Qualitative Studies
Vol. 11, No. 3, 2026, pp. 315-339
ISSN 1903-7031

Research Circles – A participatory research approach

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This article presents a further development of the Research Circles (RC) approach. The RC methodology is a participatory research approach situated within a broader landscape of collaborative research approaches, including Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Practice Research (PR) and the aim of the paper is twofold: To showcase and exemplify the RC methodology generally, and discuss some further developments of it as a result of a concrete study Green Transition and World-care. The article presents key innovations to the original RC format, including researcher-led lessons introducing common themes and conceptual resources, and practitioner-organized learning circles (LC) designed to ensure ownership and followship across the entire collective of staff. Finally, the RC methodology developed in this project is discussed in relation to practitioners' reflections and feedback, dilemmas concerning boundaries, ethics, and limits to participation across the differing realities of pedagogical research and practice. We argue that a two-tier RC–LC design supports locally grounded transformation and conceptual development without promising a direct transferable RC model.

Keywords: Research Circles, participatory research approach, professional development, researching with care

Introduction

In this article, we present and discuss the research methodology known as *Research Circles* (RC). The way we have worked with RC methodology is exemplified and developed in relation to a research project in Early years education and care (ECEC) called: Green Transition and World-care (Nielsen et al 2024, Winther-Lindqvist et al 2025, Kolmos et al 2025, Winther-Lindqvist et al., in press). The RC methodology is a user-involved research approach used mainly in Scandinavia and originally developed in Swedish academia in the 1970s as part of a broader tradition of popular education *(folkbildning)*. Central to this approach is the co-creation of knowledge and close collaboration between researchers and practitioners around a particular topic of interest to both. Thus, it seeks to overcome the traditional power-imbalance and ethical problems following from more expert-driven research, where academic experts develop and provide intervention programs for professionals or practitioners to implement. Aligned with the topic of this issue, the goal in RC is '*studying with people, not on them*' to ensure ownership, quality in the development of practice and mutual benefit of exchange of knowledge. In the World-care project, the researchers introduced a conceptual way of thinking about the caring task in ECEC that includes the natural environment and ecosystems, with the aim of developing an early years pedagogy that is more sustainable. This conceptual framework was a theoretical suggestion for a common language for developing a new sustainability pedagogy based on care ethics. This goal reflects a serious real-life problem facing both present and future generations, researchers, parents and early childhood educators. However, climate and environmental crisis are not confined to the educational sector, but constitutes an overarching wicked problem characterized by deep cultural and ethical dilemmas, uncertainty, and high complexity (Jørgensen et al., 2025). Our aim was to engage practitioners and ourselves in this wicked problem, that we cannot solve, but we may prepare for and work-against, in more sustainable and eco-friendly ways together with children in ECEC. In this sense, the project demanded that all participants were willing to 'stay with the trouble' of climate change and biodiversity crises within the educational task of ECEC, to paraphrase Haraway (2016). The term World-care and the ambition to situate sustainability education within a care-ethical lens, was the conceptual starting point for a joined exploration of how a caring pedagogy could be expanded to include "caring about nature and protecting

other living beings" in actual practices with children in everyday life of ECEC. The RC meetings became a place for mutual reflection, sharing experiences, exploring dilemmas, identifying barriers, and developing the concept and practice of a world-caring pedagogy. The choice of the term *place* is a direct consequence of this collaboration because the practitioners turned the wickedness of the major issue of climate change and sustainability education into a place-awareness for their pedagogy. They operationalized "World-care" into a caring practice for their specific places (the play-ground, the local creek, the library corner) and they turned their way of being in places into pedagogical events. Inspired by the practitioners we searched on literature on place-based approaches and found that these were available within phenomenologist and eco-feminist accounts of human-nature relations (Casey 1993; Plumwood, 2002). Such a back-and-forth movement between knowledge forms and knowledge production aligns with the aim of RC as described by Møgster et al. (2024, p. 2): *"to build environments for innovative knowledge creation and sharing where the participants gain increased knowledge and understanding of a chosen topic"*. In this project, we all developed and gained increased insight into what World-care can mean in an ECEC context, and what resources are needed to become more world-caring in everyday pedagogical practice. In this article we focus on how the RC meetings and the Learning Circles invented and organized by practitioners worked for us as a methodology for this collaborative investigation, hoping that the close design descriptions can inspire others to develop their own versions of RC research.

