
OUTLINES - CRITICAL PRACTICE STUDIES

• Vol. 19, No. 1 • 2018 • (46-66) •
www.outlines.dk

How Contradictions in Professional Practices Become Contradictions in Research Practices

Cristina Munck

University College Capital, UCC
Copenhagen, Denmark

Abstract

Within child and childhood research, contextual approaches are foregrounded, thus emphasizing children as active agents who take part in the social world and who thereby challenge and reproduce everyday social practices. However, child researchers seem to differ when it comes to understanding and exploring the social engagement of children and adults as either separated or interwoven. When understanding the engagement of children and adults as two separate things, adults are positioned as potentially disturbing the children, who are in turn doing what they themselves choose to. Accordingly, adults are to distance themselves from adult perceptions of children. From the position of an adult researcher, this would suggest a position of 'least adult'. As an alternative, this article proposes that adults and children are involved in a common social practice and that, in consequence, their arrangements are interwoven and interdependent. The researcher is also involved in this common social practice and thereby becomes entangled in conflicts within this practice. Finally, this article calls for further investigations into how conflicts in professional practice also become conflicts in research practice.

Introduction

This article wishes to contribute to methodological discussions about how to do research *with* children in day nurseries. For this purpose, I explore the dialectics between professional practice in day nurseries and a researcher's practice. By participating with children and professionals in institutional practices (Lave, 2012, 2011), the researcher position becomes entangled in contradictions and conflicts within such institutional practices. As a corollary of this, I as a researcher become a co-producer of conflicts, as well as a co-creator of ways of resolving conflicts in social practice.

Conflicts concerning children in day nurseries are connected to historical and political conflicts about the way children develop and learn, if understood as a part of everyday life

and as related to dualities and contradictions in the pedagogical arrangements (Højholt & Schraube, 2016). To be able to explore how conflicts and contradictions in pedagogical arrangements are *internally related* (Ollman, 2015), the article argues that the researcher position becomes part of the analysis of conflicts in institutional practice.

The research that serves as the basis for this article was conducted over ten months in two public day care institutions, more specifically in day nurseries. I conducted 44 days of participant observations and followed¹ two small groups of children: around twelve children aged between six months and two years and ten months, and three professionals. Both groups were located in day care settings with other groups of older children around the age of three-six years. In addition, I held planned dialogues with a variety of social educators and other professionals.

However, this article is not an article about methods as mere techniques for conducting research, but an effort to illustrate how methodologies are connected to the actual practice that I am participating in, as well as to the contradictions embedded in this practice (Solberg, 1994). My research practice is therefore to be understood as *situated research practice*, through which knowledge is produced from a defined place in the world, where the 'practice of study' as well as the researcher are embedded.

Structure of the Article

In this article, I analyse my *practice as a researcher* by presenting two empirical examples that illuminate how I position myself as a researcher and how I thus become part of the *dualities* and *contradictions* within the daily practice concerned, as well as the conflicts connected to them. Common to both examples are that they illustrate how I follow the children's social engagement, seen as part of the pedagogical practice, and by doing so acquire knowledge about how children and adults are positioned differently, and about how children are positioned differently among themselves.

The first example in this article analyses how I become part of the children's lunch arrangements, and how the arrangements of children and adults are intertwined and part of a lunch practice marked by contradictions. This example illuminates how I position myself and am positioned as an adult 'in between' the structurally produced positions of child and adult in the day nursery. This researcher 'positioning' opens up for an understanding of what seems to matter to the children, as well as of what matters to the adults as professionals within this *shared and contradictory practice*. In this context, mattering is related to the conditions and possibilities of action in the actual situations where children and professionals are engaged in and directed at an activity (Dreier, 2008; Schraube & Osterkamp, 2013). The second example illuminates how my researcher position becomes fixed when I primarily follow the children's social engagement, and thereby contribute to constituting the professional's arrangements as *opposites* to the children's arrangements. In relation to this example, I will discuss how structural contradictions also become an embodied contradiction. Both examples serve the purpose of showing how conflicts in institutional practices also become conflicts in research practice, and how the professionals and I, from different positions, struggle with exploring the children's social engagement both as connected with and separated from that of the adults.

¹ The term 'follow' will be further elaborated in the article as a way I work with children's perspectives by taking part in the children's everyday lives.

How some Premises Matter when Exploring the Perspectives of Small Children

In Denmark, a very large percentage of children attend day care. In 2013, 91.2 % of children between one and two years of age attended some kind of public day care or day nursery, as well as 19% of children under the age of one. By the age of three, 97.2 % of all Danish children were attending kindergarten (Danmarks Statistik, 2014).

Exploring children's perspectives on everyday life in public institutions is rooted in the proposition that in order to understand children's development, we must concern ourselves with children's perspectives on their everyday life. In this article, I explore children participating in the social world with intention and involvement (Røn Larsen & Stanek, 2015; Hedegaard, 2012, 2002; Højholt & Kousholt, 2014; Rogoff et al., 2007). Adults in institutional settings have a lot of conflicts about the children and about how to best understand children's problems. These problems seem to be connected to different ideals regarding what children should learn and how children should develop, as well as differences concerning the task of professionals in relation to children's institutional lives (Højholt & Kousholt, 2017). If we as adults do not understand children's problems as connected to what they are involved in, we risk marginalising these problems and preventing ourselves from understanding what is at stake for the children. To create better conditions for children's lives, we must therefore acquire knowledge about what matters to children through the children's perspectives on their social lives, and about what they get engaged in in this connection.

