skaber afvigelsespositionerne.

Dette leder til spørgsmålet om, hvorvidt vi risikerer at skabe en ny norm: »det neurodivergente barn, der elsker detaljer, rytmer og solovandringer«. Her er det vigtigt at slå fast at neurodivergente børn leger lige så forskellige som alle andre børn og at legepraksisserne fra analysen ikke nødvendigvis er særlige for én gruppe af børn. De ses hos mange, men bliver først kategoriseret som anderledes, når barnet i forvejen er udpeget som afvigende eller når barnet kontinuerligt skubber til vores forståelser af fællesskaber og leg. Faren er derfor ikke, at vi essentialiserer neurodivergent leg, men at vi ikke tager højde for, at alle børn bevæger sig mellem forskellige måder og har forskellige udtryk for at være i og virke på legens orden. Problemet ligger ikke i børnenes leg, men i det filter, der kategoriserer nogle udtryk som naturlige variationer og andre som tegn på manglende kompetencer.

Vi ønsker derfor ikke at udpege nogle praksisser som værende særligt neurodivergente, men derimod at pege på, hvordan visse praksisser bliver gjort forkerte. Børn der ikke passer ind i en normativ legeforståelse, er i høj risiko for at opleve strukturel eksklusion i det, at en normativ forståelse styrer både, hvilke legemedier de voksne tilbyder, hvilke børn der får lov at dvæle, og hvilke børn der guides væk fra de legeformer, de faktisk finder glæde i. Når en tryllestav ikke bruges »rigtigt«, fjernes den ofte; selvom den i barnets hænder måske indgår i en sanselig, rytmisk og meningsfuld relation, der netop er legens poesi. I den forstand vender

diskussionen tilbage til artiklens indledning: måske manglede legen aldrig – måske manglede vi blot et blik, der kunne se den.

6. Konklusion

Artiklen har undersøgt, hvordan aspekter af neurodivergente børns leg kan forstås som en poetisk og sanselig praksis, og hvordan dette perspektiv udfordrer pædagogiske forståelser af leg og fællesskab. Analysen viser, at de praksisser, der ofte fremstår som atypiske eller »mangelfulde«, i stedet kan forstås som rytmiske, materielt orienterede og stemningsskabende måder at være i legen på. Disse poetiske udtryk bliver imidlertid let overset, når leg vurderes ud fra normative kriterier, der vægter udviklingsorienterede legeformer.

Gennem kombinationen af stemningsperspektivet og cripteori tydeliggør artiklen, at misforståelserne ikke skyldes fravær af leg hos barnet, men fravær af genkendelse i de rammer, som voksne og institutioner fortolker leg igennem. Dermed udfordrer materialet normative antagelser om leg og peger i stedet mod, at fællesskab også kan tage form på måder, der ikke nødvendigvis er synlige for det normative blik, men som rummer både mening og samspil.

Artiklens bidrag er således dobbelt: Den udvider forståelsen af, hvad poetisk leg kan være, ved at fremhæve de sanselige og subtile dimensioner af neurodivergente børns legepraksisser; og den udfordrer de pædagogiske strukturer, der bestemmer, hvilke former for leg og deltagelse der anerkendes. Dette indebærer også at anerkende, at fællesskaber kan se ud på mange måder, og at deltagelse ikke nødvendigvis kræver fælles narrativ og synkron handling. At tage disse poetiske praksisser alvorligt åbner for en inkluderende forståelse af både leg og fællesskab; én, der ikke spørger, om barnet lever op til legens normer, men hvordan legens normer kan udvides, så flere måder at være i verden på får plads.

»På mit fritidshjem brugte jeg 3 måneder eller sådan noget på at samle sten i forskellige former for at bygge en troldmand, og skabe en historie om troldmanden der var blevet forstenet og så var blevet ødelagt i 100 stykker. Jeg skulle samle ham igen så han kunne komme tilbage til de levendes verden«. (Legeminder fra voksen AuDHD'er)

Noter

1. Drakonheart er et filantropisk projekt på Sostrup Slot, skabt i samarbejde mellem Thomas Kirk Kristiansen og Jim Lyngvild, med fokus på at tilgå undervisning og fællesskaber på en ny måde ved at skabe camps og lignende tilbud. Drakonheart beskriver sig selv som »et magisk læringsfællesskab for alle børn« (<https://drakonheart.com>), et eksperimenterende læringsunivers for børn med fokus på fantasi, skaberkraft, æstetiske læringsprocesser og kreative fællesskaber. Workshopforløbet beskrevet i denne artikel, er en del af Drakonhearts Draystone Academy 2024-2025. Et forløb, fordelt over 4 weekender på et år. De 18 børn som oprindeligt deltog i forløbet, var alle mellem 10-13 år og beskrives som *kreative børn med krøllede hjerner og særlige evner for en ny verden* og som børn der ikke altid passer ind i folkeskolens rammer.

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Biografier

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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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Peter Kostenniemi

Negative Agency in Children's Picture Books. Non-Empowering and Ethically Dubious Agency

Abstract

Child agency has emerged as a key concept within both child studies and children's literature research. In the latter, agency is commonly regarded as something inherently positive. This article zooms in on the other side of the spectrum to explore negative agency in two picturebooks: Dorthe Karrebæk's *Pigen der var go' til mange ting* (1996) and Anders Sparring's and Per Gustavsson's *Vi är pirater* (2024). Karrebæk's picturebook invokes notions of the competent child, but agency emerges as burdensome and solitary; Sparring's and Gustavsson's picturebook portrays child agency as ethically dubious and as undermining any clear moral message. The article concludes with a discussion of the potential impact of negative agency in children's literature and beyond.



Keywords: child agency; negative agency; children's literature; picturebooks; child studies

To address, or at least acknowledge, the concept of agency has become almost ubiquitous within child studies. The often-cited first chapter of *Constructing and Re-Constructing Childhood. Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood* (1990) outlines some key features in what has come to be known as the »new« sociology of childhood with emphasis on children as active agents and participants rather than as »passive subjects of social structures and processes« (James & Prout, 2015, p. 7; see further Qvortrup 1994). In *Theorizing Childhood* (1998), the importance of seeing the child as a being rather than a becoming is stressed. Later, David Oswell suggests children are specifically »doings« and therefore he characterizes the period from the previous century onwards as the »age of children's agency« (Oswell, 2013, p. 3). Nevertheless, a broader theoretical discussion about child agency remains in demand (Punch, 2016; Tisdall & Punch, 2012) and this article contributes to such discussions by approaching child agency as represented in children's literature, specifically the picturebooks *Pigen der var go' til mange ting* (1996), by Dorte Karrebæk, and *Vi är Pirater* (2024) by Anders Sparring and Per Gustavsson. Sharing the conviction that children's literature is part of the discursive construction of childhood (Hunt 2009) the aim is to explore how agency is portrayed in these picturebooks and how this can spur further discussion of the concept of child agency.

Much as in child studies, agency has emerged as a key concept in children's literature research (Castro, ed., 2021; Castro & Clark, eds., 2019; Christensen, 2025; Coste, 2025; Kostenniemi 2017). Yet, there is little agreement on what constitutes agency. A basic dictionary definition is that it is the »[a]bility or capacity to act or exert power« (Oxford University Press) and Allison James and Adrian James define agency as »the capacity of individuals to act independently« (James & James, 2012, p. 3). Allison James further emphasizes the capacity of agency to influence not only the individual's own life but societal structure as well (James, 2011, p. 41). When explored in children's literature and culture, child agency tends to be regarded as something essentially good (Buckingham, 2019; Castro, 2021) and as a potentially subversive force for societal change (Kelen & Sundmark, eds., 2017; Nikolajeva, 2009). Yet agency is neither necessarily »good« (Punch, 2016, p. 185), nor does it hold any intrinsic ethical value (Gallagher, 2019), and the notion that agency liberates children from structural constraints »sometimes verge[s] on romanticising children's actions, making it more difficult to see how agency is ethically ambivalent« (Gallagher, 2019, p. 191). Drawing on a relational approach to agency from child studies (Gallagher 2019; Raithelhuber 2016; Spyrou 2019) and children's literature research (Christensen 2025; Coste 2025) this article further scrutinizes the meaning and impact of agency in children's literature. This article addresses two research questions: 1) how child agency is portrayed in the two aforementioned picturebooks, and 2) how these portrayals problematize normative conceptions of the nature of child agency.

The negative side of the agency spectrum

Nina Christensen (2021) identifies three main research areas for approaching agency in children's literature: the amount of agency attributed to fictional child characters; the amount of agency attributed to the implied child reader; and the role of children's agency in the production and distribution of books (p. 11; see further Christensen, 2025). Even though this article focuses solely on the first of the three, surveying the research field is difficult. Children acting independently and/or exerting power are omnipresent in children's literature

and therefore constitute a major area of research regardless of whether agency is treated as a designated theoretical approach. However, several anthologies overtly centred on the subject suggest the prominence of child agency as a specific research subject in children's culture: *Representing Agency in Popular Culture. Children and Youth on Page, Screen, and in Between* (2019), *Child and Youth Agency in Science Fiction. Travel, Technology, Time* (2019), *Childhood Agency, and Fantasy. Walking in Other Worlds* (2020) and *Child as Citizen. Agency and Activism in Children's Literature and Culture* (2025).

To facilitate child agency in children's literature, child characters (or their proxies) are temporarily disconnected from adult authority, which enables what John Stephens refers to as the child's »time out« (Stephens, 1992; c.f. Nikolajeva, 2009, p. 10). This has been explored in relation to power, where child agency is understood as signalling autonomy, emancipation, and empowerment with the potential to subvert societal structures (Kelen & Sundmark eds., 2017; Nikolajeva, 2009). Agency has also been associated with the strengthening of a sense of self (Seelinger Trites 2000, p. 2–3), individual growth (Nodelman, 2008), and children's participation as a means of fostering citizenship (Fenech ed., 2025). Agency is thus considered liberating, as character-building, and as a subversive force. However, as argued by Ingrid E. Castro (2020), not all children »employ agency in the spirit of goodwill toward constructive betterment of themselves or others or in pursuit of more utopic societies« (p. 21). Apart from assuming agency to be ethically good or beneficial, the emphasis on subversion also promotes child agency as resistance to adult structures. This tendency is partly inherited from child studies, where there is often an assumption that adult-imposed structure is something »that children should assert their agency to resist or counteract« (Punch, 2016, p. 185). To further scrutinize these assumptions, the emphasis here is on representations of child agency when they appear as ethically ambiguous and/or do not comply with the notion of child agency as resistance to (adult) structures. Furthermore, any conflation of agency with individual autonomy, emancipation, empowerment, or growth is eschewed. Taken together, this constitutes what I refer to as *negative agency*.

When used as an adjective, negative denotes something disadvantageous, rejecting, or critical, whereas as a noun it refers to a photographic image in reverse. There are similarities between the former meaning in connection to agency with what Lorenzo I. Bordonaro and Ruth Payne terms ambiguous agency, in an editorial in *Children's Geographies* (2012). This refers to »agency amongst children and youth which is in stark contrast to established and normative conceptions about childhood and moral and social ideals about the kind of behaviour young people would demonstrate« (Bordonaro & Payne, 2012, p. 366). However, negative agency does not necessarily exclude the presence of normative conceptions, but rather shed light on their reverse image, hence the inspiration from negative as a noun. Whilst the photographic negative and its diapositive are different, the object (the picture) remains the same. Negative agency, thus, highlights a different side of the agency spectrum without ruling out the possible presence and impact of such things as autonomy, emancipation, empowerment, and growth in the portrayals of child agency. These, supposedly positive aspects (in the sense of being ethically good and subversive), are regarded as intertwined with their reverse image. What might appear as positive in one context, e.g. empowerment, carries with it a potentially negative side whilst some acts performed challenge ethical norms and expectations.

Methodologically, the article draws on motif analysis in combination with a discursive understanding of children's literature in relation to non-fictional conceptions of childhood. While the portrayal of child characters remains important, the primary focus is on the relations and connections of which they are part. The analysis examines various instances of agency as portrayed in the picturebooks, more specifically »how they are being exercised, through which bodies, through which relations and assemblages and with what effects« (Gallagher, 2019, p. 197). By foregrounding relations and connections between child characters and other elements depicted in both text and pictures, the analysis places emphasis on interaction. This makes it possible to move away from viewing agency as something that resides solely in, or exclusively emanate from, the individual. Instead, a relational approach is favoured which stresses hybridity and understands agency as flowing between various human and non-human agents in fluid networks (Gallagher, 2019; Prout, 2000; Oswell, 2013; Raithelhuber, 2016; Spyrou, 2019).

Differences notwithstanding, relational agency eschews the structure/agency dualism and the notion of agency as mere individual intent. Prout emphasizes that children are »participants shaping, as well as being shaped by, society« and suggests viewing agency »less as an essential attribute of children and more as an effect of the connections made between a heterogeneous array of materials, including bodies, representations and technologies« (Prout, 2000, p. 2). Oswell similarly argues that agency is not centred on human reflexivity but is rather distributed »across human and non-human arrangements and infrastructures« (Oswell, 2013, p. 7). In articulating this position, Oswell touches upon the post-human, an approach that Spyros Spyrou identifies is significant for understanding child agency:

»By decentring human beings, posthumanism challenges the humanist assumption of the autonomous, knowing subject who acts upon the world from a privileged position and introduces instead a relationality emerging from the encounter between human and non-human entities« (Spyrou, 2019, p. 316).

Decentring without deserting the human subject enables an understanding of child agency and as argued by Eberhard Raithelhuber (2016), one advantage of a relational approach to agency is to avoid the trap of locating agency either entirely in people's heads or completely outsourcing it to background forces (p. 99). He argues that agency »can only exist in interconnectedness and be brought about in relations« (p. 95–96): »Hence, agents are those human beings and things that have a specific status within a network of social relations, i.e. social positions that can originate causal events in their environment. In other words, if human beings or things inherit a status of this kind, they become instances of agency« (p. 97). Accordingly, it is impossible to assign individuals agency outside of context. Instead, as Christensen puts it, we need to »turn toward agency and subjectivity as being embedded in social interactions and relationships in specific social settings and contexts« (Christensen, 2025, p. 74). In this article, such networks of agency are approached through representations in which child characters are interconnected in various ways with their human and non-human surroundings.

Karrebæk's and Sparring's and Gustavsson's picturebooks differ in tone and aesthetics. *Pigen der var go' til mange ting* can be defined as a challenging picturebook, as it entails

aesthetic complexity as well as sensitive or disturbing topics (Ommundsen et al., 2022, p. 8); Christensen describes Karrebæk's book as a symbolic narrative about divorce (Christensen, 2000, p. 14). *Vi är pirater* has a lighter tone and uses humour and playfulness to portray children playacting. Nevertheless, both focus strongly on child agency and are chosen because they foreground its ethically dubious and non-normative dimensions. *Vi är pirater* enters into dialogue with ethical and traditional expectations on children's literature, while *Pigen der var go' til mange ting* challenges notions of agency as synonymous with empowerment, competence, and emancipation. In the analysis, both verbal text and pictures will be taken into consideration, with particular attention paid to the iconotext (Hallberg, 1982, 2022), i.e. the interplay between the modalities. The article concludes with a discussion of the potential impact of cultural representations of negative agency.

Non-subversive agency in *Pigen der var go' til mange ting*

Pigen der var go' til mange ting (hereafter *Pigen*) revolves around a girl whose parents are preoccupied with each other, staying up late, sleeping in during the mornings, arguing, and drinking. In the absence of parental supervision, the girl takes charge of domestic chores such as ironing, doing the dishes, and cleaning. The situation is far from ideal and in an attempt to improve it, the girl organizes a costume party at which her mother and father dress up as a cat and a dog. The implicit antagonism between them is symbolically reinforced, and even more so when they undergo a metamorphosis into the animals they initially impersonate. In the end, the girl accepts that one cannot change the nature of a cat and a dog and by her own choice she swiftly grows up and leaves home, entering a prosperous future as her competence also enables her to find her place in the world.

All but one of the double spreads in Karrebæk's picturebook consist of a white page on the left, carrying the verbal text, and a pictorial page on the right.¹ Her use of »innovative and highly dynamic instances of frame-breaking which carry subtle meanings« (Scott, 2010, p. 104) create complexity in the pictures and the iconotext. The first double spread after the title page introduces the girl, who is described in the verbal text as being good at many things and is depicted in the picture standing front and centre, wearing a red – verging on pink – dress with white dots and a bow in the same style. Her visual performance is girlish, even doll-like, and the frame surrounding her is a smaller frame positioned in the middle of the page. The frame-within-a-frame composition is repeated in most illustrations, but the girl is primarily positioned outside the inner frame which is instead partly or wholly occupied by her parents.

Whilst initially appearing passive, standing upright in the inner square and looking outwards, the girl is subsequently portrayed as physically active and competent. She has »taught herself everything by using first her eyes, then her hands – and sometimes her legs« [Alting havde hun lært sig selv ved at bruge øjnene først og derefter hænderne – og nogle gange benene].² However, her interactions are predominantly visualized in connection with non-human objects: her hands engage with the iron and ironing board, later with the dish brush, and her feet with a pair of scrubbing brushes. The girl's networks of agency thus emphatically lack immediate connections with other human beings, a condition that is further amplified by the visualization of her gaze. Christensen describes Karrebæk's picturebook as a narrative

seen through the eyes of the girl (Christensen, 2000, p. 14), yet this externalized perspective further prevents her from interacting with her parents. Instead, she is portrayed as an observer, and her parents never reciprocate her glances.

Scott argues that the interplay between the inner and outer frames creates a dynamic that suggests a »shifting relationship between the parents and child« (Scott, 2010, p. 104). The initial positioning of the girl and her parents in different frames does enhance distance, but the frame-breaking does not induce change. On the sixth double spread, all characters appear in the same frame, sitting at the dinner table. Yet the distance remains: the parents sit at one end, looking intensely at each other while the father strokes the mother's hand, and the girl remains shut out of their interplay. The only other human figure appearing in the picturebook is a woman on television, who serves as a source of the girl's knowledge about domestic chores. The girl's connectedness with other humans is thus mediated through technology or, later displaced onto the non-human when her parents look at her only after having transformed into animals. Not even in this instance is eye contact tied to connection. Instead, the roles are reversed, as the girl looks away when her parents become the observers.

Even though *Pigen* emphasizes a lack of interconnectedness between the girl and her parents, her agency is nevertheless entangled with theirs. The girl is portrayed as a hyperbolic version of the competent child, adopting a normative adult role, while her parents assume a normative child role (their inverted timetable, staying up at night and sleeping out in the morning, is no coincidence). Kristina Hermansson (2014) identifies a theme of adult incompetence in contemporary Scandinavian picturebooks, often juxtaposed with child competence, and reads this as a sign of a cultural concern about failing parenthood in the late modern society (p. 21). *Pigen* is not included in her analysis, but her conclusions are nevertheless applicable to it, as the verbal text stresses not only that the girl is good at many things, but that she needs to be since »there was so much for her to do« [der var så meget hun skulle lave].

Michael Gallagher (2019) suggests that agency can be divided into routine and inventive acts, where the former establishes and reproduces patterns, while the latter erupts them and reconfigure relations (p. 197). On the one hand, the chores undertaken by the girl (cleaning, doing the dishes, ironing) appear as routine acts but on the other hand they break established patterns when performed by the girl acting in loco parentis. This corresponds with the hegemonic construction of the self-regulating child in late modern society (Smith, 2014) and the girl's parents proclaim that »self-taught is well taught« [Selvlært er vellært]. However, instead of empowering the girl, her routine acts maintain a situation that prevents both empowerment and subversion. Agency thus appears as a burden the girl strives to rid herself off. The verbal text states: »Sometimes the girl thought of upbringing and she thought of changing things« [Engang imellem tænkte pigen på opdragelse og hun tænkte på at lave ting om]. Yet while the routine acts maintain the status quo, the aim to reconfigure relations by organizing the costume party (her inventive actions) fails. This suggests not only that the girl's agency functions as a burden, but also that her actions are ultimately non-subversive.

The ending of the book has been interpreted as altogether optimistic (Beckett 2012, p. 219) and as emancipatory, as the picturebook conveys the message that it is possible to influence the ways in which one shapes identity and gender (Christensen & Österlund, 2016). Karrebæk's pictures equate growth with becoming adult, most notably on the twelfth double spread

where the girl steps out through the roof of the inner frame (another example of Karrebæk's use of frame-breaking). The girl's long hair flows behind her, and the bow has transformed into a ladybug. Visual signals suggest that she is now a young woman, notably the way her elongated body makes the dress appear less childlike and reveals the outline of a bosom. The bow, another girlish attribute, gradually shrinks as she grows, only to be discarded in the end. To reconfigure relations the girl must step out of her position as a capable child, and in this sense she is indeed emancipated. However, neither this emancipation nor her empowerment is connected to *child* agency. In *Pigen*, empowerment is equated with growing up, and Scott goes even further in suggesting that the girl in Karrebæk's picturebook »has had no childhood« (Scott, 2010, p. 105). It may be more accurate to assert that the childhood she has performed diverges from normative representations in children's literature in which the child resists structural restraints (which the girl instead longs for), is granted a temporal »time out« (the girl is caught in it) and is empowered by agency (the girl is burdened by it). *Pigen* is thus a picturebook where child agency enhances exposure, appears as burdensome and as solitary, and where the only way to instil agency with emancipatory and empowering qualities is to detach it from the category child.

Agency as cruelty in *Vi är pirater*

In Sparring and Gustavsson's *Vi är pirater* (hereafter *Pirater*) the layout of the text shifts, and the pictures occupy half a page, a whole page, or an entire double spread. Whereas *Pigen* has an omniscient narrator, *Pirater* is narrated in first person by a boy who appears together with his sister on the front cover and on the first double spread. They wear eyepatches and shirts decorated with skulls and crossbones. The verbal text on the first double spread states: »We are pirates, me and my siss. That is, not fake pirates with fake swords and a fake eyepatch or a fake parrot on the shoulder. Real pirates with real swords and a real eyepatch« [Vi är pirater, jag och min syrra. Alltså inte låtsaspirater med låtsassvärd och låtsaslapp för ögat och låtsaspapegoja på axeln. Utan riktiga pirater med riktiga svärd och riktig lapp för ögat]. The siblings stand in front of a cardboard box marked »Pirate's nest« [Pirathålan] with various objects scattered on the floor including a small toy chest and a toy pirate ship. The claim made in the verbal text is undermined by the picture's emphasis on pretend play, but on the second double spread the siblings wield swords. Furthermore, they are contrasted with another set of children with neat hair and clothing, carrying wooden swords. The text states: »Pretence pirates pretend to attack. Real pirates attack for real« [Låtsaspirater anfaller på låtsas. Riktiga pirater anfaller på riktigt]. This is exemplified through a retelling of an attack on a young girl followed by other events, including theft.