The origins and traditions of Research Circle methodology

RC (*forskningscirkel*) methodology is a user-involved and participatory research approach that emerged in Swedish academia in the 1970s as part of a broader tradition of *folkbildning* (popular education) and the labor movement's pursuit of social justice and equality in educational opportunity (Olsson et al., 2024; Salo & Rönnerman, 2014). Since then, RC methodology has been applied across many welfare professions, including health care, social work, and increasingly in education (Holmstrand & Härnsten, 2022). There is a range of Scandinavian approaches organized as learning in or through meeting in 'circles' bringing practitioners and researchers together (Aakjær & Wegener, 2023). They all have in common, that they are highly user-involving, and based on democratic ideals for knowledge production, yet they also differ in the extent to which the problem

definitions are defined in advance, and in terms of how formalized the framing is (purely voluntary, part of one's paid work, involving researchers or not, etc.). RC is often identified as a particular variation of *Action Research* (AR) or *Participatory Action Research* (PAR) (Olsson et al., 2024, Wahlgreen & Aarkrog, 2024), but we find that it also bears strong similarities to the German-Nordic tradition of *Practice Research* (PR) (Højholt & Kousholt, 2014; Kousholt et al., 2026, Nissen, 2009, see also Dege, 2023). We aim to bring the RC methodology more clearly into dialogue with this broader range of participatory research approaches – including PR, as they all share the ambition of involving research partners in collaborative research activities and shared knowledge production (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). At its core, the RC approach targets a challenge or problem that is relevant to both practitioners and researchers and seeks to understand it through systematic exploration and experimentation with new practices aimed at overcoming barriers and improving practice (Olsson et al., 2024). Practitioners' experience-based knowledge and working conditions are acknowledged and engaged on equal terms with researchers' scientific knowledge and institutional conditions. RC methodology is therefore applied across diverse research–practice questions, ranging from concrete and goal-oriented issues, such as preventing dropout in vocational education (Wahlgreen & Aarkrog, 2024), to more exploratory inquiries, such as investigating the concept of 'teaching' in preschool (Olsson et al., 2024) and to more philosophical and broader issues like sustainability education with preschool children in the World-care project (Winther-Lindqvist et al., 2025).

The growing use of RC methodology in Scandinavia can be understood as a response to a broader call for practice relevance within research. In a landscape otherwise dominated by new public management, classical intervention studies, and evidence-based procedures, there is a parallel and somewhat paradoxical call for more user-driven, democratic, and collaborative research in the welfare professions (see Kousholt et al., 2026).

One of the key figures in the early development of RC methodology was Gunilla Härnsten, a Swedish scholar of adult education whose work in the 1970s and 1980s contributed to formalizing the approach. In her seminal report *The Research Circle: Building Knowledge on Equal Terms* (1994), published by the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO), Härnsten presented the RC as an educational response to what she

described as a collective need. Knowledge development was understood not as the transmission of expert knowledge from researcher to practitioner, but as a dialogical process through which workers and professionals could develop knowledge relevant to their own professions and social realities. In this perspective, the RC is conceived as a place for mutual learning (Härnsten, 1994; Holmstrand & Härnsten, 1995). Within this framework, practitioners are not positioned as passive subjects of research but as equal co-creators of knowledge, while researchers simultaneously become participants in the development of practice. This reciprocal relation highlights the transformative ambition of RC methodology, in which both understandings of practice and the practices themselves are subject to change. RC can thus be understood as a specific articulation within the broader field of participatory research approaches concerned with understanding and transforming the conditions that constitute social practices (Carr & Kemmis, 2005; Kemmis, 2009; Nissen, 2009; Højholt & Kousholt, 2014; Thomsen et al., 2017).

Originally, RC methodology was designed to address the often-invoked 'gap' between theory and practice (Olsson et al., 2024). It varies in different RC projects, the extent to which practitioners and researchers collaborative equally in all phases of the research process, however, the research process in all cases aims at transforming both practitioners and researchers' practices and knowledge.