Many variations within childhood research deal with contextual approaches, emphasizing that children are active agents involved in various social practices (Andersen & Kampmann, 2010; Emilson & Johansson, 2009; Gulløv & Højlund, 2010; Gilliam & Gulløv, 2012; Larsen, 2010; Palludan, 2005). Children are not just passive recipients of pedagogy and socialization, but actively create the conditions for their social lives. Children are therefore to be studied on their own terms (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998). Accordingly, a critique of adulto-centric perspectives prevails in professional pedagogical practices, as well as within early childhood educational research, particularly in the Nordic countries. Critical researchers position adults as primarily civilizing and disciplining the children according to predefined learning agendas, thereby preventing the agency of the children to emerge (Gulløv, 2012).

As a consequence of this, researchers are to avoid reproducing adulto-centric perspectives on children: "The researcher must free him or herself from adult conceptions of children's activities, and enter the child's world as both observer and participant" (Corsaro, 1985, p. 3). It is important to note that in this quote, the worlds of children and adults are understood as *separated* from one another, and that subsequently, adults must distance themselves from adult conceptions of children. This critique of dominating adulto-centric perspectives on children has contributed to an analysis of how children's co-creations and contributions are *limited* and *controlled* by adults, thereby overshadowing how children actually co-create pedagogical arrangements (Munck, 2017).

This article takes another point of departure, seeing the social engagement of children and adults as both interwoven and interdependent. This implies that children are not *objects* of neither pedagogical practice nor research, but are *co-creators* (Stetsenko, 2008; Stetsenko & Grace Ho, 2015), as they elaborate their possibilities for pursuing what they want in

relation to others. Social practice in the day nursery is thereby *co-created as a matter common* to a number of children and adults. To understand practice and purposefully develop practice, we need to seek knowledge about practice from many different perspectives (Kousholt, 2012; Chimirri, 2015; Schraube & Osterkamp, 2013; Munck, 2017).

My research is not about accessing ‘true or genuine knowledge’ about children, but about exploring children’s co-creation in relation to what they are involved in. This means that knowledge is ‘context-sensitive’ and must be developed through common arrangements and understandings. From this vantage point, children’s development is constituted by social and cultural-historical activities and practices (Valsiner, 1997; Stetsenko, 2008; Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this article, I will discuss how it is possible, though simultaneously conflictual, to set up research informed by subjective experiences and embedded in the children’s everyday institutional lives. According to Agnes Andenæs, “[d]ay care does not appear as a ‘factor’ that ‘influences children’s development’, but rather as a part of a system in which everybody changes and is changed by each other” (Andenæs, 2011, p. 65). As a part of this reciprocal changing of arrangements, I follow the way in which professionals arrange the everyday lives of children (in a day nursery) by structuring different kinds of activities, such as lunch and circle-time, and how the children organise social interplay during these pedagogical arrangements and in between them.

The Day Nursery as a Myriad of Social Activities and Engagements

The day nursery can be understood as a social practice, an institutional arrangement with different cultural and institutional ‘pathways’ or trajectories (Andenæs, 2014; Dreier, 2011). In a day nursery, these trajectories are connected to the children’s age and to understandings of the children’s physical and social skills. The trajectories are also connected to materiality and social space. The children and adults produce and reproduce their personal trajectories in connection with the institutional trajectories. Life in the nursery is characterized by a lot of children simultaneously doing a lot of different things. Children’s activities are changing all the time; children direct their attention towards, and participate in, several activities at a time. Children’s activities must be understood as connected to the daily rhythm and structure of life in the nursery.

When I enter the day nursery, I enter into an historical practice that is many-sided and interlaced by dual and contradictory understandings of the children and their development. The day nursery is an institutional setting directed at helping and controlling children’s development (Qvortrup, 2009). Political and societal demands influence the institutional life of children, and professionals are expected to include all children, as well as to identify children who show deviant behaviour. Thus, practice is arranged in a variety of ways designed to explore and support children’s participation; that is, in ways that are flexible and mindful of the children’s wellbeing. At the same time, the professionals are expected to assess the development of the individual child. This many-sided practice creates dilemmas connected to historical and political views on children’s institutional lives. My participation as a researcher makes some of the on-going social dilemmas within the practice visible. When I enter the practice, I become a part of these various dilemmas concerning the children (Højholt, 2016; Kousholt, 2016). Meanwhile, my collaboration

with the professionals opens up for new understandings and possibilities of action, for the children as well as for the professionals and myself.

These dilemmas in social practice reflect the two-sided agendas connected to understandings of children's development and learning. The professionals seem to balance between creating opportunities for the children's activities, their 'free play', while at the same time maintaining the social order and pedagogical structure – to ensure that all children are able to contribute to the common activities, albeit in different ways. The professionals are concerned with the children's well-being, and yet they have to make sure that the children are moving around and taking part in the different activities at the right time and in the right way. This pedagogical responsibility and the related practical tasks that ensure the activity flow, may *obscure* the ability of professionals to see the children's participation as connected to what they are involved in. Often therefore, the children's actions may seem *incomprehensible*.