Pirater follows the pattern of the journey away from home, in which the children enjoy their »time out« beyond adult regulation. However, the actions they perform are portrayed as cruel, involving bullying and theft. The girl they attack is depicted as smaller than the siblings, which corresponds with how victims of bullying are commonly portrayed in children's picturebooks (Esch, 2008, p. 380). The occurrence of bullying in children's literature often encourages reader alignment with the victim(s) in order to deter bullying, promote strategies for handling such situations, and offer solace to the implied reader (Esch, 2008; Flanagan et al., 2013; Freeman, 2013; Moulton, 2011; Oppliger & Davis, 2016). In *Pirater*, the siblings give their account of the episode in the verbal text: »She took it rather well« [Hon tog det

ganska bra]. The consequences of their actions are downplayed, once again stressing piracy as play, but the picture of the girl standing with her head thrown back, crying out with tears spurting from her eyes, suggests otherwise. The picturebook thus uses an unreliable narrator whose unreliability is exposed through the pictures.

Children who challenge ethical norms are common figures in children's books. A moral saintliness, associated with older children's literature, has been replaced by a contemporary emphasis on the justification of breaking rules and questioning adult authority for a greater good (Barker, 2014, p. 101, 102–106; c.f. Sainsbury, 2015, p. 192–193). According to Monica Flegel and Christopher Parkes (2018), children acting cruelly are positioned between evil and innocence. The evil child goes too far, while the completely innocent child appears equally problematic and in need of being »purged from society«; by contrast, cruel children are rendered intelligible as children navigating and negotiating the boundaries of their actions (p. 13). In *Pirater*, the reader is invited to partake in this negotiation by adopting the siblings' perspective through the first-person narrator while simultaneously observing a discrepancy between the verbal account and the visual representation of the events. This makes the portrayal of agency in *Pirater* appear ambivalent: playful on the one hand, and ethically dubious on the other.

After the attack on the girl, the siblings successfully rob candy from their neighbours. They then consume the loot, but the next morning they are awoken by their father shouting at them. They jump out of the window, steal a pair of bikes, and extend their »time out« by hiding amongst outcasts, imagined as grown-up pirates. In the pictures, they are surrounded with bottles, trash, and a dust bin with a burning fire, creating an iconography of exposure and addiction; once again, the reader is invited to see through the narrator's description. On the tenth double spread, the father appears visually, pushing the children in front of him. They are literally forced back home, thus ending their journey. So far, the traditional narrative pattern is followed to the letter, particularly in that the outer journey is combined with an inner, developmental journey. There is a lesson to be learned for the child protagonists (and presumably the reader), staged through a restoration of adult authority as the father informs them that they will have to apologize and replace the stolen candy.

According to Perry Nodelman (2008), children's literature often stages an inner journey that entails character development and individual growth. He identifies a didactic pattern in which »childhood desires stem from childhood ignorance, and the getting of knowledge will reveal the inadequacy of the desires and make children wiser and better by expelling the desires« (p. 49). The theft of the candy is seemingly subordinated this traditional pattern. The siblings' childish desire to act out their piracy and gratify a taste for candy (particularly chocolates!) is expelled as inappropriate. When they return to the scene of the crime, they are neatly dressed up in much the same fashion as the pretend pirates from the second double spread, and all pirate props have been left behind. The literal stripping of piracy conveys a clear-cut message: stealing is wrong and if you do wrong, you will suffer the consequences.

Even though the message appears overt, the ending overturns it altogether. After apologizing to the neighbouring children, the siblings notice a candy necklace worn by one of them. The protagonists' reaction is depicted on the last double spread: they glare sideways at each other with overtly sinister expressions, and behind them their shadows are shown wielding swords. The verbal text repeats the introductory words (and the title of the picturebook) »We are

pirates« [Vi är pirater]. Here, this statement does not merely declare that the children are pirates, but furthermore that they *remain* pirates. The verbal text and pictures thus converge to underline the implication that no moral lesson has been learned and that there is no higher goal in sight beyond further individual gain and pleasure. Instead of stressing the playfulness of the siblings' agency, the ending underlines its ethical dubiousness.

The significance of negative agency

The emergence of agency as a key concept in child studies coincided with the ratification of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989). The convention lays down children's right to protection, but notably also their right to participation. Article 12 establishes children's right to express views and to have them acknowledged and taken into account, thus enhancing their active role in the construction of childhood. In article 12, and in the convention more generally, a tension emerges between the child's right to protection and to participation. A similar tension can be observed in children's literature, where it frequently manifests itself in the negotiation between »liberation (child rule) and control (ruling the child)« (Kelen & Sundmark, 2017, p. 9). This echoes of the structure/agency dualism, but Karrebæk's *Pigen* problematizes this as its portrayal of a lack of protection does not enhance participation. Rather, the girl appears as lost somewhere in between – neither participating, nor being protected. This provokes questions that extend beyond cultural representation, perhaps the most crucial being to what extent children strive to move away from adult authority and desire to assert their agency. After all, as stated by E. Kay M. Tisdall and Samantha Punch (2012) »[j]ust as children and young people should have the right not to participate, they should be able to choose not to assert their agency« (p. 256). As suggested in *Pigen*, the absence of adult surveillance and child agency may be less a matter of individual choice and more a position to which the child is involuntarily assigned. The portrayal of child agency corresponds to the discourse of the self-regulating and competent child of the 21st century, a discourse that presupposes both capability and the opportunity for children to interact with adults on equal terms. This, in turn, calls for adults to »renounce part of their authority, and instead, to become trusted friends« (Brembeck et al., 2008, p. 7–8; c.f. Cunningham, 2021, p. 165). However, in *Pigen*, the parents neither wield their authority, nor strive to become the girl's peers or trusted friends, and their refusal to negotiate her position is the reason she ultimately leaves childhood behind.

As Buckingham notes, agency is not solely a matter of activity and rebellion, it »can also be about choosing obedience, passivity, and conformity to adult authority« (Buckingham, 2019, p. 286). Passivity, on the other hand, tends to be associated with ideas of childhood innocence and with characteristics such as vulnerability, weakness and helplessness, traits commonly regarded as antithetical to agency; yet scholars may »simultaneously (and subconsciously) embrace childhood innocence as the reason for why they believe children will always be good and positive agents« (Castro, 2021, p. 21). In other words, child agency is often separated from passivity, i.e. from the choice not to assert their agency, and when children do assert their agency, their actions are expected to be morally good or at least beneficial for them and for others. Not only is the child at risk of being reduced to a dissident but, furthermore, to a dissident for good.

In *Pigen*, the protagonist fails to induce change (at least up until she leaves home, by which point she is no longer a child). *Pirater* by Sparring and Gustavsson, on the other hand, utilizes the traditional narrative pattern of children's literature in which, as Kelen and Sundmark (2017) put it, »the journey is the teacher« (p. 6). Moral norms are initially reproduced as the protagonists display remorse and apologise for their previous acts, but this is ultimately mocked. They do not succumb to the expectation that they have learnt their lesson; on the contrary, the remorse is as much a playact as their earlier piracy and through this, they add manipulation and deceit to their catalogue of ethically dubious characters traits. As suggested by Jani L. Barker (2014), children in works of fiction that defy adult authority and disobey rules tend to do so when these rules constitute obstacles to a higher moral purpose (p. 101). In *Pirater*, however, there is no such higher moral purpose. Even though the child protagonists are dissidents in relation to adult authority, they emerge as dissidents for bad.

In his exploration of agency among street children in Cape Verde, Lorenzo I. Bordonaro (2012) urges us to consider how our understanding of child agency changes when »their actions go against the grain of current morality, when their agency is not what it is expected to be« (p. 415). Tisdall and Punch (2012) emphasize the importance of contesting and scrutinizing conceptions of child agency rather than taking it-for-granted or assuming it to be »inherently [...] positive and desired by all children and young people« (p. 256). This point is just as pertinent to children's literature research since, as argued by Peter Hunt (2009), the relation between children's literature and childhood is symbiotic. Childhood in fiction differs from lived reality but is »imitated in real life« (p. 52). And vice versa, one might add. The picturebooks explored here draw attention to agency when it is not the child's obvious choice, and when it is chosen but enacted through activities that diverge from norms sanctioned by adults and society (and, not least, from common understandings of child agency in children's literature). Together, they serve as reminders that child agency is not »a fixed quality, but one that is actively produced in different social contexts and defined in quite different ways« (Buckingham, 2019, p. 285). Depictions of negative agency underscore the complexity and multifaceted nature of the concept and the need to acknowledge and further scrutinize images of child agency in children's literature and beyond, even when they diverge from norms and expectations and appear problematic, uncomfortable, or even disturbing.

Noter

1. Other exceptions are the title page, which appears on the right, and the colophon at the end, which appears on the left. Both are accompanied by the red endpaper.
- 2 All translations of quotations are by the author.

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Biography

Peter Kostenniemi is a postdoctoral scholar at Linköping University, Department of Thematic Studies: Child Studies, and at Aarhus University. His research project »Disturbing Childhood« explores negative images of childhood in contemporary Swedish and Danish children's fiction. Kostenniemi defended his dissertation *Hemsökt barndom. Bilder av barnet i gotisk barnlitteratur* at Stockholm university in 2022. He has published articles on, e.g., picturebooks, post-apocalyptic fiction, didactics of zombie fiction, and the dramatic works of Per Olov Enquist. Research interests include child subjectivity and agency, the relationship between children's culture and childhood, and popular fiction aimed at children and young people.



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Ellinor Lidén

Agency and Generationing Aspects of Young Audience's Self-initiated Theatre-going Practices

Abstract

The greater part of professional theatre performances for young people in Sweden takes place during school hours, clearly situating theatre-going within a compulsory school context. Consequently, most audience reception studies with young audiences are carried out within this context as well. The aim of this article is to discuss young audience's agency within theatre-going practices which they take part of outside school hours, on their own initiative, as well as to discuss in what ways these theatre-going practices are generationally constituted. The article draws on theories from both theatre- and performance studies and childhood studies, where the concept of *theatre as event* is used as basic framework of understanding (Sauter 2000, 2008) and *generation(-ing)* (Alanen 2001) and *agency* (Esser 2016; James 2011; Lee 2009) are used analytically. The material consists of three transcribed in-depth focus group discussions with eight individuals, 13-15 years of age (five girls and three boys), who on a regular basis take part of professional theatre and performing arts in their leisure time. Even though the school as mediator is absent, adults still clearly impact young audience's theatre-going in several, and somewhat contradictory, ways paving way for as well as limit young audience's agency. The very infrastructure of theatre and performing arts outside school hours leans heavily on adult norm, communicating that the theatre is yet another public space that young people should not have (full) access to. At the same time adults do encourage and invite young people to participate in theatre-going practices outside school hours through networks and organizations connected

to venues and theatre organizations around Sweden. This article demonstrates such young voices. Though young audience's agency is tangible, it takes on various expressions and to varying extents. However, it still works within generational structures as young audiences are more or less depending on adult support, openness and/or willingness to share the world of theatre and performing arts with young audiences. Thus, generational boundaries are largely maintained by generationing practices, by adults and young people both.

Keywords: theatre; performing arts; young audiences; leisure time; theatre as event; generation(-ing)

- Mohammed* *I saw another performance at the Skärholmen stage where you had like headphones on. And there were like mirrors.*
- Ellinor* *»Som i spegeln«? (»Like in the mirror« in Swedish. Recognizes the performance and suggests the title) Did you see it in school?*
- Mohammed* *No, by myself*
- Ellinor* *With your family?*
- Mohammed* *No, with my friends*
- Ellinor* *With your friends? Uhum... How come? (a noticeable surprised tone of voice)*
- Mohammed* *We were going to the mall in Skärholmen. I was supposed to buy Converse. But then I didn't. We wanted to go to the movies, but then my friends said« Nah, we can't take it, a movie is too long. So... Jalla! We wanted to go to the theatre.*
- Ellinor* *So you bought tickets? (a questioning tone of voice)*
- Mohammed* *Yes*
- Ellinor* *You and your friends? (a considerably questioning tone of voice)*
- Mohammed* *Yeah, they had cash too*
- Ellinor* *Pardon? (not perceiving what Mohammed said)*
- Mohammed* *Money*
- Mikaela* *Pengar (»money« in Swedish, turns to me as if to interpret)*
- Ellinor* *Would you like to go back?*
- Mohammed* *Yeah, what do you think, bro? Definitely! Jalla!*
- Ellinor* *But you said to me before that theatre is boring*
- Mohammed* *I was kidding. That was the old Mohammed*

(Lidén 2022:174f)

Introduction

Professional theatre and performing arts for young audiences are immensely dependent on adults. To begin with, playwrights, dramatists, directors, actors, scenographers and costume designers, just to name a few, are involved in producing and performing. Other adults, often teachers, principals, governmental and municipal employees but also parents and relatives, then make the arrangements and/or escort young people to the theatre, thus also become part of the audience. Consequently, most initiatives and arrangements tend to be kept away from the primary audiences themselves. Although benevolent, a distinctive feature of theatre for young people, in comparison to its adult counterpart, is that its audiences rarely choose to attend themselves. This constitutes the basic premise of what I call the »scenario of children's theatre« (Lidén 2022).

The greater part of all professional theatre for young people in Sweden takes place during school hours (Swedish Agency for Cultural Policy Analysis 2024). It is thereby subject to compulsory schooling and largely supported by governmental funding and subventions. On the one hand this makes theatre and performing arts (potentially) available for nearly all children and young people in Sweden regardless of social background. This fits well with article 31 of the *UN Convention on The Rights of the Child* (1989), incorporated in Swedish legislation in 2022. On the other hand this clearly situates theatre-going within a school context, also shown to leave traces in young audience's experiences of theatre (Lidén 2022; Lundberg, Hallberg & Zetterqvist Nelson 2012; Helander 2011, 1998; Wittrock 2011; Lund 2008, 2004; Gustafsson 2008; Hjorth & Klosterberg 1997). Adults are thus crucial when it comes to enabling professional theatre and performing arts for children and young people in the first place. However, adults also profoundly shape the conditions and influence the overall theatre-going practices for young audiences.

To say the least, it is quite unusual that young people around 11 years of age, like Mohammed and his friends, go to the theatre on their own without accompanying adults. Mohammed made visible a rift within the scenario of children's theatre, and by doing so highlighting an infrastructure generally not well customized for young people exercising agency to buy theatre tickets themselves. Professional theatre for young audiences slightly stands out in the general child and youth culture context in being so surrounded by adult intermediation when it comes to the mere access to it. One can compare this with the agency of young people of the same age as Mohammed buying tickets on their own to go to the movies together with friends, or young people's access to TV/film, literature, gaming or social media. Worth noting in this matter, and somewhat contradictory, is that Swedish theatre praxis generally do attribute quite an amount of agency to children and young people, addressing them as competent theatre audiences who are more than capable to appreciate complex artistic expressions and themes (Lorentzon 2018; Helander 2014; Helander 1998; Davet 2011). However, when it comes to acknowledging young audience's agency as theatre *consumers*, that is facilitating young audiences to buy tickets on their own after school hours, the current infrastructure does not attribute young people agency to the same extent.

This conversation with Mohammed lingered and eventually led to a two-year postdoctoral research project on which this article is built. Contributing to the relevance of the project, initiatives have lately begun to sprout among theatre organizations and venues around Sweden in order to reach young audiences without, or at least with *less*, adult intermediators,

in addition to keep addressing school audiences. Several networks and associations of all sorts involving young people who take great interest in theatre and performing arts have thus been founded and this article demonstrates such young voices.

Research aims and questions

The aim of this article is to discuss young audience's agency within theatre-going practices which they take part of on their own initiative. Even though the school context is absent in this case, generational aspects undoubtedly still affect young audience's theatre-going practices. Therefore, the article also seeks to discuss in what ways young people's theatre-going practices are generationally constituted. This falls out in the following two research questions: How do members of young audiences perform agency within self-initiated theatre-going practices? How do generational aspects emerge within this context?

Previous research

Theatre for young audiences (TYA) is modestly represented within the overall research field of theatre and performance studies, which also applies for audience studies, although emerging (Schonmann 2006; Reason 2010). Bringing these together suggests that there is indeed room for expansion. However, audience research within TYA conducted in the Nordic region demonstrate not only vibrance but potential to immensely enrich the research field of theatre and performance studies in general, not least when it comes to research involving the very youngest audiences (Nagel 2018; Nagel & Hovik 2016; Böhnisch 2010). Where audience studies are carried out on adult audiences these are usually demographically oriented, often resembling those of the market research kind (Snyder-Young & Omasta 2022). TYA audience research from the Nordic region is often designed differently, placing young audiences and their experiences of performances in the centre (Lund, Brinch, Lorentzon 2024; Lidén 2022; Aspán 2020; Helander 2011; 2004; Wirdeñäs 2000). Each member of an audience brings its own personal set of experiences, references and interpretations to the theatre (Freshwater 2009; Bennett 1997). Not only is this inevitable, Snyder-Young and Omasta claim (2022), but necessary, as they argue for a critical empirical audience research that should be multifaceted. Audience research in TYA has developed from mere observing and mapping audience expressions at specific moments of performances, to now encompass qualitative, complex and interview-based studies to a greater extent (Saldaña 2022:52f). This project fits well with the latter and follows the footsteps of the audience research conducted in the Nordic region.

The dyadic relationship between school and theatre is frequently discussed, where school is often described as being both indispensable to the theatre as well as being considered a problematic spouse (Lidén 2022; Aspán 2020; Hald 2015; Lundberg, Hallberg & Zetterqvist Nelson 2012; Wittrock 2011; Gustafsson 2008; Gustafsson & Fritzén 2004; Lund 2008; Lund 2004; Helander 2011, 1998, 2004; Hjorth & Klosterberg 1997). This is not solely a Nordic dilemma. Omasta (2015, 2009) and Reason (2010) illustrate this intricate relationship within North American and British contexts. Australian audience studies point in the same direction (Anderson, Ewing & Flemming, 2014:62ff; Stinson & Burton, 2016:69), as do Israeli receptions research by Schonmann (2006). However, a scenario where school is *not* part of the infrastructure of providing professional theatre and performing arts to young audiences

has rendered very little attention academically. Hence, this project provides new, albeit initial, knowledge to the field.

Theoretical framework and concepts

Theoretically, this article has one foot within theatre- and performance studies and the other within childhood studies. The notion of *theatre as event*, drawing on Sauter (2000, 2008) means studying performances with a wider scope than focusing merely on what is performed on stage, which enables bringing the audience into the performance analysis. This article, however, stretches the concept even further thus making it possible to both include and exceed the time and space of the actual performances. Audience's experiences and thoughts derived from performances do not necessarily end with a final round of applause or a curtain fall. Such experiences, in this article made visible through focus group discussions, can thus be included in theatrical events, as do experiences of theatre-going as a whole.

This broadened notion of theatre as event constitutes this article's basic framework of understanding, as it allows the many layers in time and space surrounding theatre performances to be included. All these layers also inhabit adults who tend to impact the theatrical events that young audiences take part of, thus leading to the concepts used in this article emanating from childhood studies; *generation(-ing)* (Alanen 2001) and *agency* (Esser 2016; James 2011; Lee (2009)). Both are key concepts within the field of childhood studies, emerging from what has commonly been described as a shift of paradigm during the 1970s and -80s. Childhood studies acknowledge children and young people as social actors with agency of their own. As such they construct, as well as have the ability to re-construct, the social and cultural structures they inhabit together with adults (Qvortrup et al., 2011; James & Prout, 2003). James argues that the concept of agency constitutes the most important theoretical development within the field, and before the paradigm shift there was no such thing as »the agentic child« (James 2011:37). However, agency should not be understood as an innate characteristic, but rather relationally and generationally co-constructed. Different social contexts thus offer different kinds and extents of agency for children and young people and to varying extents, where generational hierarchy can, but does not have to, be a determining factor (Esser 2016:64 f). Lee (2009:72) suggests children's agency be considered as *distributed* in situations shared by adults. Similarly, the concept of generation is to be understood as relational and co-constructed by adults and children both in processes best described as *generationing* (Esser 2016; Alanen 2001). This translates to the context of theatre and performing arts that children and adults both are social actors exercising agency within theatre-going practices. The scenario of children's theatre, mentioned above, is in itself a good example of such a context that, as Mohammed showed, also carries the potential to be changed by young people's agency, thus also potentially change the whole of the theatre-going practices.

Methodology

Woodhead & Faulkner (2008) stress the importance of using research methods that are meaningful to the participants, not least when involving children and young people, for ethical and validity reasons both. In my prior research the participants aged 6-13 expressed great appreciation discussing their experiences of theatre-going with peers and me as a researcher

(Lidén 2022). Hence, I decided to continue working with focus group discussions in this project. However, researching young people's experiences of self-initiated theatre-going practices outside school hours did give rise to some challenging, although expected, methodological circumstances. Ruling out school as intermediary made the process of recruiting research participants slightly difficult. As initial attempt, 100 printed research inquiry flyers were placed in theatre foyers at three venues each in Stockholm offering weekend theatre performances for audiences ranging from 6-13 years of age. Interested parties were asked to contact me should they be interested in participating. As I attended all venues a few times as part of the audience myself, I noticed a tangible interest from young audience members and some parents, of whom some even approached me having recognized me from the flyer. One of the venues even ran out of flyers and decided on their own to produce additional copies on several occasions. Quite surprisingly, despite this apparent interest, this procedure generated no participants at all. Simultaneously, I contacted the organizer of a network of young people connected to a venue in Gothenburg. Although this venue mainly addresses adult audiences, the youth network is meant to function as a means to attract young people, who in turn are expected to serve as ambassadors for other young people to find their way to the venue. This recruitment strategy turned out successfully. Hence, I decided to reach out to other networks of the kind. Although most of these consisted of individuals from 18 years of age, I managed to locate three involving younger participants as well. I sent out research inquiries through the coordinators, who distributed them to the young members of their networks. This resulted in eight voluntary young participants, 13-15 years of age, five girls and three boys, who all on a regular basis, although to varying extents, take part of theatre and performing arts on their own initiative outside school hours. Written consents were obtained from both the young participants as well as their parents. The research participants were asked to choose their own pseudonyms for me to use when citing them. Aside from being highly appreciated, this procedure has proven to be of significance for improving participants' understanding of what it means to participate in research, but also in explaining how confidentiality is assured throughout the research process (Alderson 2005; Danby & Farrell 2007).