Reciprocity between knowledge forms

Carr and Kemmis (2005) emphasize that the aim of the action research tradition is to enable practitioners to co-produce theory from within their own professional contexts together with researchers. In our case knowledge from practice challenged and specified the suggested theoretical concepts and categories. The suggested caring domains, including World-care and what that could be was confronted with practice and thus also held accountable for its relevance and resonance within practitioners' socio-material-discursive realities (Højholt & Kousholt, 2019). As Papastephanou (2014) notes, the relation between knowledge forms (theory vs. practice) must be reconceived, not as a hierarchical or instrumental one, but as a dynamic and reciprocal process in which theory is generated through reflective engagement with practice, and practice is transformed through theoretical insights - no matter if this insight is happening to researchers or

practitioners. Through participation in RCs, both researchers and practitioners undergo processes of transformation. In the World-care project, systematically rethinking care as also including 'nature', gave rise to a deepening of our appreciation of our interdependence with the natural world, and the urgent need to care better for it in everyday life choices. These insights led to new and sometimes unsettling realization of our human precariousness and cultural critique; by making visible dilemmas and systemic pulls toward unsustainable choices, with rather uncaring consequences within contemporary Danish society. When central dilemmas and barriers for more sustainable choices become apparent, the RC meetings as a place for critical reflection fostered new practical solutions, new ways of struggling with dilemmas, leading to capacity building, and further refinement of theoretical concepts and analytical categories. Moral dilemmas are often presented as dualistic binary hierarchical choices (either we think about animal welfare or human welfare, and we must choose) while environmental ethics argue against this 'trap' and point to the many solutions existing where both animal and human welfare can be considered (Plumwood, 2002). These insights had transformative effects on all participants and changed priorities in everyday life of the daycare center. For example it is a common practice to use vast amounts of freshwater during the hot summer months, to cool down in a playful and fun way. However, this practice is quite unsustainable, and instead the pedagogues thought of new fun ways of cooling down the children: by making home-made 'ice-creams' consisting of frozen bananas on a stick and creating more zones for cosy hanging out in shade on the playground. Theoretically informed critique can thus inspire us to think differently and more inclusively about priorities and good solutions in practice.

In such learning processes the different knowledge forms become integrated dimensions of practice that continuously transform one another through reflection and action (Kemmis et al., 2014; Kousholt & Højholt, 2022). Kemmis (2009) further articulates this dynamic through the concepts of 'sayings', 'doings', and 'relatings' as interdependent components of practice research that are constantly reconfigured in educational contexts, in our case the 'saying' of World-care became substantiated by numerous new 'doings' in everyday practice and connected to new 'relatings' ethically, philosophically and practically.

Addressing power-imbalance as a question of mutual respect and clear division of labour

As part of the critique of the hierarchical approach to different knowledge forms (in higher or lower forms of knowledge and education) this wider cultural setting nonetheless is part of the reality of collaboration across disciplines. RC seeks to overcome this traditional divide, enabling practitioners to bring their situated knowledge and *know-how* into conversation with research-based knowledge collaborating on developing new practices and conceptual understandings. This also entails addressing the asymmetry between the roles of researcher and practitioners brought into the collaboration from the wider cultural setting (Højholt & Kousholt, 2019).

Most researchers in educational psychology have a Ph.D.-degree, whilst practitioners in ECEC, in the Danish context, typically, are educated from University Colleges. University researchers enjoy more recognition symbolically and materially than practitioners in day-care centers in current Danish society – and these wider cultural settings enter the RC meetings as potential barriers for acknowledging the practitioner's expertise. As the researchers were all newcomers to the field of sustainability research it was easier for us to avoid the pitfall of positioning ourselves as: *"those who know best and know what is in need of change"* (Olsson et al., 2024, p. 65). Yet, acknowledging different knowledge forms is also, in our view, to acknowledging different skills, and expertise in how to approach the fact that none of us knew much about sustainability education. We were all in need of knowledge and inspiration, and in our division of labor it was the research team who did a lot of reading into the relevant fields and presented this in lessons at RC meetings, whereas the practitioners contributed with reflections, examples from practice, confronting us with challenging questions based on their work with a more world-caring approach as they experimented with different ideas and 'doings' and 'relatings' in everyday life of daycare. With different tasks and clear division of labor from our different fields and areas of expertise we were all curious to explore how a concept of World-care could translate into new practices and shed light on the resources needed in ECEC for such a transformation to happen. For both ethical and epistemological reasons, practice-based knowledge is necessary, if the goal is to transform practice; in our case in a more world-caring direction. Yet more information, formal and research-based knowledge was also needed as a contribution from the

researchers to this learning process. This dialectical movement between reflection and action, understanding and transformation, constitutes the philosophical foundation for participatory methodologies and epistemologies, such as the RC, where practitioners and researchers co-create knowledge in the relation of mutual fidelity between theory and practice and different knowledge forms (Papastephanou, 2014; Nissen, 2009).

