Do you want to play? Pedagogues' participation in play as a pathway to inclusive environments

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to present an analysis of how pedagogues can handle inclusion and exclusion processes in children's play to support children to become participants in play. To participate in play may strengthen children's social skills and prevent social marginalization (Butler et al., 2016). Therefore, it is important for all children to participate in play.

The analysis combines theoretical concepts of play order and play practices (Schatzki 2001; Schmidt 1999; Skovbjerg, 2021, Skovbjerg et al., 2022) with theory of inclusion and exclusion processes in relation to play (Buch, 2017; Hansen 2012, 16; Hansen et al. 2020; Hansen et al. 2022; Lave & Wenger, 2004; Schatzki, 2001). The combination allows for a deeper understanding of inclusion as a practice that requires adapting to a social order while also being able to negotiate and define the social order through participation.

Data of the research project *Can I Join in? – Play, Inclusion and Community in School* (Skovbjerg et al. 2022) show a wide variation in how pedagogues handle inclusion and exclusion processes in play. In this paper, our main interest is to examine how pedagogues can support and strengthen children's ability to become participants in play through inclusive pedagogical strategies. We draw one example to illustrate how children practice social skills and strategies in play, and two examples to illustrate the analytical results, which are based on the overall data base.

The main contribution of this paper is the analytical finding that pedagogues' participation in play is important to removing barriers to children's participation in play. Free play, understood as free from pedagogues, does not support inclusive pedagogical purposes. Based on our analysis, we have developed the concept of *pedagogical play practice* which focuses on creating more possibilities for all children to participate in play.

Keywords: Inclusion, Exclusion, Participation, Play order, Play practice.

Point of interest

An increasing number of children are being identified with social and behavioral challenges, and pedagogues note that these children struggle to engage in play with their peers. They are often not invited to join in by other children and are generally at risk of social marginalization. However, participation in play is important for developing children's social skills. We are therefore interested in understanding the role of educators' knowledge and understanding of play, how they use play pedagogically, and how their involvement in play affects children's overall opportunities to participate, especially for those at risk of being excluded.

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Introduction

The political goal of fostering more inclusive schools in Denmark has not yet succeeded. The number of children identified as having social and behavioural difficulties is increasing. According to a Danish survey (Hansen et al., 2018), students with special needs seem to participate less in activities in public schools compared to students without special needs. Pedagogues report that it is difficult for these children to participate in play, and they encounter troubles when doing it. Consequently, they are not chosen or invited by other children, and they are in risk of social marginalisation (Hansen et al. 2020). Reportedly, 8% of children starting school do not feel that they belong to the school community (Ministry of Education 2015; Rasmussen et al. 2014; World Health Organization 2016). Additionally, reports indicate that the number of students recommended for special education programmes has increased in Denmark, returning to the same level as in 2013 - one year after the implementation of the so-called 'inclusion law' and one year before the 2014 school reform (Ministry of Education 2012, 2014; Vive 2022). Further, the number of children assessed as having special needs is increasing in preschool and primary school (KL 2020).

In the Danish research project *Can I Join in? – Play, Inclusion and Community in School* (Skovbjerg et al. 2022), we combine theory of play and theory of inclusion and exclusion to gain new knowledge of how to support and strengthen children's ability to participate in social processes through play. As part of the research project, we have investigated inclusion and exclusion processes pertaining to play and how different pedagogical strategies, instructions, and roles impact on these processes in children's play. In this paper we explore how pedagogues can support children in becoming participants in play, focusing on the following research question: "How can pedagogues contribute to a more inclusive environment to ensure children's participation in play"?

Inclusion and exclusion

Research on inclusive education has contributed to knowledge of how to develop a more inclusive school based on the idea of inclusive education as a human right (Ainscow et al., 2006; Carrington, 1999, 2017; Farrell, 2004). Further, how teachers and other educators accommodate student diversity through inclusive pedagogical arrangements (Avramidis & Norwich, 2010; Clarke et al., 1998; Egelund & Tetler, 2009; Florian, 2005).