I travelled to the participants' locations to conduct focus group discussions. Two of a total of three focus group discussions involved participants living within or right outside the second and third largest cities in Sweden (Gothenburg and Malmö). The third focus group consisted of two participants living in smaller towns in south/mid-Sweden, who are part of a nationwide network gathering young people with an interest in theatre and performing arts. Consequently, the material thus consists of transcriptions from three audio recorded in-depth focus group discussions, with the duration of around 50 minutes each. Even though the focus group discussions are few in number, the participants' pronounced interest in theatre and performing arts resulted in a surprisingly dense material, where almost all recorded information turned out to be of high relevance to the project, and was thus transcribed.

Agency and generational aspects of young audience's self-initiated theatre-going practices

The fact that the school context is not present in young audience's self-initiated theatre-going practices does, by no means, mean that adult impact is all together absent. The young audience's stated experiences show that generational aspects do still permeate the theatre-going practices, on several levels and to different extents, where adults both pave way for as well as limit young audience agency. This is accounted for below, sorted under three prominent, although intertwined, themes: *Adults as norm, chaperones and financial supporters*, *Young audiences as liminal, generational outsiders* and *Obstacles and opportunities within self-initiated theatre-going practices*. Uniting the three themes and their contents is a demonstration of a broadened notion of theatre as event (Sauter 2000; 2008) – encompassing aspects beyond the time and place of the actual performances.

Adults as norm, chaperones and financial supporters

The participants mentioned experiences of performances covering a wide range of repertoire: *Don Giovanni*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Wicked*, *Carmen*, *La Bohème*, *Mean girls*, *Cabaret*, *Oliver*, *Beetlejuice*, *The Nutcracker* as well as contemporary dance performances like *Hammer and Vaults of heaven*, to name a few. As stated above, performances intended for young audiences are usually and predominantly provided during school hours. Consequently, for young people to pursue an interest in theatre and performing arts in one's leisure time, often means taking part of performances produced with an adult audience in mind, or rather with *no* explicitly defined age group at all. The adult audience is, as ever so often, the unstated norm, thus does not need definition (Young-Bruehl 2012; Wall 2010). However, other parameters do indeed communicate a presumed adult audience, such as ticket prices and time of day, both often being out of reach for young audiences. This indicates that the theatre (after school hours) is yet another public space, highly generationally constituted, that young people should not have full access to. However, the young network at the venue in Gothenburg do invite their members to attend dress rehearsals and selected performances. Alex, Viktor and Victoria from Gothenburg speak about a dance performance they have all seen, although well aware of that it was not intended for their generation.

Alex *But it wasn't really intended for....*

Viktor *No*

Alex *...for kids, was it?*

Victoria *No*

Ellinor *No?*

Viktor *I wouldn't say that/.../ I would say that it's a little more complicated than others/.../*

Ellinor *In what way?*

Viktor *Yeah, well like it is a lot oh, what do you say...*

Alex *They... are hard to understand in general, dance performances and operas, I think*

Victoria *Yes*

Alex Like *... you don't like get a clear picture of it. You get to like figure out how it is yourself/.../One has to like imagine how it is*

This performance, not »intended for kids«, is described as »more complicated« and not so easy to »understand«. The same goes for dance and opera performances in general, which they claim leave more room for one's own imagination. Dance and opera performances, it seems, require the experiences of theatre and performing arts often held by adults in order to fully enjoy them, thus implicating they are not actually intended for young audiences.

There are simply fewer opportunities to take part of performances produced specifically for young audiences after school hours, and beggars can't be choosers. Two of the participants, Haylie and Ebbie, who both live in small towns in south/mid-Sweden, expressed taking any given chance to see any kind of performance comes their way, be it for young or adult audiences, toddlers or youths, professional or amateur and even friends' recitals. For them age recommendations do not seem to matter. Spoken theatre and musicals are the genres Ebbie and Haylie enjoy the most. However, taking part of performances intended for the societal norm, adults, means ticket prices are out of reach and far from the subsidized prices often allocated for school audiences. Living in a small town also makes regular theatre-going difficult as opportunities are often rare. Consequently, they are not only dependent on their parents financially in order to pursue their interest in theatre, they also often need a ride to cover the distance. Sometimes a couple of hours away and on rare occasions even abroad, which requires quite some ingenuity from the youngsters, who often lack funding. Ebbie describes how she and her mother once negotiated using Ebbie's school grades as currency:

- Ebbie* *When I went [to the theatre] in London, then I had to pay for both my mum and myself because I sort of had to drag her with me (laughs)*
- Ellinor* *(laughs) Did you pay for the tickets?*
- Ebbie* *Eh... yeah but... she said like »if you manage to get this grade...*
- Ellinor* *Aha*
- Ebbie* *... then you can like... then you only need to pay for your own ticket/.../or like... yeah, something like that/.../and I do pretty well in school so that was not a problem (laughs)*

Though depending on adults to quite some extent in order to take part of performances, the participants do find room for agency, using all possible resources available. Not only does Ebbie »pay« for her mother's ticket with her grades, but she also pays for her own ticket, and she arranges for an adult chaperone to escort her, for this exceptional occasion to a performance in London. Haylie shares similar experiences:

- Haylie* *I am like the only one in my family who is really into performing arts (giggles)*
- Ellinor* *Is that so?*
- Haylie* *So I try to like convince them... »Don't you want to see this performance with me, or come with me to see this one?«*
- Ellinor* *So you are the one introducing...*
- Haylie* *Yes*
- Ellinor* *...for the rest of the family?*
- Haylie* *My mum is beginning to warm up (giggles)*

One could easily assume that young people's interest in theatre and performing arts would stem from growing up in families who share their interest. However, and quite surprisingly, that did not seem to be the case regarding all participants, as shown above with Haylie and Ebbie. Although they both grew up in families with a general interest in the arts, they describe how they are the ones introducing theatre for the members of their family. Though it seems to emerge from a basic need of adult escort and financial support, they are indeed exercising quite some agency reconstructing the cultural habits of their families, using all means and capital at hand making their interest in theatre possible (Qvortrup et al., 2011; James & Prout, 2003).

Young audiences as liminal, generational outsiders

Not surprisingly, the participants living in or nearby the large cities of Gothenburg and Malmö spoke of more regular access to theatre and performing arts, where they seem not as dependent on adults to the same extent as Ebbie and Haylie express. Not only do they live near the venues of their choice, but their engagements within the networks offer regular opportunities to see theatre and performing arts as well. This, however, means that adult coordinators have facilitated for the young members to access, perhaps not all, but a number of selected performances at times of their own choice. This is similar to what Lee (2009) calls *distributed agency*. In this case adults invite and make room for young people's agency within the adult-oriented theatre-going practices. Alex, Viktor and Victoria mainly see opera or dance performances where they go by themselves, one by one. However, they often end up meeting peers from the network once at the venue, but they do not plan ahead to go together. Nor do they talk to friends and peers at school about taking part of theatre and performing art and asking a friend to come along seems almost out of the question. This is worth a remark, not least considering networks where young members are expected to function as ambassadors in order to attract other young people to the venues. That kind of ambition thus might lack support. And the reasons seem manifold. Theatre and performing arts in general, the participants say, are perceived by people their age being for »geeks«, or »old people«. Alex claims: »Apparently it is not as popular anymore... to go to the opera amongst kids«. Similarly, Ebbie and Haylie talk about theatre as an artform associated with old age, both in the sense of being ancient and an art form primarily intended for senior citizens:

Ebbie Well, it is kind of geeky...

Haylie I think the geek-label... I also think it's because one thinks of it as something old/.../I mean... they did like this [performed theatre] in ancient Rome and in Greece/.../ And then I mean... when I am at the theatre, I am always the youngest one there (laughs) /.../ I mean I don't see a lot of people in my own age. I see like... old people. And I think that is why it [theatre] is perceived like »nah, that is dorky, that is only for old people. Why would a 14-year-old want to do something that a bunch of 60-year-olds would do?/.../Not many young people seem to be interested in going to the theatre.

The participants seem well aware of that they are entering a space not primarily intended for young people. They seem to position themselves in a liminal, almost ambivalent, position.

Sometimes they consider themselves being outsiders yearning to belong to the adult theatre community, and sometimes they feel they are already a part of it, although not always recognized as such by adults, where they often talk about themselves as part of a chosen group of young people exclusively entitled to occupy this adult space. Their interest in theatre and performing arts seem to also separate them from peers of the same age, adding to the liminality. Viktor, Victoria and Alex:

- Ellinor* *What do your friends say when they learn that you see so many performances? Are they curious?*
- Alex* *I... it is not really something that is discussed at my school*
- Ellinor* *Isn't it?*
- Alex* *No*
- Ellinor* *How come?*
- Victoria* *I usually don't...*
- Alex* *I am the only one that like... have been to the opera, so to speak...*
- Ellinor* *Okey*
- Alex* *None of them have like been there/.../it's not something you talk about*
- Victoria* *I don't usually tell people that I have seen performances... so uhm...*
- Alex* *No me neither*
- Victoria* *... I don't know how people would react*

Viktor, however, says he once tried to bring a friend to the opera, but his friend was not allowed to stay out that late in the evening, again highlighting the adult norm in theatre-going practices after school hours. Viktor and Alex demonstrate yet another reason they are hesitant to ask friends to come along, claiming that people their age are not as knowledgeable when it comes to opera as they themselves are, lacking both the interest and experience of theatre and performing arts.

- Viktor* *They are not as informed, or what do you say*
- Ellinor* *Uhum...*
- Alex* *I wouldn't be able to ask any of my friends/.../ if I want to go to the opera, I ask my grandma/.../Opera doesn't really feel like something you do with, like, friends*

Not only do they believe that other young people might feel uncomfortable with the art form of opera itself, but also the duration of the performances. Many operas last for hours and they fear that other young people their age will find it boring and hard to sit still, a skill they themselves claim to have acquired over the years. Alex utterance draws again on relying on adult escort, but this time not to pay, not do drive them, but as sheer company!

Where the Gothenburg participants have explicitly been invited by adults to take part of performing arts within the network, Haylie and Ebbie express experiences where they have been treated like they do not belong by the adult co-members of the audience. They speak of being side-eyed with suspicion by the adult majority audience, as if they were worried they would ruin the event by not being able to behave in a theatre-going context. Haylie shares an example from a rare occasion where she managed to bring a friend to the theatre:

»When I went to The Great Gatsby, like I did recently, then there were none... I mean there were me and my friend who I managed to bring with me... uhm... (laughs). We were the youngest ones, no doubt about that. We were absolutely the youngest and we got looks, like 'why are there two children here?'«

Other participants too share stories where adults in the audience and/or the organizers and staff at the theatre have made them feel alienated. However, not always manifested as adult skepticism, as in the example by Haylie above, but instead being overly and exaggeratedly welcomed. Yet, still leaving them with feelings of not belonging. Both adult approaches emphasize generational distinction and are thus processes of generationing (Alanen 2001). The young audience seem to be positioned by adults primarily as young, in the meaning *not* adults, rather than being considered fellow human beings who also take interest in theatre and performing arts. Though for the young participants age seems to be of subordinate significance, like Alex with his grandmother, while a great interest in theatre is more important. Most participants do, however, express wishes to go to the theatre with young people in their own age who share their interest, but those seem hard to find. And going to the theatre with peers during school hours does not appear to fulfill this need according to Haylie and Ebbie:

- Haylie* *Well I would like to be able to go with people who like show at least some interest but have not really been there before. Then I could like show them: »this is my world«*
- Ebbie* *Well it feels like it depends on the context, like what you are about to see*
- Haylie* *Well, yeah*
- Ebbie* *Maybe you don't want to go see everything with your classmates, maybe you don't want to see certain things with your parents. Some performances you would want to go with your friends/.../*
- Haylie* *Yes. It's also a lot of fun sometimes to go together with others who share your interest in theatre, because then you can like sit down together afterwards and discuss like »how did they do that?« and »did you notice that detail?« And such things/.../ and you can't do that with people who are not interested in theatre/.../*
- Ellinor* *And such conversations, do they arise when you go to the theatre with school?*
- Ebbie* *No*
- Haylie* *No*
- Ebbi* *Many people in school think theatre is for geeks and that it's a waste of time*
- Haylie* *Like an excuse not to do your schoolwork*

Although in a liminal position, the participants seem proud to be associated with the adult-oriented community of theatre and performing arts, where few people their own age seem to (want to) participate. Though they clearly enjoy a certain perceived exclusiveness and seem to consider theatre-going to be somewhat an elevated activity for their age group, they

would still gladly welcome other young people to join them. The emerging networks and organizations connected to venues and theatres around Sweden, such as the ones represented in this article, constitute promising opportunities for young people with an interest in theatre and performing arts to connect with each other. Although it would be beneficial should they lower their age-limit to also include participants under 18 years of age.

Obstacles and opportunities within self-initiated theatre-going practices

This liminal, generational position did not seem to resonate quite as much with the experiences of the participants in Malmö, nor the vast extent of dependence on adults in order to merely access the performances. Hence, this enables agency to a larger extent for the young people in Malmö in their theatre-going practices. Dua, Ruth and Gabriel mainly take part of dance performances and music concerts, and they do so together with their friends, which stands out among the participants. However, these theatre-going practices are not evenly distributed throughout the year. These are sometimes, though not always, specifically addressed to young audiences, although it does not seem to matter. The Malmö participants specifically mention one big annual event, the Malmö Festival in August, where they take part of a wide range of performances for free. This affordable, accessible and highly appreciated occasion offers opportunities to take part of performances together with friends, thus reinforcing young audience's agency. The festival is described by the participants as a very important event not only when it comes to accessing performances, but also as a socially significant event among friends their age. Dua explains »/.../everyone is there and everyone writes about it in the group chat«.

Dua is greatly interested in dance performances and those are the kind she takes part of the most. She explains that she might very well go by herself, but preferably with friends and sometimes with her family, mostly together with her mother. Her agency stands out among the participants, since she often plans in advance and she knows exactly where to find information about upcoming performances as well as how to access them. She mentions yet another annual event that seems to be of importance for her as well as her agency in accessing performances:

- Dua* *The dance scene in Malmö is... compared with other cities in Sweden... it's a bit bigger and then you can uhm/.../ you find people who like to dance here... easier and then you can go to places... by yourself and all/.../There's a week... Malmö Dance weekend. It's a huge event/.../where you can go around participating in workshops, buy tickets on your own /.../ and then I have gone out on my own, with my friends who are also interested in dance. Then you have looked up and bought your own tickets and checked the schedule...*
- Ellinor* *So you know where to find information? Do you know how to get information about what is being performed right now?*
- Dua* *Well we... like there is this... uhm... It's called Kul i Malmö (Fun in Malmö). There you can usually find out/.../they have a website where /.../ they show what's going on every day, what time and what place*

Living in a big city has its advantages when it comes to accessing performances, thus exercising agency in that very context. The Malmö participants seem quite satisfied. I asked what all the participants would like to ask of adult decision makers. Dua is more than happy as it is for her own sake, also appreciating Malmö's location close to Copenhagen. However, she expresses solidarity with other young people in Sweden and wishes for them to enjoy her privileges:

»In Malmö I think there is a lot going on already. Like I... you can of course always have more and that would be great, but if anything, then maybe... I don't know... like for others in other places to have this too. That everyone would have what we have here... here in Malmö when it comes to culture and stuff. Because it's really... there are so many people from different places and... well like there are... so many religions and different traditions and all/.../ That's really nice (laughs). I mean it's really good here«.

Haylie and Ebbie wish for better access to performances for the sake of their own as well as for others, recognizing the unfair conditions too. Haylie explains:

»Make sure theatres are available in more places. The closest one for me /.../ I have to travel for hours. Still, it's pretty close. But think about those who live in like... uhm... Åmål... or I don't know/.../They don't have anything like that/.../So I would say invest in more places to see theatre. And increase the budget so that ticket prices can be lowered so that young people are able to go/.../ I think an important part is that it shouldn't be too expensive/.../I think that if you make it less expensive, I think more children would want... or more young people would want to go«.

She points out that ticket prices are often out of reach for young people, not only excluding them from taking part of performances, but also communicating that these are not intended for young people. Hence, young audience's agency in theater-going practices is also a question of marketing and communication. Haylie and Ebbie suggest that theatres and other venues address young people more directly in their public communication in order to attract them. If addressed directly, as agentic members of an audience in the broader understanding of theatre as event (Sauter 2000; 2008), young people would thus be more motivated. In the long run that might even boost their interest, thus stimulating their agency in theatre-going practices:

Ebbie Really... young people should be able to find their way to the theatre themselves and if someone is forcing them/.../then they will not enjoy it. Like they must... there must be more advertising in like social media so that people will actually know....

Haylie Yes, exactly

Ebbie ... know that this world exists. Uhm... because like nobody... not many people go look for information about things to do anymore/.../It's like if you find...

Haylie ...yeah, find it on social media

Ebbie *... something to do on social media. Like spreading information in a better way*

Adjusted communication strategies in order to reach young people more directly could indeed be worth considering, thus facilitating young audience's agency in theatre-going. Not least should this be of relevance when young people are indeed the primary audience. Ebbie and Haylie imply that using social media platforms frequented by young people might be fruitful, claiming that young people do not often actively search for information. Instead, information tends to *find them* on social media. Information about performances through social media might pique their interest and initiative will thus come from themselves, instead of being imposed upon them. These arguments are indeed interesting to relate to the fact that most professional performances for young audiences are mediated by school, hence making performances mandatory and, to use the words of Ebbie, in one sense *forced* upon. An ongoing debate in Finland, concerning high school audiences acting out towards the performers during dance performances at the National Ballet highlights these issues (Yle 2025-11-21). By some, this kind of behavior is believed to be the direct consequence of cutbacks and slimmed opportunities for school audiences to take part of theatre and performing art during school hours. Although perhaps Ebbie offers an alternative, or at least a complementary, interpretation, that performances during school hours are often perceived by young people to be imposed upon them by adults, thus might trigger resistance. Her view also finds support in my earlier research (Lidén 2022), where school audiences (13-year-olds) admitted that the sheer presence of a teacher within a theatre performance context seems to prompt defiant behaviors by the pupils.

Still Ruth in Malmö finds it important that children and young people are indeed given the opportunity to take part of theatre and performing arts during school hours, in order to balance inequalities when it comes to access to theatre and performing arts in the first place.

»There are maybe many... who like... for example children that have parents who are not used to this, growing up with things like this and therefor do not attend anything. And then it might be fun... uhm... that for example school or other adults help out so that you can at least try it out. It might be that you don't like it. But it might also be that you find a new hobby or really love it«.

In theory, public performances during weekends produced with young audiences in mind are already part of the existing infrastructure of theatre and performing arts for young audiences. They should thus be able to attract young people to a higher degree, and by doing so offer opportunities of agency for young people to buy tickets on their own. In practice, however, young people do not seem to think of weekend performances as opportunities to take part of theatre and performing arts together with friends (see also Lidén 2022). Leve & Ruwe (2022) claim, though based on American context, this being a mere question of labelling performances in the marketing process. Theatres rather market weekend performances as »Family performances« than »Children's performances« in order to appeal the adult buyer of the tickets. It is reasonable to assume that this be the case also in Sweden, reinforcing young people's notion of theatre-going in general as a mainly adult initiative.

Concluding words

Further and more developed knowledge about young audience's agency and motivation to theatre and performing arts, be it within a school context or not, is not only necessary but simply reasonable, not least considering that most performances are indeed carried out during school hours and are thus supported by governmental funding. Deepened knowledge about both means of offering performances to young audiences, be it during school hours or in young peoples' leisure time, have great potential to enrich, complement and develop each other. Where the former has the potential to establish an interest in theatre and performing arts widely for young people, the latter can be developed in order to meet the needs of young people who wish to continue pursuing this interest after school-hours.

As stated, the young participants in this project are few, partly due to the fact that they are hard to locate without help from networks and associations and, as of today, the majority of those involve only young adults. Consequently, this project is best considered a first step in filling a gap that is academically, as well as in praxis, previously overlooked.

Notes

1. This is a translated excerpt from a focus group interview with Mohammed and some peers of his in 5th grade (11 years old), from my dissertation (Lidén 2022). Mohammed and Mikaela are pseudonyms that the participants decided by themselves.
2. Still, as stated in a report by Swedish Assitej (2022), the possibilities to take part of theatre and performing arts for children and young people are quite unevenly distributed across Sweden.
3. »31:1: States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.
31:2: States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity«.
4. Several children and young people in my dissertation spoke of regularly going to the movies with friends, buying tickets on their own. Many of them expressed that they had not even considered the possibility of buying tickets to a theatre performance by their own initiative and go together with their friends, since theatre-going is perceived closely intertwined with school practice (Lidén 2022).
5. A detailed TYA research overview is provided in Lidén (2022).
6. In this section I use the terms »child« and »children« since the research field from which two of the article's theoretical concepts are emanating from is referred to as »childhood studies«. Although in the rest of the article I mainly use the term »young people«, referring to individuals in the upper age range of childhood. However, there is no clear boundary between the two. As shown further on in this article, the participants sometimes refer to themselves as »children«, sometimes as »young people«.
7. Conducting research with minors requires continuous methodological and ethical consideration. Hence, an application to the Swedish Ethical Review Authority and a data processing plan, aiming to structure the work at an early stage in order to handle research data in a secure manner throughout the project, was carried out. Registry number at the Swedish Ethical Review Authority: 2024-01172.01.

8. From what I could see, all children and young people were accompanied by adults.
9. To ensure participant confidentiality these networks/organizations are not mentioned by name.
10. It is worth mentioning that theatre and performing arts for young audiences are highly segmented based on age, thus might risk communicating an expected progression and advancement.
11. Distributed agency can also be said to be practiced by The Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm (Dramaten), who offers membership for young audiences under 26 years of age to book tickets for a heavily reduced price to, what they claim, are an unlimited number of performances. However, the tickets can only be booked two weeks prior to the performances and therefore in practice only include unsold single tickets, if any.