Research design of RCs exemplified through the World-care project

We started by organizing a steering group consisting of the two area managers representing facilities in the two participating areas and the research team. This group discussed and decided on the themes for the first 5 planned RCs and negotiated the best possible period between each to be around 10-12 weeks apart; this leave enough time in between RC to explore the target theme, trying out possible new practices and reflecting on the topic with colleagues. One of the area managers, also an experienced participant in different collaborative research projects, noted that our design would run into problems with implementation beyond the participants attending the RC's and therefore suggested *a learning circle* including all staff members in the facilities to be held in between RC meetings. We discussed this suggestion and agreed that such a solution would be an interesting way of ensuring knowledge sharing and ownership by all staff members. We looked into the resources on both sides (research and ECEC practitioners) and decided that the LC would be the responsibility of the practitioner participants, and that we as researchers would not attend them, yet it was possible to allocate hours from the budget to compensate the staff's planning and participation in LCs. The project was then officially opened at a kick-off conference with all staff with presentations from the researchers on the topic and urgency of developing a World-care pedagogy for ECEC.

We decided on around 12-15 participants from 5 different ECECs (one manager and one or two staff members, and two researchers) in each RC. It is crucial to the quality of the dialogues and reflections that the same participants attend the RC's across time, to ensure building an atmosphere of confidentiality and trust. There also need to be enough people in the RC to still be a sufficiently large group when illness and other obstacles hinder full participation from all. The research team was responsible for sending out the agenda (decided upon in collaboration with area management in the steering group) one week

prior to the meeting; following this prototype for the agenda (inspired by Thomsen et al., 2017).

An example of the RC: Agenda and Process

Time	**Activity**	**Responsible actors**
9:00–9:15	Introduction: Presentation of the theme of the research circle.	Researchers
9:15–10:15	Roundtable: Each facility presents their work. The purpose is to share experiences, reflect on practices, and foster mutual learning, support, and a sense of community. Confidentiality is emphasised, and participants are encouraged to seek advice on dilemmas within the group.	Practitioners
	Break	
10:30–11:00	Lesson: Researchers present key concepts and relevant research related to the theme. Materials are prepared collaboratively among the researchers and shared afterwards.	Researchers
11:00–11:30	Group discussions: Participants engage in smaller group discussions based on themes and	All participants

	questions emerging from the roundtable.	
11:30–11:45	Plenary: Sharing insights and reflections across groups.	All participants
11:45–12:00	Preparation of the learning circle (LC): Agreement on tasks for reflection and further inquiry until the next meeting.	All participants

This procedure for the agenda we followed in all RC to ensure systematic dialogue and knowledge sharing on the theme – in both municipal areas. The agenda and tasks made the division of labor visible and explicit as recommended in RC literature (Olsson et al., 2024; Thomsen et al., 2017). The researchers were responsible for formulating agenda, preparing questions and lessons and analyzing the process and dialogue, and acted as facilitators of the meetings (Thomsen et al., 2017). The practitioners were responsible for preparing examples from practice, providing documentation for these examples (collages, written memos, photos or the like) - reflecting on the topics and questions as part of their critical engagement with own and their colleagues' practices and communicating their thoughts in RC discussions and tasks. They were also responsible for planning and conducting the Learning Circles in between meetings. We decided to include both the area- and the daily managers in the RC to keep up with both management and educator perspectives, as we experienced in former projects that the managers are crucial as stakeholders to maintain and inspire cultural change in the facilities. However, to avoid possible silencing of the educators on more delicate issues, we ensured that management and educators were in separate groups during group discussions (Kousholt & Højholt, 2022). Thomsen et al's approach (2017) reminds us that an RC must be intentionally guided where roles and tasks are articulated, negotiated and made explicit, tensions addressed, and the work process adapted to the practitioners' working conditions. One very important way of acknowledging the work put into the research project by practitioners, is by ensuring that they are compensated and given the institutional support