In this paper, we argue that inclusive pedagogical arrangements involve the sociological point that all communities must place limits on what can be included and what cannot be included to secure the social structure (Bjerre, 2019; Hansen, 2012, 2016; Hansen et al., 2020; Laclau, 1996). Consequently, identification and alteration of the social and cultural patterns and of the understandings of difference in a social practice is essential to ensure equity for all children. Likewise, differentiation is a prerequisite for access to participate for all children (Hansen et al., 2020). In short, differentiation is a practice based on knowledge about the individual child and using this knowledge to plan pedagogical activities ensuring access for all children to be a participator and get a feeling of belonging and acceptance (Allan, 2008; Bjerre, 2019; Farrel, 2004; Hansen et al., 2020).

From this perspective, inclusion is on the one hand about rights and access to participation. On the other hand, inclusion is about commitment and adaption meaning that children commit to the social order of the learning community – norms, rules, routines, values etc. – and this requires the ability to participate. Ability to participate refers to social and cultural skills, such as understanding and handling situations, rules, routines, meanings, and goals, in interaction with other individuals (Buch, 2017; Lave & Wenger, 2004; Schatzki, 2001). Ability to participate is essential because communities are not a specific and fixed unit; community members influence what the social order of the community can be through negotiations and actions (Buch, 2017; Cordsen, 2020; Schatzki, 2001; Schmidt, 1999). From this perspective, children must have the ability to commit to the social order and at the same time they have the possibility to influence what they are committing to as participator. Commitment is to adapt to the social order and at the same time to negotiate and define the social order through participation.

Consequently, inclusion involves ability and social skills but also ensuring equity and access (Carrington & Robinson, 2006; Hansen et al., 2020, Hansen et al., 2022). Thus, pedagogues must consider both individual needs and the cohesion of the community. Balancing between individual needs and the

cohesion of the community is a huge challenge in everyday life in schools and pedagogical practice in general.

When we analyse inclusion and exclusion processes from this perspective on inclusion, we focus on examining pedagogical practice, pedagogical strategies, and the choice of activities and how they have an impact on children's access and possibility of participation. How do pedagogues account for children's differences, different needs, different preferences, resources, experiences, and skills when planning and practicing play activities? And how do they support children in becoming participants in these activities? Participating is a prerequisite for inclusion, but one can participate without being truly included. As noted earlier, inclusion involves both commitment to the social order and the possibility to influence what one is committing to as a participator. This commitment means adapting to the social order while also negotiating and defining it through participation.

According to research on inclusive education, inclusive strategies in pedagogical practice seldom involve supporting children's ability to participate and thereby gain a feeling of belonging to and being part of the learning community, which is what the inclusive education model represents (Carrington, 1999, Carrington & Robinson, 2006; Hansen et al., 2020). Tendencies indicate that the dominating understanding of difficulties is mainly based on a special-needs model that presumes difficulties to be intrinsic to the individual child. These understandings therefore point towards strategies that target and compensate for the children's needs. According to the inclusive educational model, social difficulties arise in the relation between the child and his/her environment. Therefore, inclusion requires pedagogical strategies that support the abilities and access of children experiencing social difficulties and those identified as having behavioural challenges from a pedagogical perspective.

To be a participator in play may be a pathway to strengthen social skills for these children. In the following we introduce our theoretical understanding of play.

Through the lenses of play

There seems to be a close correlation between lack of ability to play and social marginalisation (Butler et al., 2016). Accordingly, having or developing the skills to partake in play may strengthen children's social skills. As Butler, Duncombe and Mason (2016, 48) state, "Taking part in this collective and collaborative play can, therefore, be understood as a social accomplishment – something that children manage through a sophisticated array of social skills and strategies".

Play is not an easy concept to work with empirically or analytically (Sutton-Smith, 2001). Play can be understood as splits or shifts into qualitatively new constellations of participants, themes, and behaviours (Iacovides et al., 2011). Understanding the rhythm of repetition and distance within play makes it possible to gain a deeper understanding of the micro-processes involved in producing and reproducing play practices through negotiations to search for common understandings and adaptation. Thus, research on play provides a deeper understanding of children's social skills in interactions and situations where commitment is necessary (Skovbjerg, 2021; Sundsdal & Øksnes, 2015; Sutton-Smith, 2001).