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Biography

Ellinor Lidén holds a PhD in Theatre Studies from Stockholm University. Her research interest revolves around professional theatre and performing arts for children and young people, where her prime focus is young audience's own perspectives of theatre-going practices, both within and outside a compulsory school context. Being a scholar within theatre and performance studies as well as being anchored within the studies of children's culture Ellinor's work is interdisciplinary, drawing on both theatre- and performance studies as well as childhood studies and often actualizing generational issues.



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Neither Becoming Nor Being? Children's Subjectivity and Early Years Theater

Abstract

This article analyses traditional ways of conceptualising children's subjectivity. We trace historical approaches to children as 'becoming' (in the adult-centred tradition) and the later approach to children as 'being', arguing that both of these metaphysical categories are outdated and inadequate for contemporary research. Instead, we postulate the need for a new, less historically burdened ontological formula, which may be rooted in social ontology of childhood. As a potential source of guidance for such an alternative formula, we point to the practices of theatre for the youngest audiences (aged 0-5), which in fact strengthen children's subjectivity.



Keywords: *childhood; human becoming; human being; early years theater; subjectivity*

This article is philosophical in nature and concerns the issue of child subjectivity understood in the context of the concepts of »becoming« and »being«. For a long time, children were viewed as »becoming« (i.e., not-yet-adult); later, as a result of criticism of this concept and in response to the development of the idea of children's rights, the view of children as »being« was valued. From a contemporary perspective, including the new paradigm of childhood sociology, it is generally accepted that these two concepts should be treated as complementary characteristics of children. Our argument is primarily a critical one: we believe that the concepts of »becoming« and »being« – treated both individually and in conjunction – imply a number of methodological problems. After all, these are metaphysical concepts, strongly entangled in the history of European philosophy. In this article we argue that these terms are outdated and therefore inadequate. Contemporary research on children and childhood could benefit from exploring alternative conceptual foundations. In support of this claim, this article draws upon both philosophical inquiry and our previous empirical research into children's theatre.

In support of this claim, this article draws upon both philosophical inquiry and our previous empirical research into children's theatre. We are particularly interested in the subjectivity of children in the context of theatrical practices addressed to the youngest children (0-3 years old). Moreover, it is in theatrical practices that we seek clues to a possible alternative to the subject described as »becoming« and/or »being«. We assume that theoretical reflection, including philosophical reflection, should always refer to social practices. Our considerations therefore fall within the realm of practical philosophy. And if research on children and childhood is to include an ontological theme, it should primarily be social ontology, going beyond outdated metaphysical schemes.

In 2023-24, we worked on the project »Children as Agents in Early Years Theater Practice«, the results of which we published in a report published by ASSITEJ International. This article is not directly related to that project, but the research results have been an inspiration to us. We do not refer here to data collected on the basis of surveys and interviews with professionals involved in theater for children, nor do we repeat the conclusions contained in the aforementioned report. However, we outlined a theoretical perspective encompassing philosophy and cultural anthropology, and the results of empirical research inspired us to further reflect on children's subjectivity. It should also be noted that the article mainly concerns methodological issues, i.e., in short, it does not directly concern children, but rather ways of thinking about children, ways of strengthening their subjectivity, and the consequences of using specific concepts, which never turn out to be axiologically neutral.

In the text, we refer both to classical, sometimes very old philosophical concepts (Aristotle 2017; Rousseau 1975) and to contemporary research. The point of reference for the latter is mainly the new paradigm of childhood sociology (James & Prout 1990; Qvortrup et al. 1994; Wyness 2006) and its criticism (Lee 1998, King 2007, Ryan 2008). The works of Jens Qvortrup (2004) and Emma Uprichard (2008) have played a particularly important role in the discussion on the perception of the child as »becoming« and/or »being«. The publications of Spyros Spyrou (2018, 2019) have proved to be particularly inspiring. Among other things, he proposes that research on childhood should take into account the consequences of the ontological turn in the humanities and social sciences and make use of the possibilities offered in this regard by so-called relational ontologies (Deleuze & Guattari 2013; Latour 2005). And,

of course, there is also the contemporary philosophy of childhood, many aspects of which we take into account and draw inspiration from (Matthews 1996; Mullin 2007, 2014; Farquhar & White 2016; Kennedy & Bahler 2017).

Both in our research and in this article, we assume that the child is a subject. We see no need to discuss whether the child is a subject. However, we do consider it problematic that, firstly, definitions of subjectivity – which differ from one another but are all constructed by adults – have a specific impact on the way children are perceived and treated (in other words, these definitions are certainly not axiologically neutral). And secondly, although children are subjects, this does not mean, unfortunately, that they are treated as subjects everywhere and in the same way. Subjectivity can be taken away. Subjectivity can be fought for in one way or another, although the youngest children are in a very weak position in such a fight. Subjectivity can also be strengthened. We are interested in such concepts of subjectivity and the social practices resulting from them that strengthen children's subjectivity.

Child as Becoming

This article does not focus solely on the issue of children's subjectivity, although this is an extremely important issue, and not merely a philosophical one. We begin with a brief summary of the concept of subjectivity, because we treat the categories of 'being' and 'becoming' precisely as forms of subjectivity.

It is not easy to give a short and precise answer to the question: »What is a subject/subjectivity?« Indeed, in the history of philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, this question has been repeatedly answered, but no consensus has been reached, and the way subjectivity is understood also changes over time and space. It is easier to point to various aspects of subjectivity depending on the perspective adopted: legal subjectivity, cognitive subjectivity, moral subjectivity. Many influential and still relevant concepts of subjectivity were decidedly one-sided, e.g., the modern European theory of subjectivity, represented mainly by René Descartes and John Locke (Hamou 2018), almost exclusively emphasized human cognitive abilities (logocentric subjectivity). Some of these concepts have been rejected today for various reasons, and definitions of subjectivity have also been developed that did not include children, as well as women, people with disabilities, people of different skin colors, sexual, ethnic, and religious minorities, etc., the so-called »barbarians«, »savages«, »outcasts«, animals. (Todorov 1996).

On the other hand »individual« and »person« as potential equivalents of »subjectivity« reveal a bias towards the single, separate, particular, which is characteristic of the European, and especially liberal, belief system (Kymlicka 1989; Arneil 2002). A given social group, e.g., a class, nationality, or political party, can be a subject, but it can also be deprived of this subjectivity. Moreover, approaches to subjectivity rooted in modern European philosophy usually reduce the scope of this concept to »human«. John Locke defined a »person« as »A thinking, intelligent being that has reason and reflection and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places; which it does by that consciousness, which is inseparable from thinking« (Locke 1961, 280), but he excluded animals from this definition because he distinguished between »person« and »human animal«. It is only in modern times that it has become possible to broaden the definition of person to include animals (Francione 2009).

These and similar dilemmas also apply to children's subjectivity today. The second half of the last century was a period of attempts to reformulate the concept of subjectivity in general, and at the same time to grant and strengthen the subjectivity of children in particular according to various theoretical proposals. Certain ideas, stemming from the romantic-sentimental tradition, described the child as »Innocent« (Jenkins 1998; Garlen 2018); others, stemming from the liberal and neoliberal model of society, emphasize the »agency« of the child (Oswell 2013; Murray 2025).

Among the many attempts to define subjectivity, those that refer to metaphysical categories: »becoming« and »being« deserve attention. However, we do not intend to conduct the argument in this article in a *metaphysical* way. We are interested in »becoming« and »being« as specific forms of subjectivity (or lack thereof) along with the social consequences of their application. In other words, a »subject«, including a »child subject«, can be understood as something/someone that exists and/or is becoming.

In the 19th century, Georg W.F. Hegel proposed a formula for the relationship between being and becoming by introducing a third element: »Nothingness«, understood as the opposite of »being« (Hegel 2010, 59). For Hegel, »becoming« is the result of a dialectical relation between »being« and »nothingness«, it is the sublation (*Aufhebung*) of the opposition between them, their synthesis. Hegel clearly overestimated becoming: »being« and »nothingness« alone mean »nothing« unless there is a dialectical dynamic of »becoming«. As a consequence of this fundamental metaphysical principle, Hegel perceives reality as essentially becoming, dynamic, and this applies to phenomena such as the state, art, and religion: reality appears as historical, and most importantly, this dynamic also encompasses subjectivity.

This way of thinking, based on the categories of »becoming« and »being«, also applies to children – either directly, in the form of a specific theoretical concept referring to these notions, or implicitly, and thus present in certain social practices regardless of theoretical identification.

It can be said that the child is »the great absentee« in the history of philosophy. Children and childhood appeared sporadically, in the context of metaphysical, ethical, or political considerations; philosophers took up the subject of education somewhat more frequently. The philosophically justified goal of education can be synthetically defined as »facilitating a child's becoming an adult«. This type of attitude can be described as an *adultist form of paternalism*. Its contemporary, liberal form derives from the concept of John S. Mill, who excludes children (and »barbarian peoples«) from the principle of freedom, demanding supervision for them (Mill 1963, 224).

The adultist form of paternalism seems to be based on at least two assumptions: *essentialism* and *teleologism*. By essentialism, we mean the idea of the existence of a certain constant determinant of subjectivity (Morton et al. 2009; Phillips 2010). Although essential subjectivity is also a social construct, it is treated as universal and indisputable by those who identify with it. It can also be said that such essential subjectivity tends toward hegemony (Gramsci 1992) and is exclusionary in nature. It encompasses various ways of defining »oneself« by pointing to »the Other«, or defining (someone/something) by indicating shortcomings. For example, the dominant type of subjectivity in medieval and modern Europe was characterized as, among other things, »white«, »male«, »Christian«, »wealthy«,

»rational«, and – most importantly here – »adult«. Anyone who did not meet these criteria was considered »Other«, and therefore »incomplete«, »flawed«, »inferior«, etc.

Essentialism goes hand in hand with *teleologism*. *Telos* – purposeful goal, fulfillment, completion – present especially in Aristotle's metaphysics and ethics, determines and justifies the process of »becoming« a specific form of existence. In this view, becoming is inevitable, and the transition from potentiality to actuality is determined by immutable divine or natural laws. That which is becoming is incomplete, unfinished, immature. In accordance with this, Aristotle (2017), in his ethics of virtue, recognizes that the title of a virtuous person belongs only to those who meet certain criteria:

»We must suppose that all [slaves, women, and children] necessarily partake of the virtues of character, but not in the same way: rather, in such measure as is proper to each in relation to his own function. Hence the ruler must possess virtue of character in completeness (...); while each of the others must have that share of this virtue which is appropriate to them« (Aristotle 2017, 1.13).

As a consequence such a narrative leads to strengthening practices of subordination, violence, and domination: men over women, whites over blacks, free people over slaves, believers over non-believers, aristocrats over peasants, the rich over the poor, the civilized over the »savages« – as well as adults over children.

It should be emphasized that paternalistic attitudes usually postulate a specific »mission« for themselves. The relationship of subordination is justified by some inviolable, eternal divine or natural laws, and paternalistic supervision is explained by »good will«. A »complete«, »full-fledged« subject perceives itself not only as privileged, but also as obligated to 'care' for the »incomplete«, »flawed«, »immature« Others. This is, so to speak, a perverse way of justifying a relationship of subordination. The »civilized« colonizer is convinced of the legitimacy of his own civilizing »mission« towards the »savages« (Todorov 1996). The Christian missionary converts 'pagans' believing that he is doing so—even by force—for their »salvation«. The classic theory of education is built on a similar principle: an adult (parent, teacher, educator, etc.) »disciplines« a child in order to 'shape' them, to bring them closer to maturity. Depending on cultural needs, the child becomes a »good Christian«, a »defender of the homeland«, a »law-abiding citizen«, and thus some desirable adult figure. The disciplining of a child by an adult is equivalent to a »civilizing mission«: the presumed future good justifies physical or symbolic violence (Wivestad 2021; Saugstad 2002).

The narrative of »becoming« was rooted in metaphysics and at the same time dictated by common sense observation. Its ethical and ideological consequences were either not realized or considered obvious and desirable. As a result, for millennia, children were disciplined according to Foucault's formula of »surveillance and punishment« (Foucault 1996), and in many cases were subjected to violence and abuse (DeMause, 1982).

Modern theorists are unable to break with the old ideas about children as Others, as beings in the process of becoming. Essentially, the 20th century brings direct recognition of the humanity of children – »There are no children – there are people«, postulates Janusz Korczak in the mid-1920s. Korczak directly criticizes the perception of the child as becoming: »Weak, small, poor, dependent – they will only become citizens in the future. Indulgent,

harsh, brutal, and always disregarded. A brat, merely a child. A future human being, not a present one. They will only become citizens» (Korczak 2012, 14).

In contemporary research on childhood, changes in the concept of childhood subjectivity as becoming have been criticized late. The new paradigm, consisting of childhood psychology and new childhood sociology, only emerged in the last two or three decades of the 20th century. In 1990, the book *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood. Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood* by Allison James and Alan Prout was published, considered to be the foundation of the then-emerging subdiscipline of childhood sociology and key to the new paradigm. In the perspective of the new paradigm, emphasis was placed on the image of the child as an agent, and in methodological terms, the child was to occupy a central position. What is particularly important in the context we are interested in is that the sociology of childhood strongly questioned the view of the child as becoming. In the discussion on the child as being and becoming, the positions proposed by Emma Uprichard (2008) and Jens Qvortrup (2009) proved to be particularly relevant.

In both cases, researchers concluded that the best solution was to construct a concept of childhood that combines becoming and being. There were also proposals to go beyond the binary opposition or at least the conjunction of becoming and being by, for example, adding a third concept – »been« or »have been« (Cross 2009; Hanson 2017; Kingdon 2019). Yet another option includes the concept of »belonging« added to »becoming« and »being« (Leggett, Ford 2015).

The very idea of a »new paradigm« or »new sociology of childhood« is sometimes questioned, among other things, because of doubts about its actual »novelty« (King 2007; Ryan 2008; Leonard 2016). It can be said that while the earlier (though not necessarily »old«) approach was based in a one-sided, reductionist way on the achievements of developmental psychology, the new approach (though perhaps not so »new«) is similarly one-sidedly based on sociology. In both cases, however, we are dealing with some form of reductionism (Spyrou et al., 2019).

Child as Being

From the viewpoint of the new paradigm of childhood studies, the perspective of »being« seems appropriate: »New sociological approaches to the study of childhood is the move to study real children or the experiences of being a child« (James et al. 1998, 207). The sociological-ethnographic point of view emphasizes the »child here and now«, who is an active participant in social reality (Banković 2014, 132).

It can be assumed that both the broader concept of »human being« and the resulting »child as human being« have played and continue to play a very important role, at least in the normative dimension, i.e., as the basis for formulating postulates that make up, among other things, the ideas of human rights and children's rights (Hága 2023, 4). If such rights are to be considered universal, it seems essential to base them on the category of »being«, not only in terms of terminology (»human being«) but also in terms of substance. The proposed universality (of the declaration, convention) requires an abstract subject. This is part of the legacy of Enlightenment philosophy, in which the universality of normative postulates in law, politics, and ethics was justified by reference to the universality of descriptive postulates in mathematics, physics, and biology. However, the abstract subject (»being«) raises a number

of theoretical and political problems, ranging from accusations of Eurocentrism to criticism of the failure to take cultural diversity into account (Müller 2012). We do not wish to answer the question of whether it is possible to maintain the postulate of the universality of human and children's rights without substantial universality, but we would like to point out that the phrases »all human beings« and »every child« are (for better or worse) rooted in specific philosophical ideas.

The concept of »being« – whether applied to a child or to anyone or anything else – is as deeply rooted in European philosophical tradition as it is problematic. Even medieval philosophers, mainly Pierre Abelard and William Ockham (see Hamelin 2015) realized that conceiving of the world based on the Greek formula τὸ ὄν (or the Latin *ens*, *entia*) from the writings of Plato and Aristotle inevitably leads to a number of metaphysical difficulties – so they tried to base their ontology on *res* (real things) rather than *ens* (being). In the 20th century, neopositivists including Rudolf Carnap and Moritz Schlick (see Bergmann 1954) demonstrated that as a philosophical term, »being« is essentially a hypostasis in the logical sense, i.e., an »empty« concept, and should only be used in a grammatical sense, not as a metaphysical postulate. In a completely different philosophical tradition, Jacques Derrida proposed deconstructing classical European »metaphysics of presence« as constructed around binary oppositions, mainly the opposition between 'being' and »becoming« (Derrida 1998). First of all, »being« itself implies a static perspective, and its abstract nature implies an ahistorical perspective. From both a biological and historical point of view, »being« itself proves to be inadequate. Due to its philosophical origins, »being«, treated only as an alternative to »becoming« also in relation to children and childhood, turns out to be a linguistic hypostasis in the sense of a logical fallacy.

How would these and similar criticisms apply to children and childhood studies? Certainly, the narrative of childhood from the perspective of »being«, like the justification for the universality of children's rights, proves to be methodologically more reliable and ethically less 'burdened' than the old narratives based on »becoming«. At the same time, if we were to simply replace one dominant concept with another dominant concept, we would quickly encounter further difficulties. If we were to uncritically apply the idea of the child as »being« within the new paradigm of the sociology of childhood, we would become entangled in contradictions.

How can we reconcile static »being« with the assumption that »Childhood is a social construction« (Prout & James 1997, 8)? Static, concrete, self-existent »being« in the entire tradition of European philosophy is precisely the opposite of something that constitutes a social construct (Kingdon 2018, 354). A significant part of contemporary philosophy and social sciences strongly rejects the concept of »being« in favor of 'becoming' – this applies, among others, to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (»becoming-child«: Deleuze & Guattari 2013), Bruno Latour (relational actor-network theory: Latour 2005), feminism (e.g., Rosi Braidotti's »nomadic subject«: Braidotti 2011, and Judith Butler's »performative subject«: Butler 1990), and new materialism (e.g. intra-active agency: Barad 2007). We would venture to say that, unlike in the 19th century, social sciences in the 20th and 21st centuries are based on the ontology of »becoming« – even independently of Hegel's earlier proposals. This also applies to the natural sciences: from the theory of evolution to quantum mechanics, the

contemporary scientific view of the world makes less and less use of the old static concept of »being.«

For about twenty years, we have been observing a so-called ontological turn in the social sciences and humanities. This turn does not mean a simple »return« to earlier ontological axioms (Spyrou 2019, 316). Of course, earlier ontologies, derived from ancient philosophy, were not focused solely on »being«, but also on, for example, processes, events, facts, things. However, the contemporary ontological turn is essentially focused on »becoming« and understands reality (including childhood) as »fluid«, multidimensional, and non-binary: »The world-humans, non-humans, and whatever—just is an indefinite multiplicity of performative entities endlessly becoming in decentered and emergent dances of agency« (Pickering 2017, 136), as Andrew Pickering puts it. Perhaps the most intensively developed form of the new ontology is the set of relational ontologies, which emphasize not »objects« but the relationships between them (Latour 2005; Thiele 2016; Bergstedt 2021; Szabó 2024). In classical ontologies, relations occur between »beings«, while in relational ontologies, entities are constituted from networks of relations, characterized more as »becoming« than »being«.

Of course, the sociological paradigm of »being-centered« childhood studies may in some way abstract from these clear trends, but in a broader perspective, this means at least a hindrance to interdisciplinary debate. On the other hand, the above-mentioned contemporary philosophical trends clearly oriented towards »becoming« are certainly not »naive« enough to ignore the ethical implications of the old, paternalistic narrative about children.

To organize and simplify the argument so far, we can consider at least the following three positions: we can assume that (1) the correct narrative about children and childhood is exclusively the perspective of becoming; we can assume that, on the contrary, (2) the correct narrative about children and childhood is exclusively the perspective of being; we can also assume that (3) when treated separately, both perspectives are flawed, so we should adopt a perspective that combines the view of children as »becoming« and as »being« (Cassidy & Lone 2020, 17). Usually, conjunction (option 3) is treated as a method of avoiding the problems arising from the two previous options (Banković 2014, 135). However, some doubts remain unresolved.

What would it mean for children's subjectivity to be both »being« and »becoming«? It seems that the problem of the relationship between »being« and »becoming« is an ontological analogy to the epistemological problem of the relationship between body and mind. In the past, numerous attempts were made to justify the dominance of one over the other or to demonstrate some form of complementarity between body and mind. In the second half of the 20th century, this dispute effectively disappeared as completely new concepts emerged, notably the theories of *embodied cognition* (Francisco Varela) and *extended cognition* (David Chalmers). From this new point of view, the traditional content of the old concepts of body and mind was invalidated (Peruzzo & Stoparo 2022) – treated as a binary opposition or in a complementary way, body and mind turned out to be outdated categories.

Perhaps, in addition to the three possible ways of dealing with the idea of child as being and/or as becoming, there is a fourth option, namely to recognize that (4) none of the above options is correct and that the most appropriate solution would be to abandon the concepts of becoming and existence altogether.

Children's Subjectivity in Theater Practices

From the outset of our research, we have assumed that theory (philosophical, sociological, psychological, pedagogical) should be strongly correlated with social practice, and that theory concerning children and childhood should be correlated with social practices involving children. In some areas of the humanities – including, and perhaps especially, philosophy – the tendency to theorize often takes precedence over the need to ground research reflection in real social practices. If we are looking for a philosophical formula for children's subjectivity, it is in order to strengthen that subjectivity (and thus to strengthen social practices that promote the development of children's subjectivity). We criticize some proposals for conceptualizing the child subject in order to avoid harmful prejudices hidden in many seemingly »innocent« concepts. The *ontology of childhood* seems important and interesting to us, as long as it takes the form of a *social ontology of childhood*. However, the reconstruction of the conceptual apparatus is not merely a technical exercise: we are looking for a way of thinking about childhood that allows us to emphasize the ethical aspect of the child's presence in the socio-cultural structure.

As we have seen, there are many reasons why the perspective of »being« and »becoming« in childhood studies poses a serious challenge. Moreover, it seems that none of the solutions is fully satisfactory in terms of theory. First of all, both concepts – taken separately and together – are old, or rather outdated. Of course, not every old concept becomes obsolete, but usually changes in theory or entire paradigms are associated with the modification of the conceptual apparatus or its abandonment in favor of a new one.

It is no surprise that in contemporary social sciences and humanities, especially in philosophy, many traditional concepts have been questioned. So if we agree with the postulate of distinguishing a specific type of subjectivity, namely childhood subjectivity, which for centuries has »eluded« philosophy and science, then this certainly requires a revision of key concepts. If a new paradigm for childhood research has emerged, why should we stubbornly cling to old metaphysical categories? Since we are postulating a change not only in the research attitude towards children, but also the need for changes in education, access to culture, strengthening children's agency, developing legal protection, developing a partnership-based, inclusive treatment of children, etc., – this certainly requires the application of concepts that are not burdened by centuries of tradition, which in this case plays no positive role. On the contrary, as in the case of animals, among others, for a very long time it has mainly served to maintain a state of subordination and domination.

