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Self-organized communities of children

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Abstract: From a child-centered perspective, this article explores the practices of children's self-organized play-communities in institutional everyday life in Danish early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings, based on a phenomenological non-participant-observational study with a duration of 16 months involving two kindergartens (Bernstorff, 2021). Drawing on Bourdieu's reflexive sociology and praxeology, children's self-organized play-communities are analyzed as a social space, being a field for relations, fights, negotiations with specific admission requirements emerging as accepted values shared by the specific field. The analysis demonstrates that self-organized play-communities are a social space with its own practices of *being together* expressed through *the social language in play* linked to and guided by an *institutional choreography*. Besides, the analysis demonstrates three kinds of different communities of children in self-organized play, viz. the categories: *Relational play-communities, Community-oriented play-communities, and Conflictual play--communities*, which categories may, however, also overlap into blended categories. The article argues that children's self-organized play-communities risk being under pressure in the institutional choreography, which in turn affects children's opportunities for having uninterrupted periods of time and space to self-organized play in their institutional everyday life.

Key words: children's perspectives, self-organized play-communities, social language in play, institutional choreography

Introduction

Children's communities and participation have received significant attention in current Danish legislation and in the practices of early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutional practice. Participation is considered an essential way to underpin social equality and inclusion but needs to be

supported by (ECEC) pedagogical practice. In June 2017, a political agreement was reached to improve ECEC settings to ensure all children's inclusion and participation in institutional practices. It was further pointed out in *The Strengthened Pedagogical Curriculum* how to strengthen the ECEC quality and professionalism to fulfill legislative "strengthened" curricular aims (Ministry of Children and Education, 2020). As a part of this reform, the relations between children and ECEC staff are stipulated as essential for children's participation in self-organized and other communities in ECEC social practices. This understanding is not entirely new but has been intensified in the current reform, although it was recognizable already in the introduction of the curriculum for Danish ECEC from 2004 (Jensen, 2004). From a child-centered perspective (cf. Warming, 2011), I find that the reformed Danish ECEC pedagogical curriculum's (Ministry of Children and Education, 2020) understanding of the staff's institutional precedence seems narrow and risks underestimating how significant children themselves are to each other as well as causing a bias as to how to prioritize allocation of time to children's self-organized play-communities. Thereby, children's opportunities to gain experiences regarding how to create and participate in self-organized play-communities are under pressure.

In Nordic pedagogical tradition, the intrinsic value of play is regarded as very valuable and as a means to an end: play – being dynamic, 'alive' and in motion – depending on somebody upholding its very existence (e.g. Rasmussen, 1985; Steinsholt, 1999; Øksnes, 2012). The value of children's self-organized play-communities is an important part of this tradition. Even though the reform has it that "The ECEC staff and the management should be responsible for creating a balance between the individual and the community at the ECEC" it simultaneous points out "All play, formation and learning should take place in communities of children for which the ECEC staff set the framework" (Ministry of Children and Education 2020, p. 21). The underlying expectations in the ECEC staff's framework providing the space for affording children's establishment of and engagement in self-organized play-communities already have a substantial impact on the balance children meet in ECEC, as can be seen in a study in Danish children's play (Schmidt, 2019). This study argues that the ECEC staff's professional focus follows their general view of ECEC (core) activities as composed of (primarily) the daily routine activities and learning activities facilitated by the staff. Children's playing and establishing communities on their own are compared to this increasingly relegated to the intervals (remaining) between routines and curricular activities and with the ECEC staff's attention elsewhere. In the present study's understanding, such an organizational prioritization

puts the self-organized play-communities in a pedagogical disregarded and unsupported position. In this lens, children's possibilities to get supported experiences of doing and being in communities on their own are challenged and risk making children's perspectives invisible for the pedagogues.