Aiming to combine theory of play and theory of inclusion/exclusion, we have used the concepts of play order, play practice and polyphony. *Play order* is a concept developed by Skovbjerg (Jørgensen & Skovbjerg, 2020; Skovbjerg, 2021; Skovbjerg & Sand, 2022; Skovbjerg et al., 2022) and it refers to the logic and organisation of specific play activities. The concept of *play practices* encompasses every action you perform while engaging in play activities within a specific play order. *Polyphony* refers to a network of participatory possibilities that represent negotiation options while playing, for instance pertaining to ideas, rules, behaviour, meaning, feelings, motives and how to use toys.

Thus, play is always established as a specific play order (Bateson, 2001; Huizinga, 1938; Skovbjerg, 2021; Skovbjerg et al., 2022) of which participants must have a sense and to which they must adapt if they are to participate. Words, behaviours, and things around us can take on atypical meanings, but Bateson (2001) notes that most children understand the difference between play and non-play activities. We introduce the concept of *play order* (Skovbjerg, 2021; Skovbjerg & Sand, 2022; Skovbjerg et al., 2022) to describe that what is play is separate from what is not play. What is meaningful within the play order can only be understood from within, and being able to adapt to the meaning within the play order is a crucial play ability. Play order constitutes a shared understanding of meaning that

involves materials, values, rules, routines, and norms to which participants commit when they participate in or enter a specific play activity (Sand et al. 2022). As Skovbjerg (2021, 53) states, 'Play creates a good situation awareness so that one attunes oneself to the tone of the play; if one is tactless, one is completely amiss'. As in social practices, play order presupposes the establishment of a collective social identity, and individuals must adapt to this collective identity by learning and following the rules and principles and by internalising a shared understanding if they are to be part of the play order (Hansen et al., 2020; Skovbjerg, 2021).

Children establish play orders through several shared play practices (Mouritsen, 1996; Skovbjerg, 2021). Children use such shared practices to create play situations through collective skills that have to do with knowing about different games, different rules, and routines. We hold that play practices are entities of a particular play order. To play is to practise play orders. Play practice is situated and involves a sense of how to act and react in social processes and how to coordinate, organise and construct meaning. The creation of play practice occurs over time, and the creation of play order is the result of negotiations and actions, and it represents social patterns that are stable over time, but which are always contingent and never necessary (Hansen, 2012, 2016; Hansen et al., 2020; Laclau, 1996). These patterns are always driven by the participants who take part in shared play practices. Thus, for children, this means learning and developing their play competencies while engaging in shared play practices. At the same time, play practices must be both produced and reproduced for the play order to continue. Schmidt (1999, 37) points to social practices that are both repetitive and productive as 'a doing and making, done in a repetitive rhythm'. As Karoff Skovbjerg (2013, 5) states, 'Our practices are not clearly defined, but we have a sense of what they are. It means that our idea of what makes for excellent doll play is to some extent present in our playing together, even though it is not possible positively to define'.

Methodology

The empirical examples in this paper are based on data from the research project *Can I Join in?*[2] involving seven researchers across different research institutions in Denmark, England and the Netherlands. The methodology is based on design research and design experiments (Amiel & Reeves, 2008; Jensen et al., 2022; Nieveen et al., 2006; Skovbjerg et al., 2022) and includes approximately 500 children aged 6–9 years and 40 pedagogues from two Danish primary schools in two different socioeconomic neighbourhoods. A core value in the methodology is a strong and close collaboration between pedagogues and researchers (Criado & Estalla, 2018). The research design (Figure 1) follows the model from Christensen et al (2012) and is structured accordingly throughout all the iterations (Skovbjerg et al., 2022).