By getting involved in the day nursery from the position of a researcher, I enter an arrangement where children and adults act and are expected to act very differently in some situations. Differences between adults and children are marked both by size, by different preconditions in terms of contributing to the arrangements and also by expectations as to how to participate (Kousholt, 2011). The children themselves are variously positioned and have different possibilities in terms of influencing and contributing to the common activities (Ellegaard, 2004; Gulløv, 1999; Kousholt, 2011). As Ole Dreier states: "The arrangement of social context also usually involves particular social positions on which particular persons take part in, in different ways" (Dreier, 2011, p. 10).

In daily life in the nursery, the participation of children and adults is often understood as *separated*. The adults are supposed to 'support' the children's interplay, and at the same time leave the children to play with each other while the adults talk to other adults. There seems to be an understanding that when adults join the children in their interplay, they pull children away from what they were originally concentrating on. The adults are positioned as agents who disturb children's interplay, instead of as adult agents who become part of the children's interplay (Kousholt, 2011). This division is connected to an understanding of learning as something adults organize for children, and of children's 'free play' as something that adults are not supposed to interfere with. This perspective reveals a *dualism*, in which the child is understood as genuine by 'nature' and in which 'society's demands' and civilized adults are positioned as spoiling the child's inherent good nature (Kampmann, 1988). This perspective highlights the child's ability to *unfold its inner nature*, in opposition to an educational understanding according to which children must adapt to societal demands. Erica Burman reflects on this dualism:

There is a central ambivalence here about the relation between the natural and the nurtured that mirrors the tension between scientific objectivity and social application structuring psychological research: it seems that the natural course of development has to be carefully monitored, supported and even corrected in order to emerge appropriately. That which is designated as natural or spontaneously arising is in fact constructed or even forced. (Burman, 2008, p. 26).

During my research, it became clear that these perspectives influence the social practice of the day nursery, creating a contradictory practice in which children's 'free' play is emphasized, while at the same time children's choices are being framed into adult-

controlled pedagogical activities. As a part of this contradictory landscape, the professionals are also expected to support children's explorations and social engagement by creating spaces where children and adults *mutually engage* in interplay. However, when the pedagogical arrangements reflect a dualism in conceptions of development and learning, practice in the nursery becomes contradictory, creating conflicts for both children and adults. As a researcher, I engage with this contradictory social practice and become part of the dilemmas arising from children having to adapt to pedagogical demands while expressing themselves freely. This matter will be further analysed later in this article, drawing on empirical examples from my field of study. But first, I unfold my theoretical inspiration primarily taken from critical psychology.

Co-researching the Conduct of Institutional Life

My research project is theoretically inspired by the German-Danish version of critical psychology – *a psychology from the standpoint of the subject* (Schraube & Osterkamp, 2013; see also Munck, 2017). Children are seen in a dialectic relationship, as subjects participating in societal contexts in which they learn and develop. This implies that children are understood as subjects who are learning and developing by interacting with other children (Højholt & Kousholt, 2014; Juhl, 2014; Schraube & Osterkamp, 2013). Children pursue social activities; they cope with and change the world in collaboration with other children and adults, thus conducting their lives (Chimirri, 2014; Dreier, 2008). Through the way children conduct their institutional lives, they develop their own way of participating in child communities, and through this participation they contribute to the social practice of professionals (Højholt & Kousholt, 2014; Røn Larsen & Stanek, 2015).

In line with this theoretical point of departure, the research methods have been chosen according to the subject matter under exploration. In the case of my own fieldwork this means that I am conducting *participant observations* (Pedersen, Klitmøller & Nielsen, 2012; Bergold & Thomas, 2012) and exploring how I can take part in the children's everyday institutional lives. I have chosen to use participant observations because the children I am researching *with* are for the greater part pre-verbal. In addition, I want to transcend the dominant verbal approach to doing research. Participant observations are a way of gaining knowledge about subjects' perspectives embedded in social interplay, and as an aspect of the actual historical and social practice. I understand *knowledge as embedded in social practice* (Lave, 2012, 2011; Dreier, 2007; Højholt & Kousholt, 2014), so participating in the social practice is a way of generating knowledge. As a researcher, I am embedded in the same difficulties as the professionals and the children; we share a common life, albeit in different ways according to our different positions in practice. Thus, the professionals and I also have a *shared concern*: how to understand what matters to the children and come closer to understanding the children's actions as connected to what the children are involved in. This shared concern has served as the basis for my *co-research* with both professionals and children.

Understanding research as co-research implies that I understand children as co-researchers from a *theoretical standpoint*. This means that children are understood “as active subjects in their own lives” (Kousholt, 2016, p. 246). It also means that both children and adults explore their life conditions in order to have an influence on various matters which they find important. Children, as well as adults, contribute to the development of contradictory nursery practice (Højholt & Kousholt, 2011; Juhl, 2014; Munck, 2017). Both children and professionals are concerned with the different demands posed by daily life, and both

parties engage in mutual collaboration in order to explore and handle their interdependencies. Looked at in this way, a day nursery can be understood as an institutional care arrangement (Dreier, 2009), in which children are 'taken care of' while actively arranging their everyday lives with other children and professionals (Chimirri, 2014; Juhl, 2014). I argue that children explore their own life conditions through interplay with other children and that I, as a researcher, can take part in this exploration for a period of time.