necessary to engage meaningfully in the tasks connected to the research project: participating in and preparing for the RC meetings, by being released from ordinary work obligations. The way RC is managed and financed, is not merely a logistical or technical question but constitutive of the practice itself: without institutional and financial support, reflective inquiry and local collaboration cannot take hold (Thomsen et al., 2017). This was ensured in the budget for the project. Another way of acknowledging practice-based knowledge is in relational dynamics that make reflective inquiry possible in the RC meetings. Creating a relational spirit of support, respect and caring is paramount for productive sharing of knowledge forms to occur. Being explicit about RC meetings as confidential trust-based places for sharing experiences and acknowledging each other's positions, takes time to establish. Also, ensuring sufficient time in between meetings for practitioners to try out new practices and reflect on routines, attitudes etc. is part of this respectful collaboration, avoiding too many situations where practitioners have not been able to try out, or work on the decided topics since the last meeting. Finally, ensuring sufficient time for practitioners to talk together, discuss and exchange experiences with each other during group discussions and plenum presentations we find to be key to the success of this methodology.

Lessons on selected themes

As a way of ensuring a common knowledge base both between practitioners and researchers and across the two participating areas we decided to thematize the RC in advance and the themes were discussed and decided in the steering group.

The themes we introduced with lessons were:

1	How are we already working with various aspects of World-care and children's relationship with nature-connectedness in our practice today?
2	How do we feel as educators and role-models about the climate and biodiversity crisis, and how do we handle the balancing and paradoxes around our own human-nature connectedness?
3	How do we think of the connections between We-care, Other-care, Self-care and World-care in our daily practice – what are the dilemmas, challenges and potentialities?
4	What do we think of our role in relation to cooperation and dialogue with parents, municipality and local community/society on the issue of World-care?
5	How do we include children's perspectives and engage them in World-care activities?
6	How do we (now) work with various aspects of World-care in ourselves and with children in our practice today?

The lessons addressed topics selected together with area management, for their relevance to the development of a World-care pedagogy, our research questions and our analysis of what was needed to know to work with a particular topic. The lessons provided a shared knowledge base, and common language around empirical and theoretical understandings of care, sustainability education and the role and importance of ECEC in the educational system, family life, and local community.

In principle the lessons could have been researched and planned in closer collaboration with practitioners; but work conditions and different expertise in retrieving and reading the relevant (often English) research literature was more of a relevant task for the researchers. The research group researched and planned the lessons together as team, as preparation between RC meetings, and the materials (slides and literature) were made available, and used as resources by the practitioners in the following LC among all staff members. The co-research processes implied differentiations in responsibilities and contributions, some of which were reflected and decided during project design in cooperation with area management, and others formed for practical reasons during the project.

Learning circles (LC) – ensuring shared ownership through return-flow

A distinctive and innovative contribution of the World-care project lies in its integration of LC (*læringscirkler*) as a complementary practice to the traditional RC method. We know there is also an established Circle methodology called Learning Circles (see more in Aakjær et al., 2024), but this is not what we are referring to here. We are true to the terminology because it was suggested by the practitioners in the project. RC brings together practitioners and researchers in a shared inquiry into pedagogical meaning and transformation, but Learning Circles (in our version) are organized by practitioners in their local daycare institutions, creating a recursive and practice-embedded dimension to the research process. In one area they organized separate 3-hour evening meetings, in between RCs, and in the other area, they decided to expand their already scheduled staff meetings by 1 hour at each meeting. The participants in the original version of RC typically consist of either the management and or one or two 2 staff members. While this model ensures managerial anchoring, the anchoring to the rest of the facility is missing when only a few practitioners attend the RC, and something gets lost in translation during

the handover to everyday work practice. This illustrates a challenge when only the discursive layer (sayings) is transmitted. Without the firsthand embodied and relational dimensions (doings and relatings), transformation remains partial. LC's, therefore, became crucial places for restoring connections between saying, doing and relatings, enabling all members of staff to reflect together and connect around the themes and terminologies introduced at RC meetings and critically discuss examples and priorities in their own local practices. The RC participants re-presented and re-created the conceptual resources from the RC lessons, based on the slides used from the RC lessons, and other locally meaningful materials – and created questions for their colleagues on that basis. In many places it served its purpose of ensuring knowledge return-flow both ways; as RC participants could also report back from LC meetings. In the roundtable it became increasingly common for the participants to refer to discussions and responses expressed at the LCs – so RC participants also became voices for their whole community of colleagues and shared what they learned from their colleagues with the researchers.