In the context domain pedagogues and researchers explored the schools' play culture, the practices and the challenges related to the existing inclusive practice. In the lab domain pedagogues and researchers designed play activities based on the identified inclusion issues and following the descriptions of the play types based on Huges (2002). In the experiment domain pedagogues and researchers implemented the designed play activities together with the children. In the reflection domain pedagogues and researchers reflected on the experiences, planning another iteration.

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[2] https://www.designskolenkolding.dk/maajegværemed

Figure 1
The research design
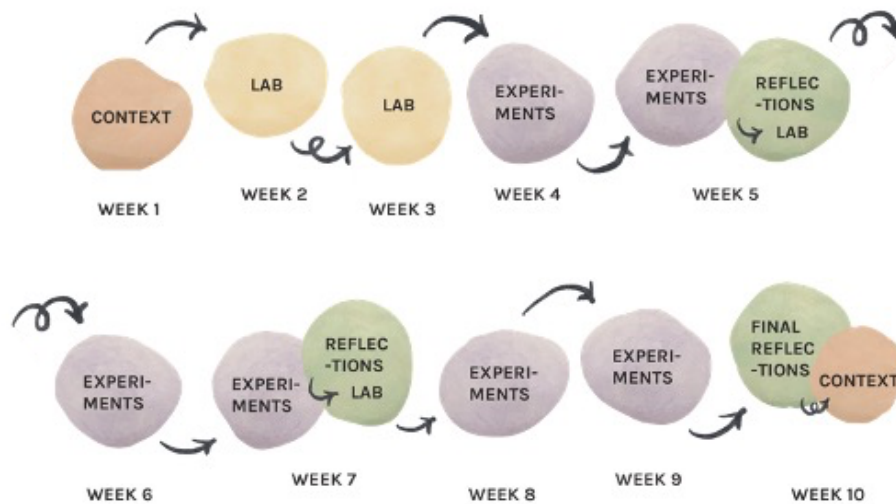
Data is constructed in two ways: 1) In children's free time after they finish school, and pedagogues take over the responsibility for the children. 2) In lessons that only pedagogues facilitate and use for social activities, e.g., play, excursions, homework etc.

The empirical data is produced from the design experiment using role-play activities.

The fieldwork consisted of ethnographically inspired methods (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983) to sensitively capture the social practices occurring during the play designs. The approach allowed us to reflect on our participation situationally and to switch between observing from a distance, moderate or full participation (Spradley, 1980). Furthermore, we used visual ethnography (Pink, 2007) to capture the specific social and material practices between children, pedagogues and environments. We had spontaneous conversations with children and pedagogues and carried out 32 interviews with pedagogues and 500 episodic interviews with children. Moreover, we used the video system IRIS to record meetings where we reflected upon the results with the pedagogues, as well as record some of the play activities. Since several researchers together have generated the empirical material, we arranged ten data sessions to discuss the practice of writing field notes and to analyse the empirical material. We used the platform Dedoose for sharing, coding and analysing the data from observations, and we used techniques from grounded theory including open coding and memos (Charmaz, 2006) along with orientational codes from Layder (1998). The open coding revealed a pattern of codes related to school as a context for play. In the following, we present central concepts from the theoretical framework.

Practicing social skills in play

To illustrate the social skills and strategies, as well as the sensitivity and awareness that children can practice in play to commit and adapt to the play order, we provide an example from our data. We meet Mathias and his friends Sasha, Adam, and Martin. The boys are classmates and know each other from school. According to the pedagogues, Mathias is a boy having social and behavioural difficulties. Now the boys have some free time, and they engage in a role play designed by the pedagogues. The play is about monsters and zombies battling each other. They seek ways to hit each other in a meaningful way, not hurting but nonetheless hitting. The following is an extract from the field notes:

> Sasha and Martin have two sticks, and Sasha hits Martin, Martin hits Sasha. They hit each
> other carefully on the hips. 'It's much more fun if we hit each other for real', Martin says.
> Sasha hits Martin. Martin hits Sasha. Sasha hits Martin. Martin hits Sasha. They continue
> back and forth between hitting and acting the hitting. Mathias joins in, trying to hit one of

> the boys. 'No, this is not allowed', says Sasha. Mathias hits Sasha carefully; Martin hits Mathias carefully. They hit each other carefully, not hitting too hard, trying once to hit, looking at the face of the other, hitting again, looking again, aware of how their hitting affects the other person. 'But I can do this because I have a weapon', Mathias says. Sasha says, 'Yes, sure, I understand'. 'He is gigantic', says Martin. Mathias takes a step back, looking at the boys hitting each other; then he hits again; then he takes a step back.