As we know, social reality has not been kind to children for centuries and millennia. Children – the younger they are, the more so – can and even should be considered an oppressed group (Medina-Minton 2018; Smith 2024). The issue of childhood undoubtedly has cognitive, ontological, educational, and other dimensions, but in our opinion, it is primarily ethical. Postulating children's subjectivity is not only a methodological measure justified by various concepts, but also has ethical consequences. The choice of one ontological basis or another in theoretical considerations is not axiologically neutral.

This conclusion can also be drawn from the *Children as Agents* project mentioned in the introduction, which sought to provide a partial answer to the question of how very young children are perceived today in the context of performative practices. The starting point of the research was the assumption of the existence of a network of social beliefs regarding

children's agency and subjectivity as one of the important premises of children's subjectivity. The report's conclusions reveal a complex and often paradoxical situation regarding the perception of children as human beings among artists and theater professionals. Even though the youngest children are covered by legal protection, they are not universally recognized as equal entities in social space (Śliwerski 2017). The historically dominant and unfortunately still current belief is that the youngest children are human becoming, not human being. We believe that the legal context of protecting the rights of the youngest children (*Declaration and Convention on the Rights of the Child*) should be solidly strengthened by actively promoting the perception of the youngest children as not only active, but above all as different but equal participants in social practices. The social situation of the youngest child is a paradox. The historically dominant model of social relations, in which the recognized subject is an adult, and culture and social institutions have been and are created by adults and for adults and they do not take into account the ontological and psychophysical characteristics of the youngest children. On the other hand, their assessment and social expectations towards them are often formulated from the perspective of adults.

We therefore believe that, in order to effectively combat adultism (Adami 2024), we must not only dismantle outdated concepts and paradigms, but also seek new theoretical inspiration in social practices whose traditions and working methods are deeply rooted in the conviction that children are ethically equal individuals.

The uniqueness of Early Years Theater lies, among other things, in the belief shared by many artists that they try to treat the youngest child as equal and in the artistic process they are perceived as an equal partner. As an entity that Is, not just Becoming. While maintaining the perspective in which a specific child is Different from us, adults, but also Equal as a socially perceived entity. In this sense, EYT is one of the most important practices that has the power to strengthen beliefs about the subjectivity and equality of the youngest children as participants in social relationships.

Therefore, we assume that – perhaps – more attention should be paid to artistic practices, especially theatrical practices addressed to the youngest audience (i.e., children aged 0 to 3). Almost fifty years ago, theatre practitioners recognised that very young children, particularly those aged 0 to 3, were not merely the audience of tomorrow and future adults, but fully-fledged partners for whom distinct and separate methods of artistic work and communication on stage needed to be developed. And to this end, one should not simply simplify existing theatrical methods, but rather devise new ones (van der Water 2012).

The Italian theatre company *La Baracca Testoni Ragazzi* is often regarded as the cradle of theatre for very young children in Europe and remains its most influential force. It has its own distinctive working methods and aesthetic, and is the most active in promoting very young children as equal participants in social life. Scandinavian artists and institutions also deserve special mention in this context, as their work was instrumental in the early development of this approach and continues to be successfully pursued in many places to this day. In Sweden, in addition to the widely known Suzanne Osten and the *Unga Klara* group, mention should be made of, for example, *Theater Tre* in Stockholm and the long-standing work of Sara Myrberg as artistic director. In Finland, meanwhile, alongside the visual dance and mime theatre Auraco, it is worth highlighting the role of *Annantalo Art Center* in Helsinki and the *Bravo* festival organised by ASSITEJ Finland.

When we look at this practice as a whole, institutionally supported by the *Small Size Network*, which brings together creators and organizations working for the youngest audiences, where issues of subjectivity are discussed and thematized (Frabetti 2016) in relation to the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Certain formulas of child subjectivity are implemented (reinforced) in practice preceding theoretical reflection, or – to put it bluntly – artists-practitioners do what theorists think (and talk) about. And looking at social practices can reveal solutions to theoretical problems that would otherwise be difficult to grasp.

Why theater? This practice has the potential to be empirically studied with a view to building new social ontologies. It seems to us, as theorists, that in the context of a conceptual crisis, we need insight into and observation of such practices that will allow us to set the direction for describing this ontology anew.

First and foremost, theater for the youngest is aimed at consciously and programmatically strengthening children's subjectivity. In addition, theater for the youngest has the value of building relationships in the sense of social interaction. This means that it is directed at real subjects existing »here and now« (children, parents/guardians, artists) and without the need to refer to outdated metaphysical categories. Theater also strengthens subjectivity by developing a partnership-based attitude towards children, listening to their voices, and giving them space and time to explore. Theatrical activities foster a sense of community, enabling the transcendence of the individual perspective in favor of a collective, communal experience. In other words, they are a form of social, public situation in which the child acts as a person, as a subject, fully equal to the other participants in the event. It can also be said that theater fulfills an emancipatory function. The phenomenon of theater for the youngest is not so much a »micro-scale picture of social behavior« as it is a set of practices that determine the direction of the child's empowerment processes; it is a kind of »laboratory of emancipation«, and thus serves not only a descriptive function, but mainly a normative (or even norm-creating) one. Importantly, theater for children, such as the examples given above, does not attempt to shape them according to the worst adultist models. It is not characterized by the didacticism that directly results from viewing the child as »becoming«. On the contrary, taking into account the difference between adults and children, it weakens adultism.

Looking at performances produced for the youngest audiences, we see neither »becoming« nor »being«. In this context—and many other contexts—such terms are not false or erroneous, but simply unwieldy and cumbersome.

Our previous empirical research on this phenomenon has shown that professionals involved in children's theater (directors, actors, set designers, etc.), regardless of the cultural circle in which they practice their art, share the belief that children are subjects. This is very often a so-called »silent assumption« that accompanies theatrical activities regardless of theoretical reflection. It is therefore primary: the very practice of empowering children precedes the deliberations of theorists. In this case, the task of researchers would not be to develop some abstract model of subjectivity, which could then be applied in the world of social practices, but to extract those applications that are already in use, describe them, and further strengthen them.

Our research also showed that although artists undertake activities already accepting an implicit idea of the child as a subject, these ideas are often vague, ambiguous, and unclear. Is the child a subject? Yes, practitioners agree. But what exactly does that mean? Is it »rational«?

Is it »causal«? Perhaps »autonomous«? Here, it is not so much doubt as uncertainty that arises. This is not surprising – an actor, for example, is not required to have a precise knowledge of philosophical, sociological, or other terms. A lack of conceptual precision in no way limits practical competence or hinders the realization of artistic projects. A given concept only begins to be perceived as problematic when questions about its meaning and context are raised.

In view of the difficulties indicated in the previous two parts related to the concepts of »becoming« and »being« understood as ontological forms of a certain concept of subjectivity, can the interpretation of theatrical practices for the youngest children help to resolve this dilemma? Yes – and probably not only in relation to this particular problem. It can be said that the method of philosophical interpretation of artistic practices presented here refers to the recommendation formulated by Ludwig Wittgenstein: »Don't think, but look!« (Wittgenstein 2009, 66). We would say: »Don't only think, but also look!«.

Conclusion

In this article, we have attempted to trace the origins and consequences of the concepts of »becoming« and »being« treated as specific forms of subjectivity. The starting point is the conception of the child as »becoming« – probably the oldest, most deeply rooted in culture, present implicate in common perceptions of children and explicate in old theories of childhood. Due to its harmful consequences, it has found an alternative in the form of the concept of »being« or in the form of the conjunction of »becoming« and »being«. However, both of these concepts belong to a set of terms that stem from classical metaphysics and are therefore clearly inadequate. Is there an alternative to these concepts? Yes, but in our opinion, it is not so much a matter of replacing one term with another, but rather of thoroughly reformulating the ontological assumptions on which contemporary research on childhood is based. We seek guidance primarily in theatrical practices addressed to the youngest audience. They are not »burdened« by traditional patterns of thinking, and their formal innovation is conducive to the development of alternative theoretical solutions.

Can we already draw any conclusions—albeit very preliminary ones—regarding the social ontology of childhood from our research on children's theatre to date? Perhaps, within the theoretical framework of philosophy and sociology, relational ontology offers an alternative to the concepts of »becoming« and »being«. Relational ontology is a relatively new position within the broader ontological turn in the humanities and has also emerged in childhood studies over the last few years (Benjamin 2016; Alanen 2017; Spyrou 2018; Deszcz-Tryhubczak & García-González 2023). It is therefore not entirely new, but we assume that it still requires further research and that it can be successfully applied to the issue of EYT.

We have only very briefly mentioned relational ontologies earlier in this article., but by way of conclusion we can formulate a working hypothesis according to which elements of relational ontology need not be »imposed« on practices (e.g. theatrical ones). Rather, relationality is already »embedded« in theatrical practices, as a kind of independent of any particular theoretical interpretations of these practices, and can be »extracted« from them by researchers. And then reinforced, which would be equivalent to strengthening children's subjectivity.

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The Ark, Dublin: Children's Cultural Archives and the Space in Between

Abstract

This research paper addresses the poetics and politics of the children's cultural archive held at The Ark, a custom-built children's cultural centre in the heart of Dublin city, Ireland, that opened its doors to the public in 1995. This is one of several outputs from the ongoing LA-TRAC project, a collaboration between The Ark and the School of English, Trinity College Dublin. The ultimate goal of the LA-TRAC project is to use the archive held at The Ark to establish a Living Archive for Teachers, Researchers, Artists, and Children. The LA-TRAC project asks – how do we go about creating living cultural archives with, about, and for children? In this paper, I reflect on the early stages of the research, map out the nature of The Ark archive, and highlight its research potential and possibilities. The first two sections provide an overview of the archive and theorise its distinct nature in terms of child and adult voices; the following three sections set out the potential of the archive to contribute to and advance broader cultural debates on the politics of childhood in Ireland, on Irish theatre history, and on marginalised voices. I suggest that the exploration of the potential of The Ark archive may act as a model for the research and development of children's cultural archives across Europe. This study, therefore, may be of particular interest to other researchers working in the field of children's cultural archives.

Keywords: archives; history; Europe; Ireland

Introduction

This research paper addresses the poetics and politics of the children's cultural archive held at The Ark, a custom-built children's cultural centre in the heart of Dublin city, Ireland, that opened its doors to the public in 1995. This is one of several outputs from the ongoing LA-TRAC project, a collaboration between The Ark and the School of English, Trinity College Dublin and is supported by Trinity's Research Boost programme. The ultimate goal of the LA-TRAC project is to use the archive held at The Ark to establish a **Living Archive for Teachers, Researchers, Artists, and Children**. The project is guided by principles of equality, diversity, and inclusion as well as Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which notes: 'State Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.' The LA-TRAC project asks – how do we go about creating living cultural archives *with, about, and for* children?

In this paper, in my capacity as Principal Investigator on the project, I reflect on the early stages of the research, map out the nature of The Ark archive, and highlight its research potential and possibilities. In this sense, this paper differs from a traditional research paper in that it focuses on an exploratory stage rather than on research findings of a completed project. The paper is divided into sections: the first two sections provide an overview of the archive and theorise its distinct nature in terms of child and adult voices; the following three sections set out the potential of the archive to contribute to and advance broader cultural debates on the politics of childhood in Ireland, on Irish theatre history, and on marginalised voices. Throughout, I address the politics of the children's cultural archive by positioning the archive as a political space of childhood. I also examine the poetics of the archive by discussing select artistic materials connected to Irish theatre. I suggest that the exploration of the potential of The Ark archive may act as a model for the research and development of children's cultural archives across Europe. This study, therefore, may be of particular interest to other researchers working in the field of children's cultural archives.

Despite the fact that The Ark archive is a central repository of our cultural heritage, it has never been researched in detail. As demonstrated below, this study of the poetics and politics of the archive necessitates an interdisciplinary approach and draws on a range of critical and theoretical perspectives, from broader theories on archives (Derrida, 1996; Steedman, 2002; Foucault, 1972; Osborne, 1999; Lustig, 2019) to children's rights (Lundy, 2007) through to children's literature (Hollindale 1997; Rose 1994; Rudd 2010) and children's cultural heritage (Sparrman, Sjöberg, et al, 2024). The political nature of the archive is well documented, such as in Michel Foucault's exploration of the power dynamics of the archive in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) and Thomas Osborne's (1999) argument that no archive is free of politics and 'it would be a mistake ever to think that there could be an archive without a politics of the archive' (Osborne, p. 55). Within children's cultural archives a distinct and complicated set of politics can be found, as demonstrated by scholarship from the Swedish 'Children's Cultural Heritage: Visual Voices from the Archives' project. Of particular significance are the project's collective paper and the special issue of *Archives and Records* from 2024. As the authors point out, children's cultural archives are also political spaces (Sparrman, Sjöberg, et al, 2024, p. 83). The works of Anna Sparrman, Victoria Hoyle, Johanna Sjöberg – and others – pose important questions about the role and function of children's cultural archives, the power dynamics

involved in archival processes, the heterogeneous nature of childhood experiences, and about the position of children – past, present, and future – within such complex discourses. At the end of their introduction to the special issue of *Archives and Records*, Sparrman, Hoyle, et al encourage us to 'think of children not as the subjects of extraordinary projects, engagements, or interventions but as integral to the vision of the archive' (Sparrman, Hoyle, et al, 2024, p. 214), thus ensuring that the role of children is considered throughout every aspect of the process, from constructing a knowledge organisation system through to accessing and using the archive. These principles have directly informed the work of the LA-TRAC project.

The project has two main stages: Stage 1 is an exploratory stage that asks: how do we build and make accessible a children's cultural archive for Teachers, Researchers, Artists, and (especially) Children? Based on these research findings, we plan to catalogue and archive the materials according to principles of best practice, establish a knowledge organisation system that caters for multiple stakeholders, and open up the archive as a living archive. It is envisaged that Stage 1 will pave the way for Stage 2, where we have aspirations to collaborate with European partners to develop a multi-lingual European database and online platform of children's cultural archives.

Overview: Toward a Living Archive

Founded in 1995, The Ark is a registered charity, a non-profit organisation now mostly funded by the Irish Government. It is the most significant children's cultural institution on the island of Ireland, and one of the only custom-built children's cultural centres in Europe. Our research has revealed that, since its founding, The Ark has carefully built, developed, and curated a distinct archive. Significant materials from across all of the programmes have been selected for inclusion, labelled appropriately, and then stored for posterity. The Ark retains particular types of material from workshops, exhibitions, performances and marketing. These can include, for example, contracts, financial records, scripts, children's feedback forms, and so on. References to these practices can also be found in the archive itself. As a result of this work, The Ark now holds over thirty years of archival material on children's culture, from dance and theatre through to literature, visual arts, music and film. These are cultural productions that are produced for, and sometimes with, children at The Ark. The archive also holds records of children's evaluations and feedback on programmes as well as children's creative responses and creative activities, such as paintings, drawings, poems and short stories. As a result, this is a children's cultural archive both in the sense that it houses material related to professional cultural productions made *for* children, but also holds the voices and creative outputs *of* children. The Ark archive, therefore, differs from other children's cultural archives such as the Swedish Archive of Children's Art (SBBA), the archive central to the Children's Cultural Heritage project. SBBA 'holds drawings, painting, film, and digital images made by children and young people' (Sparrman, Sjöberg, et al, 2024, p. 82), while The Ark is a children's cultural archive that contains material – both poetic and political – produced by adults as well as by children.

With ambitious goals, we began the LA-TRAC project by first conducting a survey of materials held in The Ark and thereby gaining a better understanding of the nature and range of items in the uncatalogued archive. It was determined that the archival materials are currently held in two different forms: analogue and born digital. The analogue aspects of

the archive are stored in boxes across three rooms in The Ark's basement, with born digital content (mostly since 2016) being held on the server. An archivist, Rebecca Casey, was hired to work on the archives over a 9-week period in November 2024 and to conduct a survey of the analogue records that hold materials from adults and children. These include paper records, posters, artwork, objects (t-shirts and badges), photographs, reversal film slides, floppy disks, DVDs, CDs, VHS, SV videos, mini disks and cassette tapes. There were two main outputs from this initial task: A detailed report with recommendations; and a box-list spreadsheet with almost 4,000 columns of data listing information/materials held in 302 containers (mostly boxes). This detailed spreadsheet will form the basis for a longer-term goal of Stage 1 of the LA-TRAC project – the cataloguing of The Ark's archive.

According to the archivist's report, clear record-keeping has been a priority at The Ark since it opened and the archive contains the following:

Boxes with records relating to programmes typically comprise multiple brochures; typed and handwritten notes on paper/scrap paper; a note (sometimes on scrap paper) with individuals' name/address/contact details; letters of agreement/formal engagement/contracts/deal memos issued by The Ark; correspondence with artists regarding their programmes (fax, letters or emails); technical specifications; schedules of events/itineraries; resources/notes for teachers/teacher's packs; notes for staff; invoices and budgets; performers bios/CVs and related articles/reviews; proposals for funding; communication with external stakeholders; scripts; workshop sheets; children's artwork; children's evaluations of programmes (artwork/letters); reversal film slides and photographs. (Casey, 2024, p. 7)

It appears that the majority of the materials relate to theatre, musical theatre, music, art or visual arts, while poetry, dance, photography and storytelling feature to a lesser extent. A small number of materials relate to other programmes such as architecture, computers (digital programmes) and animation. We have grouped these records into two distinct categories: Ark administration (establishment and foundation, day to day running and Ark ethos); and Ark programmes and collaborations (including outreach). From this archival work, a more complete picture of the breadth and depth of the archive has come into focus. The extensive collection provides evidence of concept development, ethos and construction, programmes held at The Ark, scripts and technical designs, and collaborations and outreach initiatives – this includes work in children's hospitals and in inner-city communities. Meanwhile, the decision to preserve children's evaluations and feedback on programmes over the thirty year period has ensured that the collection includes diverse children's voices from across the decades, voices which typically are not present in the historical record (Sparrman, Hoyle, et al, 2024, p. 208).

Although the archival material is carefully labelled, organised, and stored, The Ark archive remains uncatalogued and is, therefore, a closed archive. If, as the critic Charlotte McIvor points out, 'Archives must be encountered in order to live' (McIvor, 2019, p. 8), then they must be made accessible to adults and children through knowledge organisation systems. Rather than simply producing a knowledge organisation system and subsequently inviting these stakeholders to use it, a key aspect of the LA-TRAC project is to consult with stakeholders

(teachers, researchers, artists, and children) and then ascertain the most appropriate knowledge organisation system for these cohorts; one that will cater to their specific needs, that will easily facilitate encounters, and that will ensure this is a living archive. Significantly, and adopting a rights based approach in line with the broader principles of The Ark, children will also offer input at an early stage of the process on how best to design and provide access to this children's cultural archive. If, as noted above, children are 'integral to the vision of the archive' then they should also be integral in the design of the knowledge organisation system that will then allow us to open up, develop, analyse, and make accessible one of Europe's most important children's cultural archives as a *living* archive.

Drawing on the work of the Living Archives project (2018) at Malmö University, Amalia G. Sabiescu (2020) refers to living archives as the 'practices and environments that connect the organisation, curation and transmission of memory with present-bound creative, performative, and participatory processes' and addresses the potential 'synergy between creative and archival practices' (Sabiescu, 2020, p. 497). Similarly, the LA-TRAC project's aim is also to explore this 'synergy between creative and archival practices' – especially in relation to teachers, artists, and children – and to connect the curation of archival materials with creative and participatory processes in the present, thus establishing a living archive. Given that this is a cultural archive, it is well disposed to such synergy.

For researchers, too, this archive also holds great power. In 'The Ordinarity of the Archive', Osborne discusses the 'secret' archive that is not open to the public. He argues that it becomes an 'instrument of power' when there is a 'transition from secrecy to publicity' and the archive is made accessible to the public (Osborne, 1999, p. 56). The Ark archive can be similarly understood as an instrument of power when we think about the possibilities it might hold if changed from a 'closed' to an accessible 'living' archive. Specifically, it has the potential to transform existing understandings of the politics of children's culture as well as of Irish culture more broadly, as discussed below.

A Distinct Space of Child and Adult Voices

The Ark as an institution is significant, as are records pertaining to its history and development. The Ark's commitment to commissioning great, original art for children is integral to its ethos and the records attest to this. As a result of this established tradition of commissioning (rather than simply being a receiving house), the archive holds extensive original material connected to artists from Ireland (and abroad), including Jole Bartoli, Paula Meehan, Helen O'Connell, Roddy Doyle, Anna Carey, Wayne Jordan, Bryan Burroughs, and Aaron Monaghan, and is thereby a significant repository of Irish cultural heritage. The fact that members of the Children's Council at the Ark often play a role in the creative development of a project, and that children's artwork and responses to exhibitions, performances and programmes were collected and preserved by The Ark, points to an archive where child perspectives and children's voice are positioned as equal in value to those of adults. We can see from the archive how The Ark promoted creativity and inclusion for children throughout the decades with programmes such as: 'Flags Along the River', which centred on designing and making flags for poles on either side of the Dublin's River Liffey (1995); 'Plant an Idea', a mosaic programme for children inspired by National Botanic Garden's carnivorous plants (2004); The Stained Glass Project, a collaboration with five schools in Dublin which resulted in the

creation of a stained glass window for each school (2005); and 'Blown Away', a collaboration with Cork Midsummer Festival that facilitated children of pre-school age to create public artwork (2006).

Sparrman, Sjöberg, et al refer in general terms to children's cultural archives as political spaces; yet The Ark archive is somewhat unique in that it contains its own distinct set of politics that arise from its holdings of adult-produced materials as well as child-produced materials. It can, therefore, be understood as a site of intersection of child and adult voices, as a *space* where adult ideas of childhood and children's experiences of childhood are in dialogue with each other. Children's literatures studies, one of the more established research areas in children's cultural studies, takes an inherently interdisciplinary approach and, therefore, can provide a point of entry for the examination of the children's cultural archive in such spatial terms.