Aim and Methodological, Theoretical, and Ethical Approaches

The aim of the present article is to broaden the understanding of children's communities in institutional everyday life. Especially, the paper will address the self-organized play-communities, by uncovering children's (aged three to five years) perspectives on communities in ECEC settings (focusing on kindergartens). In doing so, the paper offers new ways to reflect on how to provide a framework to support and underpin children's participation in the overall institutional field and their self-organized play-communities. The paper's underlying understanding is that children's self-organized play-communities have their own social lives expressed through their *being together* and forming groups through communication. Communication is here understood and characterized as *language in play*, which manifests relative to the overall framework institutionally provided. Mastering the language in play is important for getting access to and participating in communities-of-play practices. If the self-organized play-communities only are enabled in intervals of residual time between staff-implemented activities it is hard for children to get access to experiences, (personal) development and achievement in these communities.

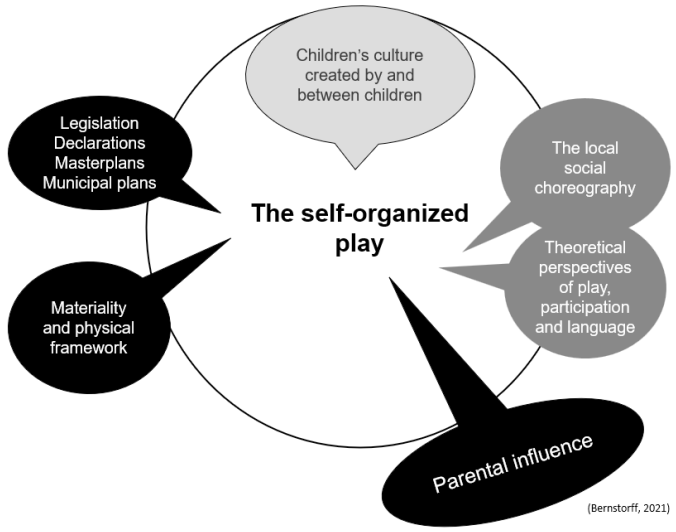
The present study was conducted as a phenomenological non-participant observational study in two kindergartens (G. Spindler & Spindler, 1992; Zahavi, 2017) examining from a child-centered perspective (Warming, 2011) how children lead their everyday lives and engage in self-organized play-communities. The study draws methodically on Bourdieu's reflexive sociology and praxeology (Bourdieu, 2004; Bourdieu & Passeron, 2006; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2004). In this lens, children's self-organized play-communities are understood as a social space: a field for relations, fights, negotiations. To do so, is not the customary way to draw on what Bourdieu described as his "thinking tools". However, according to Wacquant (2018), there has been a change of Bourdieu-compliant methodology and thinking since Bourdieu's death in 2002. This change means that a Bourdieu-compliant research design can now draw solely on the concepts relevant to the research question at hand which, in fact, Bourdieu also did himself. This approach is the one adopted by the research design of the present study.

In Bourdieu's understanding, a field cannot be pre-constructed and officially (legislatively) defined in the way the ECEC field of institutional practice appears to be with the ECEC field solely resting on an officially prescribed participation access. To be a field under a Bourdieu lens, a certain degree of autonomy and specificity must obtain that separates it from the rest of the social space. In addition, in Bourdieu's understanding, a field needs specific admission requirements according to its accepted values and interactions. As a field, self-organized play-communities distinguish themselves from the pre-constructed and officially defined communities in an ECEC setting. Children's self-organized play-communities have a certain degree of autonomy and specificity and meet therefore (Bourdieu's) requirements for being an observable field. Moreover, children's participation in their self-organized play-communities is thus not automatically achieved, and the durability of the communities (heavily) depends on the participants themselves. By highlighting which values and (inter)actions children assign importance to and see as worth 'fighting' for, a field analysis offers a way to gather knowledge from children's perspectives on their own communities-of-play in institutional everyday life. It offers knowledge as well how these values and (inter) actions impacts on participation in their communities.

In the ECEC institutional everyday life, children must choose among and negotiate with each other to establish their self-organized play-communities. Atkinson argues for constructing thumbnail fields like the way the early Bourdieu defined a family field as "[…] 'the field of relationships that are constantly re-used' and reinforced in everyday practice and exchange" (Atkinson, 2014, p. 224). I hence understand children's opportunities to establish self-organized play-communities as embedded in the institutional everyday life and as a field as for which the pre-constructed and officially defined communities are reused and reinforced by daily routines and exchanges in a way similar to that of a "family field".