Through playing the boys establish a play order, and they know that they need to adapt to this understanding to be part of the play order. When Mathias is about to break the play order by doing something which the children decide is not allowed, Sasha says 'no' and Mathias then adapts to what is allowed within the play order, and his adaptation allows the development of their play order to continue. The example shows how the boys continuously produce and reproduce play practice through negotiations to search for common understandings and adaptation. It also shows how Mathias through participating experience how to adapt to the play order by accepting Sasha's guiding.

In the following example, we meet Mathias and his friends Sasha, Adam, and Martin again in another part of the play about monsters and zombies fighting each other. In this example Mathias is not only adapting to the play order. He also contributes to developing the play order. The following is an extract from the field notes:

> Adam, Mathias, Sasha, and Martin are doing a role play in the forest. They are two teams, and each team has a base. They are fighting with sticks. Adam moves towards Mathias; he uses his hands, wanting to fight. Mathias tells a story about the Nightmare Man. 'The Nightmare Man will come for you', Mathias says to Adam. Adam stops. 'But who is the Nightmare Man?', Adam asks. 'The Nightmare Man is a terrifying person who can go into your dreams and make you dream evil dreams', Mathias replies. 'And then what can I do?' Adam asks. 'Be careful', Mathias responds. Adam walks carefully towards Mathias. Mathias hits him with his stick. 'I am the Nightmare Man', Mathias yells. Adam takes a step back. 'Okay, I am dead now, right?' 'Yes', Mathias replies. 'But you can go back to your base to get another life'.

When Mathias comes up with the story of the Nightmare Man, Adam immediately listens to his ideas and tries to go along with Mathias' story. He seems willing to make the idea work, and thereby the play order continues and develops. In that sense, participation in the play order is not defined from the very beginning, but the boys are open to new ways of practising, both for the play order to continue and for it to develop. When Mathias plays, he practices adapting to the play order, but he also contributes to the play order by coming up with new ideas which his friends are open to and try to follow. They all negotiate and collaborate about ideas, rules, behaviour, meaning, feelings, motives and how to use toys, and thereby they all contribute to the play order. According to our theoretical understanding of inclusion, Mathias is included in the role play.

Children in play demonstrate how becoming an included participator requires commitment, and adaption to the play order, illustrating what it implies on a micro level. To adapt to the play order is akin to adapt to a social order and involves the ability to comprehend and navigate situations, rules, routines, meanings, and goals, in interaction with other children or individuals (Buch, 2017; Jørgensen & Skovbjerg, 2020; Lave & Wenger, 2004; Schatzki, 2001).

Schmidt's (1999) concept of social practice as a rhythmic interplay between repetition and distance is relevant to understand how Mathias and his friends adapt to what is going on and how they use the adaptation to participate in and contribute to the play practice. On the one hand, the children repeat specific play practices within the play order so as to be part of it: Adam wants to know what he can do in practice to adhere to the play order which Mathias suggests when he presents the Nightmare Man. On the other hand, the expression of play practice varies with each repetition, and there is always some distance between one repetition and the next one. The children never perform the exact same practice twice, as there will always be a slight difference from one instance to the next. At the same time, the boys continuously try to construct a common understanding and meaning, which enables the play to continue. In order to be part of that shared understanding of meaning and production of meaning,

Mathias and his friends have to adapt to what is already going on to be able to adapt and unfold the practice, and then the community of play is open to change.