Peter Hollindale's work on 'childness' is a useful way to conceptualise such an archive. Writing from within children's literature studies and addressing the act of reading children's books as a complex event, Hollindale describes childness as a space where 'many kinds of interest in childhood meet ...: the child's concern with the presentness of her own childhood, and interest in its possibilities; the adult's recall of childhood and desire to refresh the roots and keep a sense of continuous identity; and the adult's hopes and beliefs and desires about childhood, what it is and what it ought to be.' (Hollindale, 1997, p. 42) Considering the archive as a space of childness not only opens up ways to examine the complex power-dynamics of child-adult relations but also allows us to move beyond simplistic binaries of child and adult. David Rudd's work on children's literature is particularly informative in our exploration of the children's cultural archive. In response to psychologist Jaqueline Rose's famous claim that children's literature is about adults' wants and desires rather than those of children (Rose, 1994), Rudd argues that a Bakhtinian reading of the process, would be more productive and 'would point to »the space in between« as precisely where things happen (in what he terms »the border zone«), instead of conceiving isolated authors (adults) in »command«, with passive readers (children) in danger of »seduction«, and insular texts waiting to trap readers with their baited »image of the child« (Rudd, 2010, p. 294). The Ark archive can be conceived of as precisely that, 'a space in between', a space of diverse child and diverse adult voices that presents an opportunity to explore complex child-adult power dynamics in relational terms rather than solely in terms of difference. The archive, therefore, offers significant research potential for the analysis of children's constructions of childhood and adults' constructions of childhood and the complex ways in which they intersect across three decades.

Physical Space and the Politics of the Archive

An analysis of the founding documents of The Ark held within the archive provides a wonderful insight into the shifting politics and perceptions of childhood in Ireland in the early 1990s. The earliest documents in the archive provide a unique narrative about the dreams and ambitions of conceiving a children's cultural space in the centre of Dublin. They record how Ireland formally ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992 and in October of that same year Martin Drury (who would become the first artistic director of The Ark) was hired by Temple Bar Properties Ltd to conduct a feasibility study for the creation of a children's cultural centre. These founding documents make for a fascinating read: the vision

and ambition of this project shaped by children's rights, led to children's culture being placed at the centre of a huge urban renewal project in the capital city, a project that was in part supported by European funding: Temple Bar Properties secured the original (capital) funding from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) with matching funds from the Irish Exchequer through the Department of the Environment. These foundational materials in the archive provide a narrative that reveals a massive shift in political attitudes toward children in Ireland the 1990s, moving from a society that, notoriously, often silenced children when they did try to speak up about abuse and neglect, to a culture that began to understand, acknowledge, and promote children's rights and to inscribe a physical space for children on the landscape of the capital city.

Out of these ambitions for a child-centred children's cultural centre came The Ark building itself. The Ark occupies the site of a 1725 Presbyterian Meeting House and maintains the six-bay façade to Eustace Street. The archive contains records relating to the design and repurposing of the site as a children's cultural centre and documents the way in which the architecture of the new centre invokes the memory of the original building. According to an article in *The Journal of the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland* (May 1996), this is a building that 'in its general design and in its detail signals respect for children' (p. 32) – the theatre seating and toilets, for example, are all child-sized. We can see from this that the building is valued in architectural and cultural terms, past and present. While The Ark's identity is firmly tied to the building in the Temple Bar district in Dublin's city centre, it should be noted that its activities are not confined to the building it occupies; its reach spreads throughout Dublin City, into local communities, out to national schools across the country through its online initiatives, and to the US and across Europe through international collaborations. And while the archival material highlights the value of the building as space for children, conversely the building may be understood as conferring a value on all that it holds, from artistic programmes to the archive itself.

One of the questions raised by the LA-TRAC project, is where – in physical terms – might The Ark archive be located in the future? Should it be relocated to a university library, for example, with all its tools for cataloguing and preserving, or should it remain within The Ark itself, despite the limitations of that physical space? The location of the archive has a direct impact on how the archive might be accessed, read and understood. As has been argued by numerous scholars, the position of a historical children's book collection within a university library, for example, confers a status on that collection and on the books within that collection. (Kidd, 2011; Lundin, 2004; Whyte & O'Sullivan, 2022) To move the archive might confer a similar status on its materials. However, specialised access is normally required in university libraries and there is often no access for children who may want to engage with this aspect of their cultural heritage. This is a space reserved for adult researchers, in the main. Therefore, if the archive is kept within The Ark itself, it is not conferred with the same sense of value as that of a collection within a university library. However, its value – and potential – is evident in a different way. It is housed within an organisation that places the rights of the child to the fore of all that it does and, therefore, holds the potential for a child-centred approach to the archive. This includes, for example, granting children access to the archive and to a history of children's culture; using material in the archive as a source of inspiration for artistic workshops for children; and drawing on cultural programmes from the past to create cultural outputs for

children in the present. The Ark's Mission Statement notes 'Our work is our advocacy' (www.ark.ie) and the archive fits directly within this mission statement. To remove the archive from The Ark for preservation purposes, for example, and move it to a library that does not adhere to The Ark's principles on children's rights, participation, and access, would therefore have a direct impact on how the archive could be conceived and understood as a 'children's cultural archive'. The unique value conferred on the archive by holding it in The Ark building is its potential for access – an archival space for children as well as adults.

The physical space of The Ark building has also had a formative impact on artistic creations. For example, performances commissioned to take place within The Ark building are directly shaped by the possibilities of the site itself. The Ark's commissioning process has meant that it is one of the leaders in the field in producing children's theatre in Ireland and, as a result, it can be concluded that much of Irish theatre for children over the last number of decades has been directly shaped by the performance spaces in The Ark. As outlined below, an analysis of materials in the archive that relate to these theatre productions also demonstrates the important role that this archive can play in providing a more complete picture of Irish plays as well as of Irish theatre history.

Irish Theatre and the Poetics of the Archive

While children's literature in Ireland has received increased attention in academia in recent years, this has not been the case for children's theatre. Despite its important role in the development of drama in Ireland, references to The Ark are noticeably absent from academic histories, surveys, and criticism of Irish theatre. For example, the recent *Contemporary Irish Theatre: Histories and Theories* (2024) by Charlotte McIvor and Ian R. Walsh contains only one mention of The Ark, and that is simply in a fleeting reference to Marina Carr's play for children, *The Giant Blue Hand* (2009). However, there is some notable material from outside of academia: reviews of theatre productions at The Ark can be found in newspapers in Ireland and the UK as well as in *Irish Theatre Magazine* (1998 – 2014), from 1995 right up to the present day. As well as that, Fintan Walsh's 2009 feature article in *Irish Theatre Magazine*, 'Child's Play: Making Theatre for Young Audiences', provides a rare engagement with children's theatre in Ireland. Walsh includes a discussion of the position of The Ark, highlights its appointment of 'Louis Lovett as their first theatre-maker in residence', and notes The Ark's collaborations with 'established names' such as Marina Carr, Selina Cartmell, Monica Frawley, Lynne Parker and Don Wycherley, Jo Mangan, Veronica Coburn, and John Banville. (Walsh, 2009, n.p.).

An exclusion of children's theatre and its archives will always mean an incomplete view of Irish theatre, and its artists, more broadly. Therefore, to some extent, it is important to look at material connected to these 'established names'. For example, The Ark archive holds important materials connected to John Banville: In 1995, Banville was commissioned to write a book, *The Ark*, illustrated by Conor Fallon (Gallery Press, 1996); and in 2002, his theatre show and theatrical exhibition *Dublin 1742*, was performed at The Ark, directed by Eric Fraad. The archival material for *Dublin 1742* is particularly interesting as it provides an insight into the planning and development of Banville's show, and includes scripts, casting notes, source materials, and designs. Aimed at children aged nine to fourteen, the play is set in the days leading up to the world premiere of Georg Frideric Handel's *Messiah* in Dublin

and, as the critic Karen Fricker noted in her review in *The Guardian* newspaper, features characters that 'use heightened language and convey complex ideas' (Fricker, 2002, n.p.). This host of real-life characters includes German composer Handel, author Jonathan Swift who was Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral, and philosopher George Berkeley. Meanwhile actors David Garrick and Peg Woffington also make an appearance as they rehearse for a production of *Hamlet* in the nearby Smock Alley Theatre. The play is inspired by the memoirs of Dublin poet and socialite Laetitia Pilkington and focuses on Handel's attempts 'to persuade Swift to loan him six boy singers from St Patrick's choir for the premiere' of *Messiah* in Neal's Music Hall on Dublin's Fishamble Street. (Fricker, 2002, n.p.) Interestingly, the premise of play revolves around the notion of child participation – Handel's *Messiah* cannot proceed without the choir boys. Banville's text directly engages with the cultural history of Temple Bar – with Fishamble Street and Smock Alley Theatre being just a few streets away from The Ark – while also introducing a young audience to complex philosophical ideas. This event is also a good example of how the space of The Ark has directly informed the type of theatrical text produced: audience members wandered through and encountered actors in various rooms in The Ark building before being seated in the theatre.

Within studies of Irish literature and theatre, Banville and his works for adults have received significant attention, while this fascinating text for children has been completely ignored – there is no discussion of *Dublin 1742* in any critical works on Banville. Once properly catalogued, The Ark archive, therefore, can offer a rich repository of material that can directly inform research in Banville studies, that can speak to other archives such as the John Banville archive held at Trinity College Library, and, by extension, to Irish cultural studies more broadly.

While the above example demonstrates the value of the archive in terms of furthering research on 'established names' in Irish theatre, such an approach is complicit in a conservative process of canon formation. Writing about theatre archives in Ireland, Barry Houlihan notes that a 'patriarchal concept in itself, the canon of theatre propagates and ensures a continual process of inadequate historicization by future generations.' (Houlihan, 2019, p. 18) The Ark archive, however, can simultaneously be used to deconstruct this canon. Drawing on Sparrman, Sjöberg, et al's argument, this archive can be viewed as a political space that has "the potential to empower and affirm individuals and groups of people who have not been seen or heard in the historical past, in the present, or in the pasts created in the future.' (Sparrman, Sjöberg, et al, 2024, p. 83) The Ark archive can play a significant role in giving voice to marginalised and minority communities in Irish culture, particularly in relation to artists who produce work for children, to children, and in relation to gender and class.

The Politics of Marginalised Voices

In his edited collection *Navigating Ireland's Theatre Archive: Theory, Practice and Performance* (2019), Houlihan acknowledges the potential and the challenges of navigating, accessing and understanding Ireland's archives. Included in this collection is an essay by Brenda Donohue on 'Women and the Archive', that mentions The Ark and its archive. This is a significant essay as it is one of the only examples of an academic discussion of The Ark within the context of Irish cultural studies more broadly. Donohue draws on a 2017 report for the Arts Council of Ireland – *Gender Counts: An Analysis of Gender in Irish Theatre*

2006-2015 – on gender in Irish theatre and highlights findings from a survey. She claims that 'Women were best represented in the Ark, Rough Magic, and Dublin Fringe Festival' (Donohue, 2019, p. 171) yet argues that:

Although Rough Magic's Archives are now securely held, it is worth noting that no official plan is in place for the Archives of Dublin Fringe Festival or The Ark. Both companies employ significant numbers of women in their creative roles, and yet their participation is in danger of going unrecorded, given the methods of recording participation present in these organisations, and the seeming lack of institutional interest in preserving their legacies. (Donohue, 2019, pp. 176-177)

Donohue's work is significant in that it highlights the importance of these archives and of investing resources to maintain them. However, seemingly unaware of the careful archiving processes at The Ark and its retention of particular types of material from workshops, exhibitions, performances and marketing she also frames The Ark's approach to archiving as problematic and suggests that it risks occluding women from the historical records of Irish theatre. Because The Ark archive is a closed archive and was inaccessible to Donohue, her claims were based on anecdotal reports and limited information available on websites rather than on evidence from the archive itself. This resulted in general assumptions being made about the nature of the archive. The early work of the LA-TRAC project, therefore, allows for a problematising of Donohue's claim of 'lack of institutional interest' with archivist, Rebecca Casey noting in her report that:

There has been a clear interest in record-keeping since the early days of The Ark. There is evidence of attempts to establish/preserve The Ark archive, with references to it in these terms. Across different years, certain records contain notes to demonstrate that they were earmarked for the archive. (Casey, 2024, p. 6)

As an example, Casey makes reference to a post-it note attached to a Cork Midsummer Festival brochure that reads 'Sarah, don't know if you want to keep this for the archive? Jo' (Casey, 2024, p.6). Therefore, contrary to Donohue's view, the archiving practices evident in the archive point to a recognition on the part of The Ark and its staff members of the importance of constructing and maintaining (in some form) a children's cultural archive over the past three decades. There is clear evidence of a desire to preserve legacies.

Access to and analysis of this children's cultural archive also provides opportunities to complicate histories of Irish theatre, specifically in relation to gender. In the report *Gender Counts: An Analysis of Gender in Irish Theatre (2006-2015)*, commissioned by Waking the Feminists and Funded by the Arts Council of Ireland, Donohue writes of the challenges that researchers faced when trying to gather information for the *Gender Counts* project, noting that:

In the case of theatre organisations dedicated to theatre for young audiences, particularly The Ark and Barnstorm Theatre that featured in our sample, a programme is often regarded as superfluous, given that many of the audience simply cannot read, or would have no interest in reading one. (Donohue, 2019, p. 173)

In this instance, assumptions about childhood interests and a homogenisation of childhood experiences devalues the potential of the children's cultural archive. This is a view that can only be challenged by opening up the archive and providing evidence of over thirty years of material, including programmes, produced for interested young audience members attending productions at The Ark.

This children's cultural archive can also contribute to debates regarding class in Irish culture. While Houlihan writes that 'Working-class theatre and community groups are also vastly underrepresented in generally accessible collections of performance records' (Houlihan, 2019, p. 12), evidence from The Ark archive demonstrates a direct engagement with children who come from communities that are often marginalised in terms of class. There are many examples in the archive of The Ark's work with children from a diverse range of backgrounds – from inner-city communities, from rural communities, from Direct Provision centres and so on. As Casey notes in her report, 'This shows the Ark's desire to be of benefit to the wider community and to reach as many children as possible.' (Casey, 2024, p. 8) One notable example is the ArkLink initiative (2000-2006) which was a collaboration between The Ark and the community in the Fatima Mansions area of Dublin, a socio-economically disadvantaged local authority housing estate, that was demolished and rebuilt from 2005 to 2007. The Ark archive holds extensive material related to this project, from plans and mission statements, to the works of artists in residence, through to children's artwork, feedback, and videos. This material sheds light on the challenges as well as the successes of a project that aimed to build a sustainable infrastructure for children in the area to access arts and culture.

Conclusion

The above discussion demonstrates the important role that the archive – as a space in between – can play in contributing to, and also leading, discourses on the poetics produced for children, on the politics of archiving, on childhood, on Irish cultural heritage, on canonicity, on gender, on class, and on children's voices. The Ark archive is, therefore, not simply a record of the past but a valuable source for informing debates in the present moment; as McIvor argues, we must recognise 'the archive as a political tool of the now, and not merely as portal for reflection on the past.' (McIvor, 2019, p. 6) It is also an opportunity to look to the future. As we catalogue, develop, enhance, and find ways to make the archive accessible, how do we create an original knowledge organisation system that allows input and facilitates encounters from teachers, researchers, artists, and children of the future?

Our long term goal is to move away from a tradition where, as Emily Gallagher notes in her writing on collections of children's art, these materials are 'hidden in plain sight' (Gallagher, 2023, p. 386) to one where children's cultural archives are actively visible. Creating a European database of children's cultural archives is one approach, where critical mass and collective strength can draw attention to the specific value of each institutional archive. As part of our research on the LA-TRAC project, we are creating a list of children's cultural centres across Europe that are comparable to The Ark and that also hold children's cultural archives. To date, we have identified a significant number of children's cultural centres but, so far, only a few have indicated that they hold archives. Examples include: The Estonian Children's Literature Centre (Estonia); ABC House (Belgium); Hetpaleis (Belgium); Bibiana (Slovakia); Kulturhuset Stadsteatern (Sweden); Kruunupää Centre for Children's Culture

(Finland); and Lasten ja Nuorten Taidekeskus/The Art Centre for Children and Young People (Finland). Given the unique nature of The Ark archives, it is often difficult to draw direct parallels with other institutions. Therefore, we also hope to identify important children's cultural archives more broadly, and not only those connected to cultural centres. This will provide us with a more complete picture of children's cultural archives across Europe. To fully realise these ambitions of building a European database, the LA-TRAC project will have to secure substantial funding as well as to connect with academic partners and establish a European network. It is hoped that, as the creation of The Ark inscribed children's culture on Dublin's city space, a European database of children's cultural archives will someday occupy a digital space. This will lead to a living archive of immense possibilities that could be accessed by teachers, researchers, artists, and – most importantly – children.

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Biography

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Marit Frimannslund

Felleskap i barnehagens rammeplan: Mellom politikk og poetikk i barns kulturer

Resumé

Artikkelen undersøker hvordan *felleskap* skrives frem i rammeplanen for barnehagen, og hvilken betydning disse fremskrivingene kan ha for barns egne fellesskapskulturer. Studien bygger på en kvalitativ dokumentanalyse av rammeplanen og har en fenomenologisk tilnærming. Den sentrale problemstillingen for studien er: *Hvordan ivaretas barns fellesskapskultur i rammeplanen?* Det teoretiske rammeverket består av ulike perspektiver på fellesskap som har vært betydningsfulle for analysen. Analysen viser at fellesskap i rammeplanen fremstår som et tvetydig begrep, og at det skrives frem som *statisk gruppefellesskap*, som *opplevd fellesskap* og som *utbyttefellesskap*. I tillegg viser analysen at personalet i stor grad tillegges ansvar for å skape og opprettholde fellesskap, mens barnas egne fellesskap i liten grad løftes frem som en verdi i seg selv. Artikkelen argumenterer for at det trengs en mer fleksibel forståelse av fellesskap i styringsdokumenter, og at barns egne bidrag og kulturelle praksiser bør anerkjennes som meningsbærende og medskapende.

Nøkkelord: *felleskap; barnehagens rammeplan; barnehage; barnekultur; dokumentanalyse*

Abstract

This article explores how the concept of *community* is articulated in the Norwegian Framework Plan for Kindergartens and what implications this may have for children's own peer communities. The study is based on a qualitative document analysis of the framework plan, employing a phenomenological approach. The central research question is: *How is children's peer culture of community safeguarded within the Framework Plan?* The theoretical framework draws on various conceptualizations of community that have informed the analysis. The findings indicate that the notion of community in the framework plan appears ambiguous, yet it is primarily presented as a *static group community*, as a *sense of community*, and as an *outcome-oriented community*. Furthermore, the analysis shows that staff are largely assigned responsibility for creating and maintaining community, while children's own communities are rarely highlighted as a value in themselves. The article 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.

Introduksjon

Barnehagens styringsdokumenter setter rammene for hvilke fellesskap barn inviteres inn i og for verdiene som skal prege praksisen. Fellesskap kan imidlertid forstås som et komplekst og flerdimensjonalt fenomen, der ulike former for deltakelse og tilhørighet eksisterer parallelt (Tjora, 2018). I Norge fremheves særlig likestilling, fellesskap og barns rett til medvirkning som sentrale dimensjoner i barnehagens mandat (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017). Samtidig er det uklart hvilke forståelser av fellesskap styringsdokumentene bygger på, og i hvilken grad de knytter seg til barns egne kulturelle uttrykk.

Selv om begrepet ofte brukes positivt og fremstår som et ønsket ideal, er det uenighet i litteraturen om hva fellesskap innebærer (Delanty, 2018). En medvirkende årsak til uklarheten er at policyutforming involverer aktører med ulike intensjoner. I denne artikkelen undersøker jeg hvordan fellesskap skrives frem i den norske rammeplanen for barnehagen (heretter rammeplanen) (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017). Formålet er å tydeliggjøre tolkninger og identifisere spenninger mellom politiske føringer på den ene siden og barns poetiske praksiser, forstått som barns egne kulturelle uttrykk, på den andre.

I Norge er barnehagen et frivillig tilbud for barn i alderen 1-6 år, men i 2024 hadde omtrent 95 % av alle barn mellom 1 og 5 år plass i barnehage (SSB, u.å.). Den pedagogiske virksomheten bygger på et holistisk læringssyn der lek, læring og danning ses som gjensidig forbundet, og der barndommens egenverdi skal tillegges vekt (Homme et al., 2023). Alle barnehager er underlagt de samme politiske føringene. Rammeplanen, som er barnehagens sentrale styringsdokument, konkretiserer innhold og oppgaver på bakgrunn av barnehageloven. Siden styringsdokumenter uttrykker politiske prioriteringer, gir de barnehagen ulik grad av autonomi når det gjelder pedagogiske valg og verdiforståelser (Homme et al., 2023). Generelle og åpne formuleringer i slike dokumenter kan imidlertid føre til betydelige forskjeller i hvordan begreper forstås og praktiseres.

Mye av forskningen på barnehagens styringsdokumenter har vært tverrnasjonale komparative analyser (f.eks. Kuusisto et al., 2021; Piškur et al., 2022). Et annet forskningsspor har vært historiske analyser av policyutviklingen (f.eks. Ackesjö & Persson, 2019; Giæver & Tkachenko, 2020), og noen studier har kombinert komparative og historiske perspektiver

(f.eks. Alexiadou et al., 2024; Alstad & Sopanen, 2021). Min gjennomgang viser imidlertid at det finnes få analyser (f.eks. Grindheim et al., 2022; Meland, 2023) som i dybden undersøker forståelser av innhold i aktuelle styringsdokument. I min studie retter jeg derfor oppmerksomheten mot innholdsforståelser i gjeldende rammeplan.

I likhet med fellesskapsbegrepet generelt fremstår barns egne fellesskap som utfordrende å definere. Slike fellesskap vil ofte være situasjonsavhengige og skiftende (Nilsen, 2015). I min studie søker jeg derfor ikke å avgrense fellesskap som et entydig begrep, men utforske mangfoldet av forståelser og de mulige konsekvensene av disse forståelsene. I denne artikkelen problematiserer jeg fellesskapsbegrepet i skjæringspunktet mellom politikk – forstått som føringer – og poetikk – forstått som barns egne fellesskapskulturer slik de fremstilles i forskning. Jeg analyserer hvordan fellesskap kan forstås i rammeplanen, og drøfter dette i lys av følgende problemstilling:

Hvordan ivaretas barns fellesskapskultur i rammeplanen?