Understanding children as co-researchers implies a 'joint directionality', which means that the children and I enter into a mutual involvement and exchange of explorations in daily life. Still, it is important to note that the children and I are also engaged in an *asymmetrical relationship*, due to me being an adult and the children being children. Children depend on adults (Solberg, 1994; Gulløv & Højlund, 2010) and the adults are positioned to 'define' the children's influence on and contribution to the pedagogical arrangements. Adults, on the other hand, are also dependent on the children *co-operating* and being a part of the everyday arrangements. Maja Røn Larsen and Anja Hvidtfelt Stanek (2015) have recurrently pointed out how on the one hand small children are dependent on care arrangements made by adults and on the other hand arrange their everyday life in *cooperation* with both children and adults. Ole Dreier has also emphasized how children learn how to make adults arrange care in ways that enable them, the children, to pursue what they want:

Hence, children must learn ways to make adults do the things for them or help them with what they are doing. They must learn to fit their ways of accomplishing things with the help available, by redirecting, interrupting, and postponing their ongoing activities, persuading and pestering, and so forth. (Dreier, 2009, p. 178)

To explore children's perspectives, one has to look out *from* the children and *around* the children. One has to make an effort to analyse what seems important to the children, by closely following their social engagement in time and space – and by seeing how other children and adults interactively create conditions for themselves to participate. One could say that doing research with (small) children is a *way of cooperating with the children* or *following the children around*. Inspired by Dorte Kousholt, following the children around can be explained as "walking alongside the children, paying attention to what happens on the way, being led by the children's activities and engagements – what seems to matter to them" (Kousholt, 2016, p. 250). In this way, the research process is directed at what children *do* instead of what children *are*. To explore the child's perspective is therefore an *analytical effort* to gain knowledge from the children's standpoint. Children's reasons for action are not necessarily verbally articulated, as language (Stanek, 2011), but children's reasons may become visible through an adult who participates in activities with them and looks at how they arrange and prioritize their engagements with other children during the day (Juhl, 2014). It is therefore essential that: "Children's perspectives must be explored in relation to their conditions for taking part different places" (Højholt, 2012, p. 205).

By joining the children and following them around, I am able to see how they pursue things, how they are directed at something and how they negotiate the conditions for their activities (Højholt, 2012). In this way, I can come *closer* to an understanding of the children's personal reasons for actions in their situated interplay (Kousholt, 2011; Højholt, 2012). Why it is important to explore children's personal reasons is connected to the fact

that when we engage in pedagogical work with learning agendas, children sometimes participate differently than expected, or their attention seems to be directed at other things than that of the professionals. If we do not concern ourselves with small children's reasons, we risk positing our own reasons on the children and thereby missing an opportunity to understand that people participate differently in the world. People always have reasons for their actions, and if we as researchers want to explore subjectivity, we must concern ourselves with and thus co-research small children's reasons for conducting their everyday lives in the manifold ways they do.

Researching as a Movement between *Engaging* and *Withdrawing*

As a part of exploring small children's perspectives, I had to work extensively on understanding my position as a researcher. Theoretically, I primarily analysed an ethnographic childhood research tradition (Gulløv & Højlund, 2010) described by Nancy Mandell (1991) as the 'least adult role'. This researcher position identifies how adults and children are understood as different categories. In order to participate alongside with children, you must therefore distance yourself from being a familiar adult (Corsaro, 1985; Mandell, 1991; Warming, 2011). As stated earlier, during my fieldwork I experienced how adults and children are positioned differently and how their approaches to social engagement are kept separate, due to a 'developmental dualism'. To explore what matters to children and be a part of the children's communities in the nursery, I found it necessary to *distance* myself from a kind of *structured professionalization* that implies certain *pedagogical responsibilities and tasks*. It is important to note here, however, that I did not position myself as 'least adult', because I work from the standpoint of an understanding in which children are ontologically regarded to be the same as adults – and thus a similar standpoint as Greene and Hill are proposing:

[I]n many ways children behave and think similarly to adults. It is important, however, not to essentialize either the differences or the similarities which research might reveal, since any set of findings is very often a function of local or historical demands and discourses and may not have any significance at another time or place. (Greene & Hill, 2005, p. 9)

Working from a researcher position as 'least adult', instead, one might risk positioning the children as qualitatively different from adults, hereby reproducing a classic fallacy of developmental psychology (Burman, 2008), which attributes the separation between the social engagement of children and adults to this difference. As a result, one might overlook the fact that the children's arrangements are intertwined with the adults' arrangements and that these are mutually constitutive.

Despite this reservation, what I found inspirational in Mandell's perspective on 'least adult role' was the framing of the researcher position as "undertaking a responsive, interactive, fully involved participant observer role with the children in as least an adult manner as possible. This entailed neither directing nor correcting children's actions" (Mandell, 1991, p. 42). This statement identifies a researcher position that engages with the children's social interplay without sharing a pedagogical responsibility for the children and without correcting the children; something that characterises my research with children (Munck, 2017). By being mainly reactive, waiting for the children to approach me and avoiding a more proactive and disciplinary stance towards the children, I came to identify more

strongly with the children than with the professionals (Warming, 2016; Davies, 2014; Epstein, 1998). One could say that I was learning *from* the children rather than about the children.