The two examples from our data give an insight in the complexity in being an included participator in play, and, among other things, they reveal that it requires a great deal of sensitivity and awareness from all children to partake in play, as well as good negotiating skills. Play can serve as a crucial tool in supporting all children's development of social skills and enhancing their ability to participate in social interactions and practices, which are essential for fostering inclusive environments. This shows that play is not only for fun.

The examples also demonstrate that experiencing play difficulties or social challenges is not intrinsic to the individual child; it arises from the interaction between the child and their environment. Despite Mathias being identified with social and emotional difficulties, he succeeds in becoming an included participant in the role play, and over time, he develops the ability to negotiate and contribute to the play order. Therefore, pedagogical strategies aimed at ensuring children' participation in play to strengthen their social skills and ability to participate are crucial.

In the following, we analyse how pedagogues can contribute to ensure all children's participation in play as a pathway to inclusion.

Supporting inclusive processes through play processes

From the inclusive education perspective, children's play practices provide insights into how to adapt to a social order and how to contribute to changing this order. Additionally, how these processes involve negotiations, actions, and transformation. Inclusion is, thus, not only a question of the right to participate. It is also about obligation – that is, (learning) to be able to participate by developing and/or strengthen social and cultural skills and at the same time contributing to construct and develop the (play) practice. In other words, polyphony - a network of participatory possibilities - is only possible if children adapt to a play order but play also presupposes a knowledge of play orders and play practices, as well as experience with play orders and play practices (Skovbjerg et al., 2022).

In the Danish context, too many children struggle to participate in play, and too many children struggle to make it work when they are playing with children who are identified as having social and behavioural difficulties (Hansen et al., 2021, Jensen et al., 2022; Skovbjerg et al. 2022r). Our analysis in the present project show that it is of huge importance that pedagogues know the prerequisites of participation in play if they are to ensure possibilities for all children to be included in play. Play order, play practice and polyphony are important knowledge to create an environment that is more inclusive. In the following, we present two examples wherein pedagogues support children to take part in play.

How pedagogues handle inclusion and exclusion processes in play

In the following example, the children play Teddy Bear Club which is another designed role play. It involves children engaging in role playing with teddy bears in a large, flexible indoor space. The following extract from our field notes concerns children playing Teddy Bear Taxi:

> Some children from primary one has created a car for the teddies, and the pedagogue decides that today we also have a taxi. 'Then the teddies can go for a ride', the pedagogue says. The pedagogue finds more boxes for teddy bear taxis [...] and one of the children places his teddy in the 'car' box; he swings the teddy round and round, and he screams, throwing the taxi for the teddy almost as if in flight. 'This is fun', says another child. He takes his teddy, places the teddy in another taxi car and swings it around while saying 'ooh' and throwing it away. A third child looks at these two, placing her teddy bear in another taxi box and swinging, singing and throwing it away. 'This is a trip for the teddy bears', another child says.

In this example, the pedagogue provides an opportunity for a play order to be created by suggesting the taxi idea and providing different boxes. Thereby, the pedagogue contributes to the play order, which the children have devised, by providing materials for the children to continue executing their idea. In this

way, she becomes a play order provider for the children, who have created this order by trying things out repeatedly. As such, she supports possibilities of participation within the play order, and she shows how to develop it instead of controlling or structuring it in a certain way and thereby limiting possibilities of participation. Developing the play order may give other children possibility to participate or the children in the play new possibilities.

In the following example, the pedagogue is deeply involved in the process of adapting and producing the play order. The children are managing a restaurant, but then suddenly, they start playing animals instead of humans, and the play order and play practices change into something which is the same but also different. The following is from our field notes:

> The children are playing restaurant. Some are cooking; some serve meals. The pedagogue says, 'Oh, now there is also a dog in the restaurant' (...) 'Now this has to end', the pedagogue screams in a playful voice. The dog bites, the cats are screaming, and the rabbits are jumping. The pedagogue finds a dog leash. She ties it to the table. Now, rabbits and cats jump towards the dog. One rabbit finds the leash and walks away with the dog. The rabbit moves out of the room, down the hall and back again. Other children continue eating in the restaurant while the animals are going crazy.