When I therefore characterize self-organized play-communities as a social space with a certain degree of autonomy and specificity, I simultaneously argue that the field is linked to and guided by more than its own values for interactions. It is also guided by: national political decisions (e.g. the pedagogical curriculum reform above); municipal policies; physical frameworks inside and outside the ECEC setting; a local pedagogical social choreography (guided both of political decisions and theoretical approaches negotiated among the ECEC staffs); and parental expectations and norms. This linking emerges as visible and/or underlying 'voices' with different impacts on the children's agency and autonomy regarding their own self-organized

play-communities. To understand and analyze these relations, I conceptualized an *institutional choreography* model:



Source: Bernstorff, 2021

This model renders visible analytically how the motions and other actions in self-organized play-communities is framed by the institutional choreography, and not solely related to the substantial intrinsic value of play in the ECEC setting.

Research context and participants

In Danish ECEC settings, children are typically divided into groups dependent their age group: the very young ones (up to 2.9 years old) in nurseries and the oldest (up to 6 years old) in kindergartens. Accordingly, in kindergartens, children are divided into and participate in activities dependent on their age group. In their final year in kindergarten, children attend in "school-starters" activities meant to prepare them for their onset in elementary-school. Simultaneously, children of a lower age are assigned to groups engaged in different age-dependent activities. Independent of age group, activities are to be aligned with the aims of *The Strengthened Pedagogical Curriculum*.

The youngest children in kindergartens (aged three to five years) are the center of attention of the present study. This is to gain knowledge of children's perspectives of their self-organized play-communities in institutional everyday life and what seems significant in these communities.

The research was conducted in two kindergartens during 16 months from September 2017 to December 2018: three periods in each. Both kindergartens were divided into two main groups with an average of fifteen to twenty children in each group during the period. The pedagogues were affiliated with one of the groups at the same time when they were divided across the groups during the early and late hours of opening time and when the children were divided into groups for the staff-implemented activities. Depending on the activities during the day, I was together with the whole group of children, one of the main groups or the youngest in kindergarten. Regardless of the division, the focus was on the youngest, their activities, and communities.

Theoretical background

The research interest of how and what children show as their perspectives is focused on their actions in play: how they show their expectations for each other, how they include or protest against the institutional choreography (e.g. when they negotiate participation access), how they respond to the other children's reactions and invitations during their interactions, and how they dissolve their communities. This approach is related to the understanding that communities in general are together for a reason: a "something", and social norms decide if that something can be accepted and how participation can be negotiated and achieved in a community (Madsen, 2009). How children create their self-organized play-communities will both depend on whether the something has the children's interest and on their expectations for each other.

To understand children's perspectives in self-organized play-communities, it is important to be aware of how children's expectations for each other deviate from their expectations for each other when being together with adults. According to Frønes, it can be a challenge for children to get access to and stay included in children's self-organized communities. Frønes argues that "Relations between children among themselves are characterized by horizontality, complexity, changeability and of being something to be achieved and maintained" (Frønes, 1994, p. 153, my translation). Children's experiences of what is important in a community are based on time together with equals because:

> Relationships between children are something that must be achieved. This is of fundamental importance for social and communicative strategies and fundamental for learning communicative codes among equals. (Frønes, 1994, p. 156, my translation)

When children themselves are responsible for creating access to a community, this is in marked contrast to their time together with adults when adults are responsible (cf. Frønes, 1994, 2018) for ECEC communities. Ytterhus (2003) demonstrates in her study of inclusion and exclusion in children's togetherness in kindergarten that to get invited into the community in question, children's behaviours must be mirrored in the other community members' behaviours and responses. Ytterhus draws on Goffman's theory of how to take a line including adjusting behaviours to keep in line and argues:

> To respond appropriately to an invitation from a peer, the child (invitee) must be aligned with the inviter. This means that they must have the same understanding of what is going on. Furthermore, the child must signal their understanding back to the other in a way that awakens positive emotions in the recipient. (Ytterhus, 2003, p. 39, my translation)

According to Ytterhus, children devise rules among themselves for their grouping and their way of being together so that to keep the rules is a way to stay in line. Using Corsaro's lens, children's use of "access rituals" (Corsaro, 1979) to achieve participation in communities by taking an acceptable line by way of e.g. a nonverbal entry or producing variants of on-going behaviour can be seen as specific admission requirements.