My researcher position as an adult without pedagogical responsibilities offers different opportunities for participating with the children in their everyday lives. This position has made it possible for me to be *involved* with the children and through this involvement gain knowledge about the different positions of children and adults (Solberg, 1994). By tentatively positioning myself as ‘another kind of adult’, I try to reduce relations of power between myself and the children, as well as between myself and the professionals. This approach, meanwhile, may also create some confusion and require some negotiation about how adults are expected to participate (Munck, 2017; Warming, 2016). The following example illustrates this negotiation:

(Fieldnote) I am sitting with some of the children perusing a book. One of the boys, Peter (aged 2.3), looks at one of the girls, Emma (aged 1.8). She is trying to grab another book from the bookshelf. Peter looks at me and points to Emma saying "look...not allowed". Peter looks at me as if he expects me to do something and to set Emma right. I respond: "I see what Emma is doing. You must call for another adult if you think it's not allowed".

The example shows how difficult it is to escape the expectations of children that I should take on a more familiar role as a professional with pedagogical responsibilities. The children are not just adapting to me participating as another kind of adult; as the example shows, Peter tries to negotiate how I should participate in the situation with the other children. It is therefore important to note that: “Participant observations by its very nature allows children to control the level of acceptance and involvement. The role of the researcher is therefore negotiated rather than imposed” (Emond, 2005, p. 136).

Despite the difficulties connected with positioning myself as ‘another kind of adult’, I will argue that *withdrawing* myself from a position of adult authority opens up for a social interplay and a curiosity concerning children’s social engagement that would not be possible if I had the pedagogical task of restoring social order. However, I also have to *engage* with the children in order to explore what matters to them. My researcher position is therefore a movement between *engaging in* and *withdrawing from*. My efforts to position myself as a researcher can therefore be understood as a somewhat difficult, creative process, in which I had to make up a position that did not exist prior to my entrance into the day nursery (Solberg, 1994; Gulløv & Højlund, 2010).

On this ground, I would now like to analyse how I, as a researching ‘other kind of adult’, became part of the children’s ‘lunch arrangements’, due to my different position as an adult *without* pedagogical responsibilities. This position made it possible for me to *explore the social engagement of both children and professionals as interconnected* in a practice involving dual and contradictory demands.

Lunch as a Contradictory Social Practice: How to Understand the Social Engagement of Children and Professionals as Reciprocal

The contradictions unfolded in this empirical example are related to different views on how to have lunch in a joyful way, yet still respecting ‘table manners’. The contradictory ways of arranging lunch can be seen as connected to the historical and political discussions, referred to earlier, about the right of children to express themselves, while at the same time having to adapt to societal demands. Lunch is a part of the social practice in a day nursery; an activity in which children take part in a lot of things at the same time. Eating lunch is a contradictory practice with a lot of different agendas: children are encouraged to engage in social interplay with each other, while at the same time they are expected to participate in what the professionals are arranging. Lunch is about eating food, but it is also about how to engage in social conversation and how to relate to rules (and rule bending). The children enter into the lunch situation by *negotiating* and *challenging* how they may engage in social interplay. Lunch must be *focused* and *dialogic* at the same time, which seems to be a difficult balance to maintain for both children and professionals. In the following example, I would like to draw your attention to how the children take part in lunch as a contradictory practice and what children are directed at during lunch.

Negotiating and adapting lunch as a social practice (empirical excerpt)

The children are having soup for lunch. I am sitting with BETTY (P)² and ANNE (P). Sally (aged 2.2) and Noah (aged 2.3) are sitting next to each other. They are looking at each other, smiling. "Peekaboo", says Sally and hides her face in her hands. Then she looks up at me and says very quietly "peekaboo" and smiles. I respond with a "Boo" and smile back at Sally. Noah looks at Sally and hides his face in his hands. Then he looks up and says loudly, "Boo". The children and I hide and reveal our faces a couple of times. Noah has spilled some water on the table, by accident, and tries to scrape up the water with a spoon. ANNE says to Noah, "*You must behave properly when we are eating lunch and you should not pour water on the table*". Then Sally looks at Noah and says "*stop*" while she holds up her hand in front of Noah – showing that she knows how to behave properly. BETTY says to Sally, "*I have control over the situation*", while she puts her hand on Sally's arm. Once more, Noah is told to stop spilling water on the table. Noah looks at ANNE, smiles and continues to scrape water from the table. Sally looks at Noah and tries to help scrape off the water from the table, while she smiles at Noah. Noah smiles back at Sally.

How to Understand the Agendas of Children and Professionals as Intertwined

There is a lot happening during lunch, seen as a ‘pedagogically structured situation’. One might say that the situation reveals innumerable efforts and social engagements. From the point of view of the children, nursery life can be more generally understood as consisting of a *myriad of activities*. There are a lot of children in the same room doing different things. The children are often engaged in different activities at the same time: They may be looking out of the windows, singing and making noise with other children, and still

² P = professional. The professionals are highlighted by capital letters.

coordinating who will be next to have food on their plate. This means that the children's activities change and develop in new directions all the time, and that the children's activities must be seen as connected to structures and pedagogical arrangements throughout the day.

In this situation, Sally and Noah are at the same time *adapting to* and *changing* 'how to eat lunch' through their interplay. The two children are taking part in and seeking to regulate the situation, using their noises, their actions and their bodies. It seems that the children know the social practice and attempt to regulate the lunch eating by negotiating and pushing (or bending) 'table manners'. The lunch activity can be understood as a *daily routine*, in which the children engage in a common production of meaning, and negotiate with the professionals how to 'do lunch' (Chimirri, 2014, Dreier, 2008). This negotiation can be conflictual.