The pedagogue seems to understand the rhythm of the play practices in the restaurant, which consist of repetition and distance within the play order. She makes it possible for the animal idea to continue and grow, although this causes the play order and play practices to change. In this case, her understanding of the adaptation and production of the play order makes it possible for the children with the animal idea to remain included within the play order, adapting on one hand and producing on the other. In her work with the play order and play practices, the pedagogue succeeds in supporting more children in being included in the play, because a diversity of play orders is being produced and reproduced within the same overarching play order.

Accepting and supporting polyphony to create inclusiveness

The two examples show how the pedagogues create a network of participatory possibilities supporting different play orders and, e.g., make sure that the animal play order is not destroying the restaurant play order, which several children continue to follow and find meaningful. Further, the animal idea can unfold, and all children can remain included in the play consisting of different play orders. In the Teddy bear play the pedagogue supports the idea of a teddy taxi can fly and thereby supports more possibilities of participation. By understanding and using these polyphonic possibilities and being open-minded to the idea of animals in a restaurant or a flying teddy taxi, the pedagogues ensure that more children can be involved in adapting to different play orders and contribute to negotiate and develop play orders. Thus, the pedagogues replace a clear and understandable play order with a *polyphonic play order*. That is, instead of seeing and seeking consensus and clarity and thereby limiting play orders to develop, the play order becomes imprecise and develops in different ways. Suddenly the teddy bears have a ride in a taxi and the taxi can practically fly instead of driving, which the pedagogue understands and supports, or the restaurant is suddenly full of animals. We recognise such flexibility in other types of role play when one child is telling a story about pirates and then, suddenly, another child picks up a banana that becomes a bomb. Or in a dog salon where some children playing dogs suddenly break a leg and need to go to the animal hospital. The polyphonic play order creates a network of participatory possibilities for more children because the children's ideas and initiatives are supported by the pedagogues. Thereby, they experience that they contribute to the play order and get a feeling of belonging and acceptance. Rather than being regulated and determined by specific rules, the play order is about polyphony in the play practices to ensure more children included in play.

Discussion - Free play and inclusion

By integrating play theory and theory of inclusion and exclusion, our focus is on how to ensure children's participatory possibilities in play, where they not only adapt to the play order but also contribute to its development. Being included as a participant in play can enhance children's social skills and their ability to engage in social interactions and processes. According to a Danish study (Hansen et al., 2020) pedagogues point to children's lack of social skills and play skills as the main cause of being in difficulties. Giving these children access to participate in play and practicing play order can be a way to support them to experience their ability to be a part of the community. The two examples, featuring the restaurant and Teddy bear club, highlight the importance of pedagogues actively participating in play and supporting the various play orders devised by the children. Thereby, the pedagogues create a wider network of participatory possibilities for the children.

From this perspective, the concept of free play is challenged. The idea of free play rests on the notion that every child is born to be a playing child, and it is a generally accepted pedagogical attitude to have trust in that capability, believing that pedagogues should not interfere with what children do naturally. Mouritsen (1996, 26) emphasises this play discourse and its importance by stating that we must, first and foremost, look at play culture as children's own culture. He takes offence at the notion of play as an activity employed to help children develop. Sanderod and Gurholt (2014) underline the importance of nature and curiosity in supporting free play, just as Gray (2011, 443) stresses the importance of free play by stating, 'Children are designed, by natural selection, to play. Whenever they are free to play, they play'.

In the Norwegian context, Rønning (2010) argues that free play is necessary for play practices, showing how pedagogues value free play and how they worry about turning kindergarten into 'pre-school' activities not aimed at free play. The discourse about free play seems to lead to the consequence that pedagogues should not participate in play but stay away, first and foremost, because they theoretically and empirically believe that the value of play lies in the children's own nature and culture, in which adults should not be involved.