Ethical considerations for children's participation in the study

The study is conducted according to Danish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (Ministry of Higher Education and Science, 2014) and has been approved by the Ethical Committee at the University College of Southern Denmark. As stipulated the children's parents were informed and reminded of their being entitled to withdraw their consent at any time. Inspired by Warming's perspectives of doing research with children (Warming, 2011, 2020), the study was informed by ethical considerations in addition to formal consenting, seeing that children this age were participants in the study. From day one, I told the children about my curiosity about their self-organized play and play-communities and talked with them about how my presence would influence their institutional everyday life and answered their questions. I showed the children my notebook and carried identical notebooks for the whole duration of the study, and they were aware that I was the only adult who was allowed to write and read in the notebook and kept it to myself when conducting my field research in kindergartens.

According to Menning and Kampmann (2021), research among children involves a relational ethical extension to be expressed through the researcher's attention, which must be rooted in care, trust and responsibility and awareness of getting the children's passive consent. Even though the children were informed and interested in my presence, their consent had to be achieved, not only once but all the way through the study. On the children's invitation, I told them what I had written and paid attention to their responses to examine if I had understood them correctly. When children told me about their everyday life in kindergarten and asked me to write it down in the notebook, I thus did this to establish the child's own perspective. Often the children invited me to participate as observer in their play when they left for settings, they were allowed to use without the ECEC staff's guidance. To aim at a broad representation and catch all children's perspectives, not solely those, who invited me, I paid my attention to "listening" to children's many "voices" besides their verbal communication (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Warming, 2020). Nonverbal communication here comprises children's singing, selections and using of artefacts, selection of places for their play, facework in single play and play-communities. Respecting the children's own right to withdraw their consent, I was attentive to when children dissociated themselves during the observations and when I did not get their passive consent. Examples are when children explicitly refused my participation, whispered to avoid my listening, or moved their play activities away from my field of vision. I did not observe children who, in the situation, refused my participation in their communities, which happened very infrequently. I achieved, so to say, consent for my presence on a daily basis among the children.

Considerations of consequences for children to do with how I throw light on undiscovered actions were inspired by Qvortrup's (2009) studies of the increased research interest in how societies go about regulating childhood and targeting childhood towards children's adulthood. Ethically, this is reflected in *The Convention of the Rights of Children* (UN, 1989). According to Articles 12 and 13, children have a right to be heard and to express themselves as well as a right to be protected and taken care of, cf. also Article 3 in the convention. During the observations and the following analysis, it was an underlying concern whether the findings could change children's institutional everyday life in a positive or negative way and whether the observations were too private to pass on and how findings were consistently argued from a child-centered perspective.

Findings

The findings of the study demonstrate that self-organized play-communities as a social space have their own ways for being and interacting together. As a part of the institutional choreography of a typical day, children must end their play-communities caused by interruptions brought about by mandatory participation in daily routines and learning activities led by the pedagogues:

Time	Daily routines and activities
06:30-08:45	ECEC setting opens, children and ECEC staff arrive continuous, self-imposed breakfast (before 7:30) and/or children's self-organized play in limited areas. Children are dived gradually when more areas become available. Few non-mandatory activities facilitated by the ECEC staff.
08:45-09:00	Mandatory for children to be in their main group area.
09:00-09:50	Children are gathered for fruit break in their main groups. Afterwards division in activity groups.
09:50-10:50	Mandatory activities facilitated by pedagogues in activity groups.
10:50-12:00	Mandatory gathering facilitated by pedagogues with curricular activity in main groups or activity groups. Afterwards lunch in main groups.
12:00-14:00	Children having a nap or are at the playground. Self-organized play combined with non-mandatory activities facilitated by ECEC staff. ECEC staff combine playground activities with lunchbreaks. ECEC staff begin leaving kindergarten continuous.
14:00-14:30	Children are gathered for fruit break in their main groups.
14:30-15:20	Children begin leaving kindergarten continuous. Self-organized play combined with non-mandatory activities facilitated by ECEC staff.
15:20-16:00	Children continue leaving and areas are limited continuous. Self-organized play with several interruptions.
16:00-16:45	All remaining children are gathered in a limited common area until ECEC setting is closing.