Ongoing analysis and participants products

As we worked with and developed the RC methodology together with practitioners in ECEC analytical work became an ongoing, dialogical production contributing to the project. In between RC's the practitioners' tasks were to plan and follow through with LCs, observations and reflections in practice, and to send relevant documentation from their practice and from LC activities to the researchers. This documentation took different forms, depending on the choices, resources, and preferences of the practitioners. Some facilities created big collages of photos demonstrating project-work i.e. following the life cycle of a butterfly and having to learn how to care well for it together with children. Some took photos of innovations in the playground, home-made Christmas presents made from reused materials, described a new system for garbage sorting, feeding and caring for the chicken together with families, restoring the chicken run, etc. It varied how much material was sent from the facilities to the researchers in advance of the RC meetings. The researchers' tasks were to make full and comprehensive reports from the previous round-table presentations and group discussions, plan and prepare for the next RC lesson and tasks, as well as analyzing incoming material and the material content presented at the prior meeting. In that sense the analytical process in RC work is ongoing, dialogical

and negotiated along the way. Often project duration is between 1-2 years for transformations and conceptualizations to take form (Wahlgreen & Aarkrog, 2024). It is the researchers' responsibility to disseminate the results of the analysis to, the scientific community and the wider public, during and after the RC meetings; however, the practitioners can join, and in this case decided to join us for relevant conferences during the project and also planned a dissemination conference to share their insights and practices with the whole municipality. This evening was planned by the practitioners showcasing their various ways of practicing a World-care pedagogy, and a celebratory way of closing this collaboration.

Discussing Practitioners' Experiences of the RC and Learning Circles

In the following, we discuss this version of RC methodology based on an analysis of practitioners' feedback. The project was formally evaluated at the final RC meeting and at a visionary-day (*visionsdag*), which was organized to give participants the opportunity to reflect on their journey, articulate their professional development, and consider the institutional anchoring of this professional development and capacity building. The following analysis is based on notes and transcripts from these meetings, as well as from a start-up meeting in a new research project with the same ECEC practitioners.

When we turn to practitioners' reflections on participating in the World-care project, it becomes clear that the activities in RC and LC created conditions not only for collective knowledge sharing, but also for practitioners to experience themselves as heard, recognized, and actively involved in shaping the project. Their accounts show that the project was not experienced as an externally imposed research agenda, but as a collaborative process in which their experiences, concerns, and professional judgments formed the development of a world-caring pedagogy. As one practitioner described: *"The World-care project gave us tools to handle conflicts and to talk about complex and difficult situations in our daily work".* Another practitioner similarly emphasized the importance of local ownership: *"The strength of the project was that it could be made entirely local. It was situated in practice and that made a real difference".* These reflections highlight how the methodology allowed World-care to be developed and explored in situated and meaningful ways. The practitioners emphasized that the project had helped them develop "a shared language" for discussing complex and emotionally

charged aspects of care work, including conflicts, responsibility, dilemmas, and environmental awareness. One practitioner stated: *"Developing a shared language was crucial. It strengthened collaboration and gave us a common orientation in everyday practice".* This shared language can be understood as an important outcome of the participatory design: it enabled practitioners to articulate their own experiences, connect them to the conceptual framework, and collectively negotiate what world-caring practices could mean and come to mean in their specific places. In this sense, the RC functioned as what Olsson et al., (2024) describe as collective knowledge places that foster both empowerment and recognition in the everyday pedagogical task. The practitioners' feedback also points to the importance of being recognized as knowledgeable contributors rather than as recipients of research-based knowledge. A participant shared that in the beginning some colleagues showed resistance to the topic and project, but over time, gave way to engagement, as they began to see how the dialogue with the new *"theory of practice"* could enrich their care pedagogy. Another participant described the experience as "a gift" that provided tangible tools and conceptual resources for navigating everyday challenges of care. These statements suggest that practitioners experienced the project as meaningful because it was conducted *with* them, rather than on them.

Finally, the iterative movement between RC and local LCs supported the emergence of what practitioners called *"resonance with practice"*. Rather than suggesting abstract theoretical frameworks detached from everyday work, the project invited researchers and practitioners to reinterpret familiar practices and routines through the expanded lens of a broader caring concept, i.e. World-care. As one practitioner explained: *"The research circles and learning circles worked well together. There were concrete ways of working with World-care coming about in learning circles, and the researchers supported us in keeping track of what mattered in the Research Circles".* This relational and reflexive process exemplifies a form of practice in which reflection and action are interwoven involving the interdependent 'sayings', 'doings' and 'relatings' of the practice architecture (Kemmis, 2009).