During lunch the adults and the children are positioned and position themselves differently. There seems to be different ways of 'doing child' and 'doing adult' (Alanen, 2009; Ulvik, 2015) during lunch. Whereas the adults are focused on making the children eat their soup without making a mess at the table, the children seem to be preoccupied by each other and their mutual explorations of revealing and hiding their faces. Different agendas appear to be present and yet the children and the professionals share a common social practice and have a common interest in eating lunch together and making conversation during lunch. The different ways in which 'professional adult' is done here also offer opportunities for how 'researcher' can be done and how 'child' can be done. These positions are *mutually constitutive*. As a researcher, I am sharing the lunch with the children and the professionals and thus become part of the different ways of 'doing' adult and child during lunch. I am participating in the lunch as an adult without pedagogical responsibilities. When the children are called to order, so am I indirectly called to order, because I am taking part with the children by hiding and revealing my face, rather than just focusing on eating my lunch quietly. Thereby I am positioning myself, and being positioned by the professionals, as someone that must also adapt to the lunch rules.

The children are not simply resisting the adult agendas; they are testing what they know about *doing lunch* as a part of their social interplay. The children are finding out what lunch is about and how to take part in this social practice. One might state that the children are *arranging the arrangements* in connection to their conduct of everyday life (Holzkamp, 1998; Dreier, 2011) and that they are experimenting with how to 'do' lunch. Meanwhile, the professionals' intervention into the children's interplay at the table must be understood in relation to the *conditions* and *tasks* facing the professionals with regard to lunch. The statement made by the professional to Noah: "*You must behave properly when we are eating lunch and you should not pour water on the table*", can be understood as an effort to discipline the children and restore social order at lunch (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2012). The statement can be interpreted as instrumental and as implicitly communicating that 'we (the professionals) all agree on how children should behave during lunch'. The statement points to a normativity regarding children's upbringing and thereby to considerations about what children should learn and how they should behave at a certain age (Burman, 2008).

Age is an important marker when it comes to how lunch is conducted in day nurseries. The professionals are aware of meeting children of different ages with different expectations and with different kinds of support, especially during meals. However, there

are a lot of different expectations regarding children's behaviour during meals. Different professionals *do* meals differently. Therefore, the professional's remark to Noah about not pouring water on the table may also be understood as this particular professional showing the other professionals present at the table, including me as a researcher, that she can handle the situation and knows what to do. In this situation, I am also addressed as an *equal adult* who is expected to acknowledge the professional's arrangements. My researcher position is thus entangled in the social engagement of both adults and children during lunch, positioning me as 'another kind of adult', who participates in 'setting' the lunch rules and yet also challenges these same rules.

An 'Inclusive' Lunch

Looking closely at the situation, it seems that, by the way he looks at the professional, the child, Noah, shows that he knows what is expected of him; he knows the 'lunch rules' and yet he still challenges the rules. While the professionals make an effort to create and maintain a certain social order, they also appear to accept that Sally and Noah are engaging in a fun social interplay. And even though Noah spills water on the table, he also tries to scrape the water off the table, showing that he is aware that the water should not be on the table. The children's interplay is not stopped directly, but the professionals show some discontent with the situation and call for social order. One might say that there are certain 'socio-cultural pathways' connected to eating lunch, and that these pathways are mediated by the children into 'personal trajectories' (Andenæs, 2014).

The professionals have a pedagogical responsibility to make sure that *all* the children have food during lunch and that they become part of the child community around the table. Still, some social order must be maintained, so that all the children will be *heard* and all the children *will be a part* of the lunch event – there must be room for everyone and not just some. The lunch practice is one of the everyday routines in the day nursery, and regulation and care are also part of these routines: "The routines are created by somebody who is mindful of the child's well-being on a continuous basis and who organizes a set of everyday routines to ensure daily events run smoothly" (Andenæs, 2014, p. 269). The professional's statement, "*I am in control of the situation*" can, from this point of view, be interpreted as a way of ensuring an *inclusive lunch*, where everybody can join in and take part *equally*. The professional's statement to Sally may be interpreted as an effort to establish all children as equal; no child should 'tell off' another child. That is the job of the adults. The children's (social) regulation of each other will in some situations solve problems in their interplay, while in other situations it is unwanted, which is the case here. It is a difficult pedagogical task to secure an inclusive lunch for all children and also be 'in control' of the situation. What I find interesting in this example, is that the contradictory and two-sided agendas connected to eating lunch are successfully managed by children as well as professionals, even though this may seem difficult.

I become part of the two-sidedness of the 'lunch practice' when I participate in the lunch as a shared and caring practice. Because I am 'standing outside' the pedagogical tasks, I am able to engage in this 'peekaboo' interplay with the children and also understand this social interplay as the children's way of 'doing lunch', and not as a resistance to doing lunch. This example illuminates how my participation as a researcher creates a position in which I am able to explore the social engagement of children and professionals as intertwined. What I would like to emphasize with this example is not that children must be free to participate in whatever way they want, but neither should the children adapt to

every demand they are faced with. The point is that children's participation and *what matters to children must be explored in connection with institutional arrangements and pedagogical tasks*, because the everyday dilemmas the professionals experience concerning the children are connected to contradictions in institutional practice. When these contradictions are addressed as internally interrelated and not as incompatible paradoxes (Ollman, 2015), the professionals are able to cooperate *with* the children in terms of different ways of 'doing' lunch. Given this theoretical expansion, I would like to further analyse some dilemmas that arose when I, as a researcher focused on following the children, 'overlooked' the fact that the children's arrangements and the professional's arrangements were mutually constitutive.