(Bernstorff, 2021)

Sometimes a play-community can continue being together in the pedagogues' activities, but, equally frequently, play-communities must dissociate to make room for new groups when staff-implemented activities take place.

In the following analysis elaborating general findings, I first unfold how the social language in play is tied up with the different values regarding which children express their priorities in self-organized play-communities, i.e., in accordance with what the play is about and with whom they play.

Secondly, I unfold how self-organized play-communities are organized into three different kinds of communities based on the difference in children's value priorities. The difference in prioritized values accounts for children's interest in maintaining their play-community and in which way(s) newcomers can get access to a play-community.

Thirdly, I discuss the impact interruptions have on children's possibilities

to get experience with how to act in play-communities when they want to keep the play going and maintain the play-community for long periods.

The social language in play in self-organized play-communities

As mentioned above, children's interactional expectations are different from their interactional expectations when together with adults. This is also characteristic of their communication and calls for a researcher's awareness to get insight into children's perspectives. Linguistic research has shown (e.g. Cekaite et al., 2014; Cook-Gumperz, 1986) that, unproblematically, children omit verbal communication from their communication practices and instead communicate through their actions, silence or by referring to cultural references from songs and movies etc. Communication in play-communities seen as the language in play has helped to unveil the finding that a more elaborated language exists among children in the play-communities, viz. *the social language in play*. Characteristics of the social language in play include specific attributes of the interactions: how children read each other, show attention to each other's well-being, respond relevantly in their bodily actions, accept each other's self-invented words and share fantasies to move the play forward and make room for each other's diversity. In my studies, crying, however, is only accepted behaviour as way of expressing oneself if it is caused by grief or pain.

Children's self-organized play-communities develop through children's understanding and acceptance of the common values children cite as reasons (for expectations and their own behaviours), i.e. relative to children's mastery of the social language in play. Hereby, relational preferences are created and further developed, which strengthens children's connection to each other in the current play-community, and children adjust their access to what's going on and respond positively to each other's self-invented words and when changing the play. Below an example is provided – rendered in English:

> Jens arrives on the playground and joins Zandra playing on the slide. Jens moves further down the playground: "I'll be back in a minute", he says. Zandra warns him: "Don't go on top of those color lasers" – she talks about the steps on the hill up to the slide. Jens responds: "I like lasers". They move further down the playground together to a partially open playhouse. Jens asks her: "We're making our table finely, aren't we?" Zandra responds: "Yes". They wipe away grains of sand with their forearms. Then they run back to the steps on the hill. Jens exclaims:

> "I'll die soon". Karen arrives and enters the play with the comment: "Oh no daddy." Jens is 'dead'. He now lies in front of the slide. The girls try to bring him back to life. They give up. Then Jens is a zombie, he says: "I have a magic wand with ice-power". The girls protest: "No, you are a daddy". Jens then accepts being a zombie-dad.

To show attention to each other's wellbeing can be expressed in many ways. As in the example above, the three children show attention to and make room for each other's diversity and make room for featuring imaginary "lasers" and "a magic wand with ice-power" as well as a dying daddy changing to a "zombie-dad". Together they accommodate their actions to the ongoing dynamic spontaneous scenario of the play, which makes participation in the play-community interesting for everyone.

To show attention to each other's wellbeing can also relate to an emotional situation reflecting a need for comfort, as illustrated below:

> Zandra and Jens are playing in the gym room. They are creating constructions of big pillows on a table. Sofie enters the room. Zandra climbs using a stool, it overturns and hits her. She looks sad and it seems as if it hurts. She quickly crawls under the table and turns her head up against the wall. Jens is looking at her. Sofie tells him: "I can tie a bow on my dress". She tries to get Jens' attention by showing that she is tying the bow. Jens carries pillows to Zandra: "We just have to leave her alone" he says to Sofie . Sofie asks: "Jens do you want to see that I can tie a bow on my dress?". Jens responds: "Not right now". He picks up more pillows for Zandra. A pillow causes him trouble, and he asks for my help. Zandra quickly returns from her hideout under the table and arranges the pillow. Jens throws the overturned stool along the floor: "It can't be part of the game when it overturns", he comments.