Studien har som mål å bidra til barnekulturforskning og barnehagepedagogikk ved å belyse hvordan styringsdokumenter kan forme forståelser av fellesskap og barndom i institusjonelle kontekster, samt å synliggjøre mulige implikasjoner for videre utvikling av slike dokumenter. Dermed retter studien seg mot forskere, lærerutdannere og barnehageprofesjonelle med interesse for barns hverdagsliv i barnehagen.

En begrensning ved denne studien er at den er basert på analyse av ett enkelt styringsdokument. Selv om rammeplanen har en sentral posisjon for barnehagens innhold, kunne et bredere empirisk grunnlag ha styrket analysen. Likevel er det viktig å analysere nåværende styringsdokument for å etablere en forståelse for ledende ideer i barndomsinstitusjoner (Alexiadou et al., 2024). Siden rammeplanen i likhet med andre læreplaner er åpen for tolkning (Rønning, 2013), kan en slik analyse bidra til å nyansere forståelsen av styringsdokumentet og synliggjøre implisitte føringer som påvirker praksis.

I denne artikkelen presenterer jeg først sentrale forskningsbidrag. Litteraturgjennomgangen har to deler: forskning på styringsdokumenter og forskning på barns fellesskapskulturer. Deretter redegjør jeg for de teoretiske perspektivene som har vært styrende for analysen, *fellesskap som objekt og fellesskap som subjekt*. Videre presenterer jeg dokumentanalysen med en fenomenologisk tilnærming til fremskrivingene av fellesskap i rammeplanen. Dette innebærer å undersøke hvordan forståelser av fellesskap kommer til uttrykk gjennom ulike perspektiver, fremfor å søke én universell definisjon (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). Deretter viser jeg hvordan tre fellesskapsforståelser trer frem i rammeplanen: *statisk gruppefellesskap*, *opplevd fellesskap* og *utbyttefellesskap*. Avslutningsvis diskuterer jeg, med utgangspunkt i analysen, hvordan barns fellesskapskultur ivaretas i rammeplanen.

Analyser av styringsdokument for barnehage

Gjennom søk i norske og internasjonale databaser med nøkkelord som curriculum, policyanalyse, barnehage, norsk og nordisk i ulike kombinasjoner, samt gjennomgang av litteraturlister, identifiserte jeg forskning som analyserer styringsdokumenter i en nordisk barnehagekontekst. Gjennomgangen ble avgrenset til nordiske dokumenter, ettersom barnehager i Norden er relativt like i organisering sammenlignet med mange andre land.

Jeg identifiserer to gjennomgående perspektiver: representasjoner av mangfold og økt vekt på læringsutbytte. Begge fremheves som faktorer som kan begrense barns egne fellesskap (Emilson & Eek-Karlsson, 2022; Schmidt & Rossen, 2021), og er derfor relevante i diskusjonen om barns fellesskapskulturer i rammeplanen.

Styringsdokumenter for barnehager i nordiske land preges av uklare og til dels motstridende formuleringer om mangfold, inkludering og flerspråklighet. Mangfold fremstilles både som ressurs og som noe som må balanseres mot likhet for å sikre deltakelse og likeverd (Giæver & Tkachenko, 2020; Kuusisto et al., 2021; Piškur et al., 2022). Over tid har norske styringsdokumenter beveget seg fra å vektlegge flerspråklighet og morsmål til økt fokus på verdien av norsk og barnehagens ansvar for å utvikle norskspråklige ferdigheter (Giæver & Tkachenko, 2020). Ambivalens finnes både på tvers av land og innenfor enkelt dokumenter. Flerspråklighet fremheves for eksempel som sentralt for inkludering i norske og finske dokumenter, mens inkludering i nederlandske dokumenter brukes til å legitimere prioritering av majoritetsspråket (Piškur et al., 2022).

Den norske rammeplanen kombinerer et inkluderende verdigrunnlag med posisjoneringer av minoriteter som både kan sikre rettigheter og bidra til marginalisering, avhengig av hvem som anerkjennes som minoritet (Kuusisto et al., 2021). Demokratiske idealer som likeverd, deltakelse og mangfold løftes ofte frem, men rammes samtidig inn av forestillinger om homogenitet og assimilering som forutsetninger for velferd og likestilling (Alstad & Sopanen, 2021; Millei et al., 2025). Flerspråklighet tones i økende grad ned som mål i seg selv til fordel for tilegnelse av majoritetsspråket, begrunnet med at dette fremmer deltakelse og er til barnas beste (Giæver & Tkachenko, 2020; Millei et al., 2025). Samtidig knyttes rettigheter i økende grad til dem som allerede er innenfor fellesskapet (Millei et al., 2025).

Taushet om maktforhold mellom majoritet og minoritet bidrar til å videreføre forståelser av norskhet som i praksis kan virke ekskluderende (Thun, 2015). Dette kommer også til uttrykk i dokumenter der flerspråklighet betegnes som en ressurs i overskrifter, mens språklig mangfold i teksten konstrueres som en utfordring som må håndteres (Alstad & Sopanen, 2021). Slike skjevheter blir særlig tydelige for grupper som anses som utfordrende, for eksempel knyttet til språk eller sosioøkonomisk status, og som forventes å tilpasse seg majoritetens normer og verdier for å inkluderes (Millei et al., 2025).

I forlengelsen av dette tydeliggjøres en sterkere kobling mellom språk og læringsutbytte. Tidligere forbindelser til kultur og identitet nedtones til fordel for språklige ferdigheter i tråd med politiske prioriteringer om skoleforberedthet (Alstad & Sopanen, 2021). Dette inngår i en utvikling mot økt utbytteorientering og skolifisering av barnehagen, der barnet i mindre grad forstås som utforskende og i større grad som en elev formet etter nasjonale læringskriterier (Ackesjö & Persson, 2019). Tilsvarende tendenser kommer til uttrykk i flere styringsdokumenter, der tidligere vekt på øyeblikksopplevelser av fellesskap og samspill i stor grad viker for *new public management* og økt fokus på læring og utbytte (Alexiadou et al., 2024; Piškur et al., 2022). Samtidig rettes evaluering i de nordiske styringsdokumentene fortsatt mer mot institusjonelt innhold enn mot enkeltbarns læringsresultater (Alexiadou et al., 2024).

Til tross for en utvikling som vekter utbytte, viser forskningen at et barnesentrert perspektiv fortsatt gjør seg gjeldende. Læring knyttes fremdeles til glede, hverdagsaktiviteter og meningsfulle erfaringer (Alexiadou et al., 2024). Samtidig skaper vage formuleringer

og motstridende vektlegginger uklare forventninger til praksis, særlig knyttet til deltakelse og tilhørighet. Disse begrepene forblir svakt definert, og ansvaret for å sikre barns faktiske opplevelse av tilhørighet fremstår uklart (Piškur et al., 2022). Selv om definisjonene er vage, er det forskjell på barn og ansatte. Barn fremstilles i hovedsak som rettighetshavere, mens ansvaret for å realisere demokratiske verdier i praksis legges til de ansatte (Einarsdottir et al., 2015). En vektlegging av rettigheter på bekostning av barns bidrag og kollektive ansvar kan føre til at barn i større grad posisjoneres som mottakere av tiltak enn som aktive deltakere.

Barns fellesskapskultur

I denne studien forstår jeg poetikk som barns egen fellesskapskultur i barnehagen. Mouritsen (1995) skiller mellom kultur *for*, *med* og *av* barn. Barns fellesskapskultur forstås i denne studien som en form for kultur *av* barn, det vil si barns egne spontane fellesskap der de skaper, leker og tar valg (Jæger et al., 2016). Juncker (2006) hevder at kultur *av* barn er kvalitativt forskjellig fra de øvrige formene for kultur. Hun mener at kultur *for* og *med* barn er produktorienterte, mens kultur *av* barn rommer mangfoldige uttrykk som skaper mening her og nå, uten nødvendigvis å resultere i et produkt (Juncker, 2006). Dette knyttes til danning, der meningsskaping vektlegges fremfor målbare læringsutbytter, og selv om voksne ikke bør definere hva som er meningsfullt for barn (Jæger et al., 2016), er lek i barnehagen sjelden uten voksenpåvirkning. Med dette som utgangspunkt retter jeg oppmerksomheten mot forskning på kultur av barn i praksis.

Lek kan forstås relasjonelt som prosesser der barn etablerer, forhandler om og skaper fellesskap. Gjennom lek synliggjøres barns særegne måter å være sammen på, med betydning for opplevelsen av samhörighet (Öhman, 2015). Små barn utvikler egne *samaldringsfellesskap* (peer communities) med karakteristiske uttrykk, som musiske interaksjoner og feiringer av å være sammen (Løkken, 2000). Fellesskap mellom barn er ofte dynamiske og situert i øyeblikket (Nilsen, 2015). Barns meningsskaping er i liten grad verbalt forankret, men uttrykkes gjennom lyd, bevegelse, blick og gester (Greve, 2007; Juutinen et al., 2024). Slike spontane og kroppslige uttrykk, inkludert imaginære symboler, får betydning i fellesskapet (Schmidt & Rossen, 2021) og videreutvikles når barn kobler seg på hverandres initiativ, blant annet gjennom bruk av tilgjengelige artefakter (Johansson & Berthelsen, 2019). Gjennom imitasjon, rytme og gjensidig respons utvikles interaksjoner som er meningsfulle.

I forlengelsen av dette uttrykkes tilhørighet sjelden direkte, men trer frem i barns relasjonelle praksiser. Fra barns perspektiv knyttes tilhørighet særlig til vennskap og relasjoner, selv om medlemskap også vektlegges. Dette uttrykkes i felles forståelse om at alle skal få delta i lek (Einarsdottir et al., 2022). Barn nærmer seg hverandre gjennom materialer, timing og lydløse forhandlinger, der kroppslige uttrykk som blick, smil og berøring bekrefter felles forståelse (Juutinen et al., 2024). Samlet fremstår tilhørighet som dynamisk og kontinuerlig skapt gjennom barns bidrag, med lek som en sentral arena (Einarsdottir et al., 2022; Juutinen et al., 2024). Dette tematiseres også hos Østrem (2025), som viser hvordan barns handlinger i lek kan forstås som bidrag som tilfører noe nytt til fellesskapet. Handlingene er ikke rettet mot ytre mål, men er meningsfulle ved å inngå i relasjonene mellom barna.

Barns fellesskap er situasjonsavhengig, knyttet til det som deles i øyeblikket, og forutsetter fysisk nærhet (Nilsen, 2015). De blir særlig synlige i organiserte situasjoner som måltider (Johansson & Berthelsen, 2019; Løkken, 2000), hvor barn spontant bygger på hverandres

uttrykk. Samtidig fremheves betydningen av gjentakende situasjoner, som gir et felles erfaringsgrunnlag og åpner for individuelle bidrag (Sørensen & Lund, 2024). Likevel er det viktig å skille mellom deltakelse i en felles aktivitet og opplevelsen av å være sammen. Østrem (2024) peker på en distinksjon mellom deltakelse i barnegruppen som helhet og mer subtile former for deltakelse, der enkelte barn er mer direkte oppmerksomme på hverandre. Fellesskap handler dermed ikke bare om tilstedeværelse, men om samspillet som oppstår.

Perspektiver på fellesskap

I artikkelen tar jeg utgangspunkt i en fenomenologisk epistemologi som avviser forestillingen om en objektiv sannhet løst fra subjektet (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). Målet her er derfor ikke å presentere én entydig teori om fellesskap, men å trekke inn ulike perspektiver som kan nyansere hvordan fellesskap skrives frem i rammeplanen. For å strukturere teoridelen organiseres bidragene i to overordnede perspektiver. Inndelingen er inspirert av Sartres (1994) skille mellom *vi som objekt* og *vi som subjekt*, men fungerer her som begrepslig inspirasjon, ikke som et direkte rammeverk.

Perspektivene viser ulike måter å forstå fellesskap, avhengig av ståsted. Som objekt defineres fellesskap utenfra gjennom rammer og grenser. Som subjekt vektlegges erfaringer av å være sammen om og bidra til noe felles. Siden innside–utside-perspektiver er relevante for å belyse fellesskap (Tjora & Scambler, 2020), vurderer jeg denne inndelingen som hensiktsmessig for å undersøke hvordan fellesskap skrives frem i rammeplanen. Perspektivene er ikke gjensidig utelukkende, men analytiske innganger som fremhever ulike sider ved fellesskap.

Fellesskap som objekt

I perspektivet *fellesskap som objekt* rettes oppmerksomheten mot struktur fremfor prosess. Fellesskapet fremstår som avgrenset og defineres uavhengig av individets subjektive opplevelse. Det etableres gjennom ytre rammer og institusjonelle ordninger. Et sentralt kjennetegn er at medlemskap gir tilgang til rettigheter og ressurser, uavhengig av om den enkelte opplever tilhørighet. Dette perspektivet synliggjøres hos Delanty (2018), som viser til politiske fellesskap som eksempler. Disse kjennetegnes av tydelige grenser for inkludering og ekskludering, slik vi ser i institusjonelle ordninger. Fellesskapet konstitueres gjennom formelle medlemskriterier i stedet for direkte relasjoner. Tjora og Scambler (2020) utdyper dette ved å vise til nasjonen som et fellesskap med grenser basert på statsborgerskap og identifikasjon. Samtidig kan slike fellesskap betegnes som imaginære, siden de ikke forutsetter direkte kjennskap mellom medlemmene. Det er overordnede og relativt stabile strukturer som binder individene sammen og gir fellesskapet form.

Tjora (2018) fremhever at fellesskap i denne betydningen er forankret i varighet og struktur, snarere enn samhandling. «Vi-følelsen» knyttes primært til medlemskap i etablerte rammer og kan derfor forstås som strukturelt forankret. Et lignende syn finnes hos Bauman (2000), som knytter fellesskap til kollektive ordninger som velferdsstaten. Her fremstår fellesskapet som bærer av ansvar for fordeling av goder og tilgang til ressurser. Denne typen fellesskap er tett knyttet til behovet for trygghet og kan sees i lys av demokratiske prinsipper der medlemskap gir rettigheter.

Samlet kjennetegnes fellesskap som objekt av avgrenset medlemskap, tilgang til rettigheter og ressurser og en felles referanseramme uavhengig av individuell erfaring. Fellesskapet

fremstår som en enhet betraktet utenfra, definert og opprettholdt gjennom ytre strukturer. I en barnehagekontekst kan dette knyttes til fellesskap etablert gjennom organisatoriske rammer, som barnehage, avdeling eller barnegruppe, der barn inngår som medlemmer uavhengig av egen opplevelse av tilhørighet.

Felleskap som subjekt

I perspektivet *fellesskap som subjekt* rettes oppmerksomheten mot individets levde erfaring. Fellesskapet betraktes ikke primært som en avgrenset struktur, men som et fenomen som trer frem gjennom subjektiv opplevelse og sosial interaksjon. Det forstås derfor ikke som en gitt enhet, men som noe som kontinuerlig konstitueres gjennom deltakernes erfaringer, meningsskaping og relasjoner.

Tjora (2018) beskriver fellesskap som dynamisk, der fellesskapsfølelse kan være spontan og flyktig i øyeblikket. Perspektivet videreføres av Tjora og Scambler (2020), som fremhever at fellesskap etableres gjennom deltakernes interaksjoner. Gjennom ritualer, forhandlinger og gjensidig påvirkning bidrar aktørene aktivt til å utvikle og opprettholde fellesskap. Selv om strukturelle rammer, som festivaler eller institusjoner, kan fasilitere fellesskap, er det interaksjonene som utgjør vilkårene og gir dem mening. Tilsvarende hevder Delanty (2018) at fellesskap bør forstås som kommunikative prosesser, snarere enn avgrensede enheter. Fellesskap oppstår gjennom deltakelse og erfaringen av å bidra til noe felles, og er tett knyttet til subjektiv meningsdannelse.

Denne vektleggingen utdypes hos Day (2006), som med utgangspunkt i den kulturelle vendingen forstår fellesskap som sosialt konstruert. Han bryter med forståelser basert på likhet og ensartethet, og fremhever hvordan fellesskap formes gjennom kulturelle praksiser og meningsfulle interaksjoner. Fellesskap fremstår som relasjonelle prosesser der mening kontinuerlig forhandles og etableres. Day (2006) understreker at overordnede fellesskap ikke har en selvstendig eksistens uavhengig av individene som gir dem innhold og betydning. Samlet peker fellesskap som subjekt mot en prosessorientert forståelse, der fellesskap realiseres i og gjennom erfaringer og relasjoner. I en barnehagekontekst innebærer dette at fellesskap ikke kan reduseres til strukturelle inndelinger som avdelinger eller grupper. Selv om slike rammer finnes, er det barns og ansattes praksiser, samspill og erfaringer som konstituerer fellesskapene. Det gjør dem til noe som kontinuerlig skapes og påvirkes av deltakernes opplevelser og bidrag.

Metode og analytisk tilnærming

Analyse av styringsdokumenter, slik det gjøres i denne studien, er sentralt for å utvikle dypere forståelse av ideene som ligger til grunn for politiske og pedagogiske føringer (Alexiadou et al., 2024). Metoden i denne studien er dokumentanalyse, som kjennetegnes ved at materialet ikke opprinnelig er produsert for forskning (Bowen, 2009). Innholdet i dokumentet er dermed ikke direkte påvirket av forskeren, men må forstås som et resultat av politiske, faglige og institusjonelle prosesser. I barnehagekontekst er rammeplanen særlig sentral, da den kan betraktes som barnehagens overordnede styringsdokument (Rønning, 2013). Den fastsetter både innhold og prinsipper for vurdering av virksomheten, og er dermed førende for hvilke aspekter som vektlegges i barns hverdagsliv (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017).

For å undersøke hvordan fellesskap skrives frem i rammeplanen, har jeg gjennomført en dokumentanalyse basert på van Manens (2016) tematiske lesestrategier. Siden artikkelen og det teoretiske rammeverket vektlegger opplevelse, utgjør dette en sentral dimensjon i analysen. Tilnærmingen er derfor relevant, fordi den betoner forskerens aktive fortolkning i kunnskapsproduksjonen (2016, s. 88). Samtidig er tilnærmingen utviklet for analyse av levd erfaring. Brukt i dokumentanalyse innebærer dette en metodisk forskyvning, siden materialet består av tekst framfor erfaringer. Dette kan være en begrensning, men åpner også for å analysere hvordan mening om fellesskap konstitueres i styringsdokumentet, ikke bare hva som uttrykkes.

En styrke ved dokumentanalysen er at materialet er offentlig tilgjengelig, i motsetning til mange andre empiriske data. Samtidig kan slike dokumenter ha begrenset kontekstualisering (Bowen, 2009). I denne studien vises dette blant annet ved at fellesskap ikke er klart definert eller avgrenset. Rammeplanen er utviklet gjennom kollektive prosesser der myndigheter, fagmiljøer og praksisfelt har bidratt, uten tydelig individuelt forfatterskap. Teksten reflekterer derfor et sammensatt kunnskapsgrunnlag og kan romme ulike, til dels implisitte, forståelser av sentrale begreper. Dette understreker behovet for å analysere hvordan fellesskap språklig og tematisk kommer til uttrykk i dokumentet.

Analyseprosess

Analysen er fenomenologisk-hermeneutisk og inspirert av van Manens tematiske analyse, som består av to faser. Den første er datadrevet, mens teoretiske perspektiver inkluderes i den neste fasen for å fortolke temaene (2016). Første fase i min analyse besto av gjentatte lesninger av rammeplanen ved bruk av tre spesifikke lesetilnærminger: holistisk, selektiv og detaljert (van Manen, 2016). Oppmerksomheten vekslet mellom dokumentets helhet og språklige detaljer.

Innledningsvis ble teksten lest holistisk for å få oversikt over hvordan fellesskap tematiseres i dokumentet. I denne lesningen fant jeg at begrepet fellesskap forekommer 27 ganger i rammeplanen, i ulike varianter og kombinasjoner som *fellesskapet* og *læringsfellesskap*. Deretter ble avsnitt der fellesskap forekom, lest selektivt og detaljert, med vekt på kontekst og på begrepene og verdiene som knyttes til begrepet. Gjennom vekslingen mellom holistisk, selektiv og detaljert lesing ble mønstre i språkbruk og meningsinnhold gradvis tydeligere. Dette resulterte i at jeg identifiserte åtte temaer som belyser hvordan fellesskap forstås og fremstilles i rammeplanen:

1. Fellesskapet som lukket enhet
2. Fellesskap for å dekke barns behov
3. Fellesskapsfølelse
4. Anerkjennelse av barns bidrag til fellesskap
5. Vennskap i tilknytning til fellesskap
6. Læringsfellesskap
7. Deltakelse i fellesskap er viktig for utbytte
8. Fellesskap skal bidra til utvikling/forståelse

I andre fase av analysen ble temaene brukt som analytiske innganger og satt i dialog med det teoretiske rammeverket for fellesskap. Analysen tok her sikte på å avklare om temaene primært beskrev fellesskap som objekt eller som subjekt. Temaer som ikke lot seg entydig plassere, ble analysert med tanke på andre fremtredende kjennetegn. For de tre siste temaene var en utbytteorientering særlig fremtredende. Tabell 1 viser grupperingen av temaene i analysens andre fase.

	Gruppering av temaene	Kjennetegn for grupperingen	Eksempel på utdrag fra Rammeplanen
Felleskap som objekt	1. Fellesskapet som lukket enhet 2. Fellesskap for å dekke barns behov	En entydig forståelse av fellesskap som en definert gruppe. Gruppen sikrer tilgang til ulike rettigheter og behov for de aktuelle medlemmene.	Å møte individets behov for omsorg, trygghet, tilhørighet og anerkjennelse og sikre at barna får ta del i og medvirke i fellesskapet, er viktige verdier som skal gjenspeiles i barnehagen (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, s. 8).
Felleskap som subjekt	3. Fellesskapsfølelse 4. Anerkjenne barns bidrag til fellesskap 5. Vennskap i tilknytning til fellesskap	Grupperingen beskriver subjektive opplevelser av fellesskap som vektlegger individenes bidrag i større grad en tydelige grenser.	I barnehagen skal alle barn kunne erfare å være betydningsfulle for fellesskapet og å være i positivt samspill med barn og voksne (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, s. 22-23)
Felleskap for utbytte	6. Læringsfellesskap 7. Deltakelse i fellesskap er viktig for utbytte 8. Fellesskap skal bidra til utvikling/forståelse	Fellesskap fremstår som et middel for å oppnå ulike læringsutbytter	Gjennom å delta i barnehagens fellesskap skal barna få mulighet til å utvikle forståelse for samfunnet og den verden de er en del av (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, s. 8).