Pitfalls and potentials in the RC methodology

In a project addressing controversial and normatively charged topics such as climate change, we encountered several methodological challenges related to the open-ended

nature of the problem definitions and the multiple positions participants may hold. Although the municipality and area managers actively supported the project, not all participants were equally motivated to engage with the sustainability agenda. Statements such as: *"Honestly, I am not very interested in sustainability"* or: *"I think it is a lot to take in this whole climate crisis issue"* illustrate that early childhood educators cannot be assumed to be activists or particularly progressive on the green agenda. Rather, they likely reflect the general Danish population, which is typically concerned, yet also discouraged or disengaged with climate and biodiversity issues (Roepstorff, 2022). While Denmark has substantial financial and institutional resources for green transition, it also has among the world's highest consumption-based emissions per capita (Minter et al., 2023), creating both an urgency for changing, but also a sense of not knowing where to even begin this transformation resulting in various feelings and defenses: guilt, denial, avoidance, despair and anger (Roepstorff, 2022).

Sustainability education remains a relatively new and marginal issue in ECEC, both in research and practice, and it is not a high priority in national ECEC policy (Norðdahl et al., 2025, Jørgensen et al., 2025). By foregrounding sustainability, the project therefore created an ethical dilemma: asking early childhood educators to engage with additional responsibilities on a difficult topic, in an already care-intensive profession. We addressed this dilemma through a caring and non-judgmental approach, emphasizing that all positions—including reluctance, protest, or disengagement—were legitimate and valuable to the research process. Protecting such voices proved challenging, yet essential. Conflicting understandings of sustainability and World-care can be productive when approached with curiosity rather than moral judgment. Drawing on Kousholt and Højholt (2022), we sought to maintain "*a stance of curiosity and openness when encountering contradictory and provocative statements from co-researchers"* (p. 404). This stance allows researchers to explore how certain positions become meaningful in professionals' everyday work and to analyze the social and organizational conditions shaping them, rather than framing them as individual shortcomings. Such a collaborative, multi-perspectival approach enables learning from differences, tracing how understandings shift across contexts, and developing shared analyses without demonizing particular viewpoints. However, this requires that divergent positions are voiced within the RC. To support this, we explicitly stated that all

perspectives were of interest and that we were as concerned with barriers to world-caring practices as with their realization. We deliberately avoided evaluative or praising language when discussing practice examples to sustain an atmosphere of curiosity and exploration rather than assessment. To further reduce moral pressure, we discussed that none of us were expected to be or become a"climate-goody-goody" ("klima-dengse") to contribute meaningfully. This framing helped legitimize ambivalence and resistance as part of the collective inquiry. As the project engaged more deeply with the emotionally challenging realities of eco-crises, it became necessary to repeatedly acknowledge the limits of individual and institutional agency in addressing the wicked cultural, political, and societal problems. Encouraging humor and openness proved effective in managing the negative emotions engagement with the climate and sustainability crises evoked. It also required mutual care and patience with different positions on the matter. As one daily manager noted: "*It is important that people can be who they are and think what they think… it is crucial that no one feels hunted at work".* While we shared this concern, our motivation was also epistemological: we did not want the RCs to become "bragging circles" in which facilities competed to present only their most successful initiatives.

It is difficult to assess the extent to which we avoided this pitfall – most contributions shared in the roundtable and materials sent between RC meetings focused on positive World-caring practices, while fewer accounts addressed setbacks, persistence of old habits, or structural barriers to deeper integration of World-care. Some participants did, however, acknowledge that changes in management or other challenges had limited their engagement with the agenda since the last RC meeting. Methodologically, this highlights a key limitation of the RC approach: researchers primarily gain access to participants' sayings' in meetings rather than their everyday 'doings and relatings' to paraphrase Kemmis concepts (2009). We were able to triangulate the knowledge production from RC with ethnographic fieldwork, conducted by the postdoc, and also RC with parents, in ways that supported and nuanced the 'sayings' by managers and practitioners. However, even in research projects where the knowledge source purely stems from RC material, the bias ho highlight the positive initiatives may serve another purpose. RC also function as meeting places for imagining and articulating new understandings, and the sharing of positive examples play an important role in mutual inspiration and encouragement on challenging issues (Thomsen et al., 2017).