Jens shows his understanding of both Sofie's and Zandra's wellbeing through several actions, when he: 1) appriciates Sofie by indicating that later he will watch her tying a bow, 2) synchronously guides Sofie to adjust her disruptive access ritual and take a line and adjust herself to the expectations for her participation, 3) shows his consideration for Zandra by bringing her pillows, and 4) excludes the stool, which can be seen as an accommodating gesture to Zandra. In his actions, besides expressing his consideration for the other members of the play-community, he shows that his relationships to both girls are important to him, and also that he wants

to sustain the self-organized play-community with Zandra. Zandra reads his actions and they support her staying in their community even though she has hurt herself.

Mastering the social language in play can be considered a specific field-admission requirement for the self-organized play-community and seen as significant for children's participation in play-communities both to negotiate access, to remain in the play-community and to gain experience on how to participate in future communities organized by children. The children in the observations demonstrate in their social language in play "a sense of the game", showing how relationships among children must be achieved and maintained.

A challenge for mastering the social language in play is that, besides verbal communication, it is mostly tacit and, as a result, often disregarded by the pedagogues. The pedagogues are primarily appealed to by the self-organized play-communities when a child is crying; if the crying is an attempt to get the pedagogues' help to overrule the other children, the child will nearly always be excluded from the play-community. For pedagogues to become familiar with children's social language in self-organized play-communities involves being close by and to know what's going on in the children's interactions.

Summarizing the analysis, it is demonstrated that, in children's self-organized play-communities, mastering a social language in play is more than verbal communication, e.g. also about caring for each other's wellbeing and taking a line attuned to the ongoing interactional dynamics in play. Mastering this is important for participating, both to have access and maintain community membership. It stands to reason that children's acquisition of the social language in play can only be achieved when children have a fair amount of uninterrupted time for self-organized-community activities.

Three kinds of communities of children

Pre-constructed and politically defined communities do not involve the same fights over participation as an open field because they prescribe a legal access for participation. On this basis, children are automatically included in the institutional community of children when they are enrolled in the kindergarten. Beside the institutional community of children, another pre-construced field exists in which children have their legal access – a "we-community", as it were, like the family field including everyone in the kin-

dergarten: here children, all ECEC staff and, to a lesser extent, also parents participate.

As a part of the institutional choreography the pre-constructed communities have a significant impact on children's self-organized play-communities. In the institutional everyday life, children are expected to be responsible for each other in the institutional community of children and they are often reminded by the pedagogues. An example of this is when one of the pedagogues says before leaving for the playground: "Remember everyone must have someone to play with" and encourages children to remember to "say yes to each other". Children appear to accept and react according to the imposed responsibility for each other as illustrated below:

> Mette plays alone near the water pipes to turn flasks around in a bucket rack. Jens notices she's alone and joins her. They challenge each other by performing increasingly difficult movements. Jens states: "This is even cooler than you." Mette replies: "So can I". Jens discovers an insect. He says: "It's a fly-spider" and leaves for a while. Mette invites him back, giving Jens a new challenge: "See what I can do", and Jens replies: "So can I" and tries to imitate her movement. They keep challenging each other and when the bucket racks game gets too difficult, they find new challenges: first, they start a running race, then they go to the swing. They leave the swing, but the swing keeps swinging. Mette notices: "Who is swinging?". They run back and Jens concludes: "Who is swinging? It must be a ghost. You can't see anyone". Their play continues running around the playground to catch ghosts until playground time is over.

Jens and Mette's self-organized play-community appears to be a stable community, by understanding each other's social language in play, e.g., accepting the self-invented word "fly-spider", they manage to evolve their play from the bucket racks competition to eventually sharing a ghost fantasy.