Tabell 1: Analytisk gruppering av temaene med eksempler fra rammeplanen

Fortolkningen resulterte i tre hovedkategorier: *statisk gruppefellesskap*, *opplevd fellesskap* og *utbyttefellesskap*. Kategoriene overlapper, ettersom fremstillinger av fellesskap kan påvirkes av kontekst og begrepsbruk. Utdragene som presenteres illustrerer sentrale trekk, men rommer ikke hele materialets bredde. Studiens validitet ble styrket gjennom presentasjon av foreløpige funn og fagfellekommentarer i nasjonale og internasjonale forskningsmiljøer i 2025.

Felleskap i rammeplanen

I det følgende presenterer jeg analysen og hvordan de tre formene for fellesskap – statisk, opplevd og utbytteorientert – kommer til uttrykk i rammeplanen.

Statisk gruppefellesskap

Da jeg satte fellesskapsformuleringene i rammeplanen i dialog med det teoretiske perspektivet *fellesskap som objekt*, ble enkelte tydelige avgrensninger synlige. Disse tolker jeg som indikasjoner på et statisk fellesskap. Med statisk gruppefellesskap mener jeg en forhåndsdefinert konstruksjon, der fellesskapets innhold og struktur ikke forstås som noe som forhandles frem av individene.

I flere av rammeplanens formuleringer fremstilles fellesskap som en avgrenset gruppe, og vekten ligger på medlemmenes rettigheter eller tilganger til det gruppen tilbyr. Dette kommer blant annet til uttrykk i barnehagens verdigrunnlag gjennom formuleringene: «Å møte individets behov for omsorg, trygghet, tilhørighet og anerkjennelse og sikre at barna får ta del i og medvirke i fellesskapet, er viktige verdier som skal gjenspeiles i barnehagen» (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, s. 7) og «Barnehagen skal fremme demokrati og være et inkluderende fellesskap der alle får anledning til å ytre seg, bli hørt og delta» (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, s. 8). Her fremstår fellesskapet i hovedsak som noe barna gis adgang til, heller enn som et sosialt rom som skapes gjennom bidrag og forhandling.

I forlengelsen av dette mønsteret omtales fellesskapet gjerne i bestemt form entall, eller barnehagen betegnes som et fellesskap. Dette kan forstås som et gitt fellesskap eller en tydelig avgrenset gruppe. For eksempel står det: «Gjennom å delta i barnehagens fellesskap (...)» (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, s. 8) og «Ulike meninger og perspektiver skal få komme til uttrykk og være utgangspunkt for utviklingen av barnehagen som demokratisk fellesskap» (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, s. 9). Når barnehagen omtales som et fellesskap på denne måten, tolker jeg fellesskap som en struktur som ligger til grunn forut for medlemmene, og som er definert gjennom føringer. Samtidig viser rammeplanen at denne statiske forståelsen ikke alltid er entydig knyttet til barnehagen som konkret gruppe.

Enkelte steder er det uklart hvilket gruppefellesskap det henvises til. I avsnittet om danning står det for eksempel: «Barnehagen skal bidra til at barna kan forstå felles verdier og normer som er viktige for fellesskapet» (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, s. 21). Her er det utydelig både hvilket fellesskap det refereres til, og hvem som inngår i det. Samtidig antydes det at fellesskapet representerer bestemte verdier og normer som barna skal forholde seg til. Dette åpner for ulike fortolkninger av barnas posisjon i fellesskapet; de kan være deltakere i det eller individer som kan tilegne seg forståelse for og tilgang til et allerede etablert fellesskap.

Videre står det i rammeplanen at «Barnehagen skal støtte barna i å forholde seg prøvende og nysgjerrig til omverdenen og bidra til å legge grunnlag for modig, selvstendig og ansvarlig deltakelse i demokratiske fellesskap» (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, s. 21). Her er det også uklart hvilke fellesskap det siktes til, bortsett fra at de er demokratiske. I sitatet tolker jeg det som at fellesskap i denne sammenhengen kan forstås som ulike grupper eller samfunn som barna tar del i eller kan ta del i. I motsetning til formuleringer som konstruerer fellesskap som en avgrenset og gitt enhet, peker dette sitatet dermed mot en mindre statisk forståelse gjennom bruk av flertallsformen. Samtidig forblir fellesskapene implisitt definert gjennom sine egenskaper (demokratiske), snarere enn gjennom deltakernes bidrag, noe som fortsatt kan indikere et fellesskap med en forhåndsstrukturert ramme.

En tilsvarende dobbelthet finnes i formuleringen «Alle skal ha like muligheter til å bli sett, hørt og oppmuntret til å delta i fellesskap i alle aktiviteter i barnehagen» (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, s. 10). Her konstrueres fellesskap både som et objekt barna skal gis tilgang til, og som en arena der barnets subjektive erfaring av å bli sett og hørt er sentral. Slik synliggjør analysen hvordan rammeplanen ikke opererer med en konsistent forståelse av fellesskap, men snarere rommer en spenning mellom ulike forståelser og fremskrivninger av fellesskapsbegrepet.

Opplevd fellesskap

Når fellesskap i rammeplanen forstås som noe etablert og fastlagt, kan en opplevelse av manglende tilhørighet eller utenforskap bli oversett eller underkommunisert. Samtidig finnes det flere formuleringer der barns subjektivitet tematiseres i tilknytning til fellesskap. I lys av de teoretiske perspektivene under *fellesskap som subjekt*, finnes det flere steder hentydninger til en fellesskapsforståelse som knytter seg til sosiale relasjoner og samhandling. Blant annet kobles fellesskap direkte til barns kulturskaping i sitatet «Barnehagen skal legge til rette for kulturmøter, gi rom for barnas egen kulturskaping og bidra til at alle barn kan få oppleve glede og mestring i sosiale og kulturelle fellesskap» (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, s. 9). Her fremstår fellesskap som noe som utvikles i og gjennom barns deltakelse og skapende praksiser.

Videre vektlegger flere sitater følelser og erfaringer knyttet til fellesskap. En slik erfaringsbasert forståelse kommer blant annet til uttrykk i kapittelet om vennskap og fellesskap, der det står: «I barnehagen skal alle barn kunne erfare å være betydningsfulle for fellesskapet og å være i positivt samspill med barn og voksne» (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, s. 23). Bruken av verbet «erfare» indikerer at fellesskap kan forstås som noe som må oppleves av barnet selv, og knyttes dermed til barns subjektive erfaring av verdi i relasjon til andre. Fellesskap fremstår her ikke bare som et statisk gruppefellesskap, men som noe som får mening gjennom barns opplevelser av betydning i ulike samspill.

En tilsvarende forståelse kommer også frem i verdigrunnlaget, der det fremheves: «Barnehagen skal bidra til at alle barn føler seg sett og anerkjent for den de er, og synliggjøre den enkeltes plass og verdi i fellesskapet» (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, s. 9). Opplevelsesaspektet knyttes her ikke bare til medlemskap, men til barns erfaring av relasjoner og betydning innenfor fellesskapet. Dette forsterkes gjennom rammeplanens vektlegging av vennskap i tilknytning til fellesskap for eksempel i formuleringen «Barnehagen skal være et trygt og utfordrende sted der barna kan prøve ut ulike sider ved samspill, fellesskap og vennskap» (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, s. 11). Når fellesskap brukes i direkte sammenheng med vennskap og samspill, fremstår det relasjonelle og erfaringsbaserte som sentralt.

Samtidig er det påfallende at uttrykket *meningsfulle fellesskap* bare benyttes eksplisitt ett sted i rammeplanen, og da i kapittelet om barn som trenger ekstra støtte. Det formuleres dermed ingen generell forventning om meningsfulle fellesskap for alle barn. Formuleringen i rammeplanen lyder: «For noen barn kan tidlig innsats innebære at personalet arbeider særlig målrettet og systematisk (...) med å inkludere barnet i meningsfulle fellesskap» (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, s. 40). At meningsdimensjonen her knyttes eksplisitt til enkelte barn, tolker jeg som at fellesskapets mening ellers tas for gitt. Mening fremstår dermed som noe som må produseres særskilt for noen, heller enn som et grunnleggende premiss for fellesskap mellom barn generelt.

Videre knyttes fellesskapsopplevelse også til bestemte kontekster. Under fagområdet kropp, bevegelse, mat og helse står det at personalet skal «legge til rette for at måltider og matlaging bidrar til måltids glede, deltakelse, samtaler og fellesskapsfølelse hos barna» (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, s. 50). Her konstrueres måltidssituasjonen som en arena som i seg selv skal fremme fellesskapsopplevelse, der denne opplevelsen knyttes til aktivitet og situasjon.

Andre steder fremstår fellesskapsfølelse i større grad orientert mot innhold enn mot barns umiddelbare opplevelse. Dette kommer til uttrykk i formuleringer om det samiske mangfoldet, der det står «Barnehagen skal synliggjøre samisk kultur og bidra til at barna kan utvikle respekt og fellesskapsfølelse for det samiske mangfoldet» (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, s. 9). Her fremstår fellesskapsfølelsen mindre som et subjektivt her-og-nå-fenomen og mer som en opplevelse rettet mot et bestemt innhold og formål. Selv om følelsen plasseres hos barna, er det samtidig forhåndsdefinert hva fellesskapet skal bidra til, nemlig utvikling av respekt for det samiske mangfoldet. Fellesskap fremstår dermed ikke bare som noe som erfares, men også som et middel for å fremme bestemte utbytter.

Utbyttefellesskap

At fellesskap konstrueres for å fremme bestemte utbytter, peker videre mot den tredje kategorien *utbyttefellesskap* som kom frem i min analyse av fellesskapsbegrepet i rammeplanen. Sett i lys av studiens teoretiske perspektiver, fellesskap som objekt og som subjekt, fremstår rammeplanens bruk av begrepet fellesskap enkelte steder som underordnet. Analysen indikerer at fellesskap ofte tillegges verdi gjennom sin betydning for bestemte formål, snarere enn gjennom medlemmenes tilgang og rettigheter eller gjennom erfaring av tilhørighet og bidrag.

Dette kommer til uttrykk ved at fellesskap flere steder settes i direkte sammenheng med læring. Under kapittelet om barnehagens innhold og formål står det at «Barnehagen skal bidra til læringsfellesskap der barna skal få bidra i egen og andres læring» (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, s. 22) og at personalet skal «sørge for et inkluderende fellesskap og legge til rette for at barn kan bidra i egen og andres læring» (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, s. 22). Disse formuleringene kan tolkes som en konstruksjon av barnet som en aktiv bidragsyter i pedagogiske mål, der verdien av deltakelse i større grad begrunnes i bidrag til læring enn i tilstedeværelse eller tilhørighet.

Analysen peker samtidig på en spenning i hvordan fellesskap forstås innenfor den utbytteorienterte rammen. Fellesskap omtales ikke bare som et middel for læring og utvikling, men også som en sosial størrelse med egenverdi. Et eksempel på en mer verdiorientert forståelse finner jeg i innledningen til rammeplanens fagområder, der det slås fast: «Barnas interesse for fagområdene skal stimuleres, og barnehagen skal bidra til å etablere et lærende fellesskap som verdsetter ulike uttrykk og meninger» (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, s. 47). Her tolker jeg fellesskap både som en ramme for læring og som et sosialt og verdimesig fellesskap der mangfold i uttrykk og perspektiver løftes frem. Samtidig forblir denne forståelsen tett knyttet til læringskonteksten, noe som understreker at fellesskapets verdi også her kan relateres til sin betydning for læring.

Andre steder i rammeplanen fremmes fellesskapets betydning for mer eksplisitte utbytter. For eksempel beskrives fellesskap som en viktig arena for å utvikle forståelse for ulikhet og likhet: «Gjennom arbeid med etikk, religion og filosofi skal barnehagen bidra til at barna (...) utvikler interesse og respekt for hverandre og forstår verdien av likheter og ulikheter i et fellesskap» (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, s. 55). Fellesskap tolker jeg her, som en sosial sammenheng der møter mellom ulike individer danner grunnlag for bestemte former for innsikt og forståelse.

På lignende måte fremstilles fellesskap som en sentral kontekst for utvikling av selvbylde. Det står i verdigrunnlaget at «Barnehagen skal gi rom for barnas ulike forutsetninger, perspektiver og erfaringer og bidra til at barna, i fellesskap med andre, utvikler et positivt forhold til seg selv og tro på egne evner» (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017, s. 8). Slik sitatet er formulert, tolker jeg fellesskap som en forutsetning for individuell emosjonell og personlig utvikling, der barnets selvforståelse utvikles i relasjon til andre. Selv om fellesskapet her tillegges betydning, forstås det fortsatt primært som en kontekst for utvikling av individuelle kvaliteter.

Samlet sett viser analysen at fellesskapsbegrepet er tvetydig, og at forståelsen påvirkes både av perspektiv og av konteksten det fremstilles i. Hvordan barna posisjoneres, kommer også ulikt til uttrykk i de forskjellige fremskrivingene. En gjennomgående tendens er imidlertid at det er barnehagen som institusjon, og de ansatte, som gis ansvar for å *bidra til, støtte og sørge for* ulike fellesskap for barn.

Fellesskap for eller av barn?

Med utgangspunkt i problemstillingen *Hvordan ivaretas barns fellesskapskultur i rammeplanen?*, problematiserer jeg videre hvordan fellesskap skrives frem i rammeplanen. Jeg retter særlig oppmerksomhet mot spenningen mellom politikkenes føringer og barns egne fellesskapskulturer. Analysen viser at fellesskap fremstår som et uklart og sammensatt begrep, preget av vage formuleringer og parallelle forståelser. I tråd med Piškur et al. (2022) gir begrepet begrenset veiledning for praksis. Fellesskap kan forstås som *statisk gruppefellesskap, opplevd fellesskap og utbyttefellesskap*. Samtidig fremstår barnehagen og personalet som ansvarlige for å etablere og opprettholde fellesskap, mens barna plasseres som medlemmer med tilgang til det.

Min analyse, i tråd med nordisk forskning som viser økt utbytteorientering i styringsdokumenter (Ackesjö & Persson, 2019; Alexiadou et al., 2024; Alstad & Sopanen, 2021), indikerer at fellesskap som læringsarena tillegges større vekt enn barns egen meningsskaping i samspill. Det kommer frem en avstand mellom fellesskap slik det uttrykkes av barn og beskrives som dynamisk, spontant og situert (Juutinen et al., 2024; Schmidt & Rossen, 2021), og slik det formuleres i rammeplanen med vekt på stabile og målrettede strukturer. Samtidig har slike strukturer en viktig funksjon ved å legge til rette for relasjoner og felles erfaringer, som er avgjørende for lek og vennskap (Nilsen, 2015; Öhman, 2015). De gir også grunnlag for gjentakende møter og felles referanser (Johansson & Berthelsen, 2019; Sørensen & Lund, 2024). Likevel fanger denne forståelsen ikke opp barns subjektive opplevelse av fellesskap her og nå, og deltakelse i samme aktivitet innebærer ikke nødvendigvis en opplevelse av å være sammen (Østrem, 2024).

Rammeplanens vektlegging av opplevd fellesskap kan forstås som et eksempel på hvordan subjektive erfaringer fremheves eksplisitt, samtidig som de reguleres og avgrenses gjennom andre førende prinsipper. Selv om formuleringer som *erfare og føle seg sett og anerkjent* peker mot en forståelse av fellesskap som subjektivt opplevd, viser analysen et annet mønster. Erfaringene knyttes ofte til bestemte aktiviteter, et bestemt innhold eller bestemte mål, som måltider, samisk kultur eller inkluderingstiltak, snarere enn til barnas egne meningsskapende praksiser. Slik blir opplevd fellesskap innrammet på en måte som gjør at barns erfaringer får betydning gjennom sine formål snarere enn å være meningsfulle i seg selv (Østrem, 2025).

Dette speiler ambivalensen som identifiseres i nordiske styringsdokumenter, der verdier som mangfold, deltakelse og anerkjennelse fremmes på et overordnet nivå, samtidig som det gis føringer for hvordan disse verdiene skal realiseres i tråd med forhåndsdefinerte mål (Alexiadou et al., 2024; Alstad & Sopanen, 2021). Slik flerspråklighet kan fremstå som en ressurs samtidig som den reguleres gjennom krav om majoritetsspråk (Giæver & Tkachenko, 2020; Millei et al., 2025), fremstår opplevd fellesskap som noe barn skal erfare, men innenfor forhåndsdefinerte rammer for mening og relevans. Dette synliggjør hvordan barns bidrag løftes frem, samtidig som forståelsen av hva som er meningsfullt, i stor grad knyttes til de ansatte.

På bakgrunn av dette kan det argumenteres for at rammeplanen i større grad bør anerkjenne barns fellesskapskulturer og barnas egen meningsskaping, og at fellesskap i mindre grad bør defineres av de ansatte (Jæger et al., 2016). Dette innebærer en forskyvning mot en prosessuell forståelse av fellesskap, der det som oppstår i barns samspill her og nå, tillegges verdi (Juutinen et al., 2024; Østrem, 2024). Ansattes rolle kan dermed i større grad handle mer om å følge og verne barns initiativ enn om å definere rammene for dem. I et slikt perspektiv kan de ansattes rolle i større grad knyttes til å støtte barns innspill, noe som kan gi rom for demokratisk deltakelse og lek som egenverdi (Østrem, 2025), uten en utbytteorientert forankring.

Ettersom analysen er avgrenset til et styringsdokument, er det viktig å understreke at den identifiserte avstanden mellom rammeplanens fremstillinger av fellesskap og barns fellesskapskulturer ikke impliserer en tilsvarende avstand i praksis. Det eksisterer et handlingsrom i tolkning og omsetting av politiske føringer, og pedagoger reforhandler i pedagogisk praksis (Nygård, 2017). Kritikken som fremmes, retter seg derfor primært mot policy-nivået, og peker på et potensial for å tydeliggjøre barns perspektiver i fremtidige styringsdokumenter. Studien omfatter verken analyser av ansattes operasjonalisering eller analyser av barns erfaringer, og det fremstår som sentralt for videre forskning. For å få innsikt i hvordan styringsdokumenter faktisk fortolkes og realiseres i praksis, er det derfor behov for flere empiriske studier på feltet.

Avsluttende betraktninger

Min studie viser at fellesskap i rammeplanen rommer en grunnleggende spenning mellom barns fellesskapskulturer (poetikk) og politiske føringer. Selv om opplevd fellesskap løftes frem, innrammes barns erfaringer av forhåndsdefinerte mål og strukturer, noe som kan gi ansatte betydelig definisjonsmakt over hva som forstås som meningsfullt.

På bakgrunn av dette peker studien mot et behov for at fremtidige styringsdokumenter tydeliggjør fellesskap som en prosess snarere enn en struktur. Som noe som kontinuerlig skapes i barns samspill her og nå. I en kontekst der mangfold også fremheves som en faktor som kan utfordre fellesskap (Emilson & Eek-Karlsson, 2022), blir en slik tydeliggjøring særlig viktig etter hvert som barnegrupper og uttrykksformer blir stadig mer sammensatte. Dette aktualiserer behovet for i større grad å anerkjenne nye fellesskapskulturer som formes i barnehagen. Slike forståelser kan bidra til å styrke barns demokratiske deltakelse og synliggjøre lek og medskaping som praksiser med egenverdi i barns fellesskapskulturer.

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Marit Frimannslund er ph.d.-stipendiat ved barnehagelærerutdanningen på OsloMet. Doktorgradsprosjektet hennes handler om fellesskap i hypermangfoldige barnegrupper, med særlig interesse for det som binder barn sammen på tvers av forskjeller. Hun er også opptatt av hvordan barns uttrykk og erfaringer kommer til syne og kan forstås i barnehagehverdagen.



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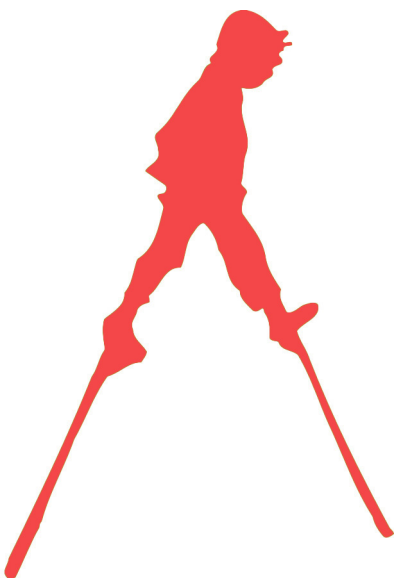
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Klaus Thestrup

Our Playground: A poetic tribute

Here is a tribute to the educators, the researchers and the practitioners at the BIN-Norden conference in Stockholm in May 2025. It was an intense experience meeting and talking to all these interesting people. I had the opportunity to read a poem to all the participants at the conference. You can read it here and you can also listen to it, if you follow this link. Enjoy!

<https://klausthestrup.com/our-playground-oplaesning-paa-bin-norden-i-stockholm/>



Our Playground

We know a lot in this vibrating everlasting space
About being in deep processes with children
Playing together in a modest everyday present

We are the experts in looking at and joining in
At the very same time inside this phenomenon play
Working and walking through a playful pedagogy

Here we are suggesting ways to become humans
Using tools and materials to understand and live life
Doing experiments to be a gentle part of a wounded world

Maybe we are the ones, who know the most on culture
On art unfolded in processes, on digital technologies
As a vivid part of the analogue and the global

At least we dare to be in the unknown and still untold
Breaking boundaries and creating new expressions
Making ourselves and children capable of agency

This is a community of researchers and practitioners
Basing our results on action and ongoing reflection
We hold our ground in the playground and talk about it

Be aware, we have just started a long journey
It might be us, who can change the future of this planet
Being sensitive to ourselves, to all and our connections

A toast for the Nordic approach, a toast for children
A toast for Bin Norden, a conference to discuss and act
A toast for our capacity to play and play again

Biography

Klaus Thestrup (b. 1959) is a poet, a researcher and a teacher. He writes about many questions in life, on digital play together with children and students and about being in open processes. He works at Aarhus University doing practice-oriented and experimenting teaching and research. He has a homepage where he presents his poems: klausthestrup.com. He has also published a poetry collection in Danish on the joy of doing research: Thestrup, K. (20205). *At stå i det næste*. Poetry collection: Mellemsgaard. Localised 07.11.2025 at <https://mellemsgaard.dk/shop/3-digte/4665-at-staa-i-det-naeste---digte-om-kaerligheden-til-at-forske/>