When the Researcher Position Becomes Fixed

As a researcher focused on following the children, I further experienced a situation in which my attention to the children's social engagement *overshadowed* the question of how the children's social engagement was connected to the adult's arrangements. I thereby created a researcher position in which I *withdrew* myself from exploring the connections between the adult's perspectives and the children's perspectives. My participation along with the children illuminated how the pedagogical professionals arranged a gathering of the children, while trying to respect the children's different contributions and arrangements. I became part of this contradictory enterprise. In the situation referred to, I avoided having a dialogue with the professional, reasoning that if I were following the children my position was not to support pedagogical initiatives. The situation illustrated how my participation in this case contributed to separating the social engagement of the children and that of the professionals, thereby overshadowing the compound nature of this pedagogical practice.

Being led by Children's Social Engagement (empirical excerpt)

After lunch. MAY³ (P) asks the new intern, IRINA, to sing with the children while she changes diapers on some of the children before nap time. IRINA is handed a small suitcase with songbooks and toys. IRINA argues that she cannot sing to the children because she does not know the songs. MAY says that she must try and that it will be fine. IRINA starts singing for a small group of children that have gathered around her. Shortly after, some of the children become restless and they get up and start playing together. I am sitting next to a bookshelf, close to IRINA, observing what is happening. Some of the children approach me. "Do you want some birthday cake" says Karen (aged 2.3) and smiles at me. Karen returns with a 'cake' in the form of a LEGO brick. "That's nice, thank you", I say and eat the cake with Karen. Sam and Peter come and serve coffee with milk and then Andrew comes to serve us cocoa. The children are now gathered around me and they are running back and forth with things for the birthday party. SUE (P) enters the room and says "Wow – what a treat you're having today". I respond "Yes, it's delightful". While I am being served more coffee and cocoa, IRINA comes and sits next to me. She smiles but also looks a bit uncomfortable. After a while she gets up and says, "It looks cozy". I feel a little uneasy in the situation. I do not want to reject the children and I try to be responsive to their invitation. I find myself in a dilemma; should I follow the children's social engagement in the birthday party, or support IRINA's pedagogical task by helping her conduct the sing-along with the children. I choose to follow the children's invitations, even though I am making IRINA's work more difficult.

³ The professionals are highlighted by capital letters.

Understanding the Interests of Children and Professionals as Opposites

This situation illustrates how my participation with the children and my attention to participating *with* the children – engaging in *their* social interplay – produces a difficult situation for another adult (the intern), the children and myself. Irina is positioned as inadequate because she is asked to sing to the children, to join with them in a way that makes her feel uncomfortable. My presence as someone familiar with the children, without pedagogical responsibilities, amplifies the difficulties of the situation. By being engaged in the children’s birthday party, I *withdraw* myself from supporting Irina’s effort to sing to the children. As Nancy Mandell states, the researcher position may create a position that challenges the practice that is being explored: “As a member of the children’s social world, I both observed and participated in rule stretching and breaking” (Mandell, 1991, p. 42). By not supporting Irina’s agenda I am participating indirectly in ‘rule stretching’. My taking part in and responding to the children’s birthday invitation contributes to breaking the ‘rule’ that all children should sit down and sing along with Irina. My participating in ‘rule breaking’ and disturbing of Irina’s pedagogical task with the children creates an insecurity about where to place myself and who to follow. In this way, the structural contradictions became *embodied contradictions*, creating a sense of uneasiness. By deciding to follow the children and not to engage in dialogue with Irina, the children’s and Irina’s arrangements became separated and disconnected.

In this situation, I was not seeking to disturb the pedagogical agenda, but still my engagement with the children turns into a disturbance of Irina’s efforts to engage the children⁴. My engagement with the children in this way thus clarifies how pedagogical arrangements cover both motivating children to be a part of *joint* pedagogical arrangements, while also making room for the children’s own initiatives. In the situation in question, it seems that Irina plays a waiting game – she does not want to overrule or disturb the children’s birthday party. This ‘waiting position’ might be connected to Irina wanting to engage in a *mutual interplay* with the children and not to ‘force’ the children into a situation they do not find exciting. Hereby Irina’s way of arranging the situation illuminates the two-sided agenda, in which nursery life is about creating space for arranged pedagogical learning activities, as well as creating space for children to explore things together. Also, Irina’s waiting game may be connected to herself, positioning me (the researcher) as having more authority than her, presuming a professional hierarchy (Ditlev Bøje, 2010). It is important to note that Irina has just begun working in the nursery and that she and the children were not yet familiar with each other. Irina is an undergraduate and very young, and my presence as a PhD fellow, older than her and familiar with the children, might also have restrained Irina from re-engaging the children to sing along with her. As Charlotte Højholt writes: “personal conduct implies investigating social possibilities. Such possibilities are structurally and unequally arranged and are grasped by persons with different positions, experiences and perspectives” (Højholt, 2016, p. 152). This situation reveals how Irina and I are positioned differently and have different possibilities in terms of contributing to and influencing the situation. In this situation, Irina is positioned as more of an apprentice⁵ than I am, due to our different

⁴ Irina was informed about me not having any pedagogical responsibilities and not intending to interfere with what the professionals want the children to do.