Possibilities and achievements in collaborative research

The RC method can be understood as a *joint-venture* between researchers and practitioners (Mørck & Nissen, 2005; Nissen, 2009). *Joint-venture* highlights both the collaborative and exploratory dimensions of participatory research: it is not a predefined collaboration aimed at implementing predetermined goals, but a shared movement into new possibilities where theory and practice develop together. This resonates with Kemmis' (2009) notion of research as a practice-changing practice and with Olsson et al.'s (2024) conceptualization of RCs as a democratic and collective process for co-creation.

We suggest that the combination of RC and LC involving all staff as a two-tiered structure enables a deeper process of mutual learning, and in addition ensures the return-flow of knowledge sharing and engagement across usual boundaries: research/practitioner, management/practitioner, and professionals from different facilities. The LCs play a central role in allowing the RC participants to bring insights developed among colleagues and researchers at the RC meetings back to their colleagues, facilitating collective reflection of the World-care pedagogy, exploring the themes together and detect barriers and dilemmas brought forth by colleagues. Such a structure grounds the development of new understandings in our case of World-care in the concrete social and material conditions of everyday pedagogical practice. The many layers and crossovers of mutual learning places emphasize co-creation, local agency and the ongoing transformation of practice across contexts. Following the practice-architectures approach (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008; Schatzki, 2002), the Research *and* Learning circles can be seen as collaborative places in which practitioners transform both 'sayings, doings, and relatings' that constitute their practice; These transformations are grounded in a democratic ideal of collective inquiry, where participants engage as equals in a process of mutual learning and shared responsibility for the development of new pedagogical understandings and practices (Højholt & Kousholt, 2019; Olsson et al., 2024). An attention within this methodological tradition has been a recurring critique of how the RC model tends to romanticize learning as a collaborative and power-neutral process. As Phillips et al. (2022) argue, tensions are embedded in the very *with* of 'research with rather than on people', and in the *co* of 'co-creating knowledge'. Depending on the quality of the relationship we found that the RC meetings became meeting places on equal

grounds, with different responsibilities, both inside and outside the RC meetings, but with a sense of common purpose and belonging to the project. This place is not power-free, but can be truly collaborative and based on mutual respect for the different forms of knowledge shared, developed and appreciated.

Summing up

There is a need for more democratic, involving and open-ended research approaches to early education in a time, where pedagogical practice struggles with expert-driven intervention programs across the ECEC field (Aabroe, 2016; Buus & Aabro, 2025). Often the models and methods are implemented without sufficient resources and time for the practitioners to take ownership and integrate changes in everyday life on their own terms. Such a way of research is detrimental in many ways, not least in the field of sustainability education. The topic of climate change and crisis is inherently disturbing and difficult to deal with emotionally and intellectually for both children and educators – a caring and democratic research approach is not only more ethical, but we would argue also more effectful in terms of promoting actual long-lasting transformative changes in attitudes, habits, activities and understandings (Carlsson, 2021). When returning to the origins of the RC method, it was founded on ideals of popular education: democracy, equality, and collective enlightenment, seeking to make knowledge accessible to all citizens and to empower people to participate actively in social and political life. Rather than emphasizing individual achievement or formal certification, popular education in the form of *folkbildning* promotes collective learning, dialogue, and reflection on lived experience as pathways to social transformation. Education is a shared, emancipatory practice – one that cultivates democratic participation and mutual understandings (Salo & Rönnerman, 2014; Nissen, 2009). A flexible and open-ended research approach like RC excludes the possibility of rigorously evaluating results and providing evidence for the precise effects on individual facilities. However, the conceptual developments and change in practice developed and tried by the practitioners enable a sense of place-based agency, social transformation, and engagement. In this process, the researchers' ethical responsibility is to legitimize a focus on sustainability as a question of care, and hold RC's as caring, sharing and exploring places, so more inclusive caring activities and choices become meaningful and preferable. By framing the climate emergency as a care

task in World-care, as both sayings, doings and relatings – educators can integrate their professional identity and prior experience as caretakers in transition into more sustainable pedagogies. In that way, the global, abstract and somehow distant issue of climate crisis, can be translated into meaningful, manageable, place-based initiatives in everyday life.

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