These theoretical ideas and related values within play and childhood research are also dominant in Danish pedagogical professionalism, and some of the pedagogues who participate in the study *Can I join in?* also represent this idea of 'just letting children play' without adult involvement in the play situation. Several of the interviewed pedagogues mention the values of free play as the main reason why they do not participate in children's play. At the same time, however, the pedagogues experience that children at risk of social marginalization either do not take part in play, get into trouble if they do, or they are not chosen by the other children (Skovbjerg et al., 2022)

Free play can of course be beneficial for many children. However, from an inclusive educational perspective, free play – as in, free from pedagogues – is not beneficial to all children because some children need to be supported in order for them to obtain access to play orders and play practices and to gain experience of how to adapt to the play order and contribute to play orders through playing. On basis of our analysis of data, we recommend that pedagogues participate in play so as to remove barriers to participation and to support all children's ability to play. This may be done either by being a player, designing and preparing play for children or by being on the edge of the play practice while focusing on possibilities of participation for all children (Skovbjerg et al., 2022). The following quotes are from the interviews with pedagogues:

> "The children I consider at risk of being excluded from play are vulnerable during free play, but not in plays we have planned during the project".

> "We have a girl in our group, and it is clear how difficult it is for her when it's play time. It's hard for her to join in because there isn't an adult to guide the play. But it's interesting to consider how we can help her to participate in play".

> "There are also children who find it overwhelming to participate in large group games. It becomes too much for them to manage. They need to practice and play in smaller groups, which we support".

As a result of our analysis, we have developed the concept of *pedagogical play practice*, which means that play is a goal to attain through pedagogical practice (Skovbjerg et al., 2022). Pedagogical play practice focuses on creating new possibilities of participating in play for all children, continuously take into consideration how different types of play and play design meet different children's diverse situations, backgrounds, references, interests, competencies, and skills. The aim is to ensure the highest degree of practicing play in order to be an included participator.

Several play researchers have described the process of adapting to and learning from play orders and play practices through the role of spectator as an essential position both in terms of learning the practice and acquiring a sense of practice (Jessen, 2001; Mouritsen, 1996; Sørensen et al., 2007). As Sørensen, Danielsen & Nielsen (2007, 22) put it, 'The younger children often look over the shoulders of the older ones when they catch a whiff of something interesting and usable going on, and the older pupils to a great extent take on the role of instructors to the younger ones.' However, looking is not enough; to become familiar with the play order and play practices, one must adapt and contribute to the practice. It is only by practising that one can gain experience (Dewey, 1909).

Conclusion

Research on inclusive education documents the tendency in pedagogical practice to focus on strategies targeting and compensating for the children's needs and seldom on supporting the children's ability and access to participate. Further, there seems to be a lack of knowledge of how to help and support children to learn to adapt and contribute to the social order and to gain the necessary social skills.

In this paper we argue that pedagogical knowledge of play order, play practice and polyphony can enhance the development of a more inclusive environment, thereby expanding possibilities of participation. Our examples demonstrate how pedagogues' participation in play along with an emphasis on flexibility, transformation and negotiation, fosters increased participatory participation among children. Through participation, children learn to adapt to play orders and contribute to developing play orders. Simultaneously, social and cultural patterns are to be challenged and transformed to ensure equity for all children.

Children's participation in play necessitates skills, as demonstrated by the role play examples where children engage in negotiations and exhibit sensitivity and awareness. Furthermore, the examples underscore the importance of everyone's commitment to the overarching goal: to sustain play by adhering to its order. We conclude that one approach to develop a more inclusive environment is through pedagogues' participation in play. While free play, as in free from pedagogues, fails to adequately support children experiencing social difficulties in becoming included in play.

In conclusion, combining play theory and theory of inclusion and exclusion emphasises the significant importance of pedagogues' approach to play practice and play orders, which involves considering new ideas, individual input, and the diverse needs of children in facilitating possibilities of participating in play. Participating in play requires both ability and access and a play pedagogical practice furthers these aspects by prioritizing strategies that facilitate the creation of inclusive opportunities within the play order, while considering children's varied interests, preferences, ideas, and backgrounds. In conclusion, play serves as a crucial arena for pedagogues to foster the development of a more inclusive environment, and a pedagogical play practice is a way to achieve this goal.

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