⁵ This point is interestingly paradoxical in terms of my effort to be an apprentice and to ‘learn from the children and the adults’.

status and authority in relation to the children as a group, and also to the professionals as a group.

By maintaining a researcher position and following the children, I contribute to creating a situation that influences both my own, Irina's and the children's action possibilities. Irina's ability to conduct a 'sing-along' with the children is limited and conditioned by my presence and the way in which I participate in what the children are doing. Because I am imposing restrictions on my position as researcher, in my effort to join the children, I avoid entering into a dialogue with Irina. Due to this, my participation contributes to producing a practice in which the arrangements of children and professionals are separated, and in which adults are positioned as controlling children's social engagement. What is worth noticing in this situation is that I position myself as *sharing an interest with the children* and this interest is constructed as *opposite* to Irina's interest in singing with the children. Thereby I am creating a *paradox*: following the children's social engagement is *incompatible* with engaging in Irina's sing-along. Acknowledging that we all share a common life in the day nursery, and that Irina, as well as I, are engaged in activities with the children and support the children's social engagement, the situation can be understood as a *contradictory situation* that calls for cooperation between Irina, the children and me as a researcher.

Shortly after this episode Irina told me that she had been reading more literature about the development of small children. By discussing this literature, and by getting to know the children, she now felt more secure about joining in with the children and creating pedagogical activities. This change in Irina's participation became clear to me through Irina's daily arrangements with the children. Irina arranged several sessions during circle-time, focusing on teaching the children about numbers and counting. Irina's 'new position' and visibility in the group of children made it possible for me to follow the children's social engagement without disturbing the pedagogical agendas to the same extent as before.

What I want to underline via this example is that my way of conducting research in this situation resulted in a *fixed position*, through which I imposed on myself certain ways of doing, or not doing, research, and thereby contributed to creating conflicts for other professionals. One might note that Irina's position and efforts to engage the children also became fixed, once connected to my position and interactions with the children. However, from my vantage point, the situation also contributed to new ways of understanding the actual pedagogical practice, and according to what Irina later told me, the situation also opened up possibilities of action for her. Based on these observations, I will argue that a focus on *following the children* might create conflicts, at least if things that matter to the children are not explored in relation to what matters to the professionals and the pedagogical arrangements the children take part in.

Summing up

In order to investigate the dialectics between my researcher practice and the practice of pedagogical professionals, I have analysed how *my position as a researcher is mutually interwoven with the arrangements made by the children and the professionals*. The professionals and I share a concern and a curiosity about the children's co-creations and what matters to children. At the same time, the professionals and I are positioned

differently and therefore have different preconditions for grasping conflicts related to the children's social engagement.

The two empirical examples illustrate how I became involved in social practices in which children were encouraged both to participate in joint arrangements and also follow their own initiatives; for instance, children were expected to be focused while eating lunch and still engage in dialogue. The researcher position gets entangled in the dilemmas and contradictions in nursery care practice, which arise when historical ideas about the connectedness and disconnectedness between the social engagement of children and professionals influence the choices of action of all participants involved in this social practice. My position as 'another kind of adult' served the purpose of positioning me in a *flexible position*, in which I would be able to engage with and understand the arrangements of children and professionals as intertwined and embedded in the social practice. As I have illustrated, this researcher position also got fixed when I followed the children's arrangements and did not understand these arrangements as connected to the commitments and arrangements of the professionals. I thereby became part of the dilemmas arising within social practice when pedagogical structures *separate* as well as *unite* the arrangements of children and professionals. Conflicts in the actual professional practice thus turned into conflicts in my research practice.

With this article I wished to emphasize how situated research practices are developed by participating in the daily routines of children and professionals as a movement between '*engaging in*' and '*withdrawing from*'. This flexibility of movement makes it possible to grasp how children's actions are connected to what they take part in, and how conflicts within the social practice are connected to and tackled by both children and professionals. However, a flexible position as researcher cannot be predetermined, but has to be negotiated with the participants in the actual social practice and is therefore not settled once and for all. I argue that it is by being part of the conflicts arising in professional practice, and by analysing these conflicts and cooperating with professionals about these conflicts, that we gain knowledge about what matters to children and about how the activities of children and professionals are interdependent. Therefore we have to challenge ideas that children's perspectives can be explored separately from children's conditions for participating, and as separated from the arrangements of the professionals. Hence, it is pivotal that child researchers reflect upon how they become part of conflicts and dilemmas in professional practice, by cooperating with children and professionals as a means of creating better knowledge about what matters to children.

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Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Niklas Chimirri for contributing with valuable perspectives on this article. Also, many thanks to Charlotte Højholt who created an inspiring learning environment during my PhD project and thereby contributed to important ideas for this article. Furthermore, I am grateful for the peer reviewers' assistance in the making of this article.

About the author

Cristina Munck is associate professor at University College Capital. Her research focuses on small children's everyday lives in daycare as well as collaborative practices among professionals and parents in institutional daycare practices.

Contact: University College Capital, UCC, Department of research for daycare – social and special pedagogics. Email: crmu@ucc.dk