Not all self-organized play-communities manage to keep going. As mentioned earlier, three different kinds of communities show up in children's self-organized play-communities:

- *Relational play-communities*, in which there is a prior close relationship between children participating, which is significant for the development of the play-community.
- *Community-oriented play-communities*, where the desire to maintain

the theme of play has a decisive impact on interactions in the play-community.
– *Conflictual play-communities*, in which conflicts, positioning and dominance struggles are the focal point.

In their actions and interactions, the "relational play-communities" and the "community-oriented play-communities" are approved in the institutional choreography, whereas "conflictual play-communities" (the most seldom I met in the kindergartens) are (choreographically) disapproved. To broaden up a construal of communities of children from children's perspectives, the focus in the analysis to come will be the participation difference of how to get access and maintain access to respectively relational play-communities and community-oriented play-communities and when there is a mix of community types.

Relational play-communities

Running parallel to the children's acceptance of the expectations expressed as an institutional choreography that everyone must have someone to play with, children's friendships with each other has an impact on the creation of play-communities. The children's priorities and interactions can be understood as a relational hierarchy, cf. Johansson's description of relationships among children:

> They are both short-lived, deep, and lasting. The children's relationships also have hierarchical features. They put each other in order of precedence. They play with several different peers, but they also build firm relationships with certain children. It's important to be with someone they value. (Johansson, 2002, p. 78, my translation)

Hierarchical features have an impact on the relational play-communities for children's access: friendship itself is accepted as a direct (non-negotiable) access right to ongoing self-organized play-communities, cf. the example below:

> Jesper and Alba have been playing with LEGO bricks for a while, and Markus has several times tried to get access without succeeding when Fina arrives in the kindergarten. Alba leaves the LEGO bricks to pick Fina up. She comments on this to Jesper: "Fina is my best friend" and takes Fina to the LEGO bricks without discussing this with Jesper or Jesper protesting. The play with LEGO bricks continues together with Fina.

According to Johansson's studies to be friends means: "We care for the good of our friend, and we direct our care to him or her" (Johansson, 2002, p. 78, my translation). Accordingly, children care for each other's participation more intensely when their self-organized play-community is a relational play-community, as we also see when Sidse comforts Karen and solves Karen's problem to do with an adjacent spoon:

> Sidse plays with plasticine and has disregarded the other children sitting next to her also playing with plasticine when Karen passes. Sidse calls: "Hello Karne (her pet name for Karen): "Look I am playing with plasticine". Karen: "I would like to, too". Sidse: "You can have some of mine". Manja, who was sitting at the neighboring table offers Sidse her plasticine. Sidse: "Yes, thank you, I really need it". Manja offers knives. Sidse: "Yes, thank you, I want them". Manja comes with a spoon. Karen reacts: "No". Manja puts the spoon on the table. Karen raises her voice: "No, no, no, I don't want it". Sidse looks at Karen: "It's just a spoon Karne. Don't worry. It's a spoon. I'll take it".

Firm relationships and friendships affect the play-communities' sustainability and durability as when Erik and Hans who remain close to each other are engulfed in their own fantasies when playing with LEGO bricks and at the same time very attentive to each other:

> Erik and Hans are playing next to each other. They each build their own boats with LEGO bricks. Sometimes they also put a single brick or two on each other's boats in the making. Their communication is connected to their own play. Erik says: "I need to find the King", Hans asks: "The King?" Erik: "Pokémon – we need to catch it". They both sing Pokémon songs. After a while Erik says: "Now you are kidnapped. You only have one left in your boat". Hans doesn't react but keeps singing Pokémon songs while rocking his chair. Both are engaged in building boats without contact until Erik suddenly says: "My boat is a thief", and Hans responds: "My boat is a gold ship". Erik suggests: "Shouldn't we say that that boat is sailing ashore?" and continues: "I've stolen what's in my boat". They build on alternating between no contact and involvement in each other for a while until they become preoccupied with other children's play with Pokémon cards. Erik wants to join. Hans responds: "I want to go too. Shouldn't we play afterwards?".

Even though communities are about being together about something, firm relationships and friendships underpin the durability of time spent to-

gether hierarchically. As Johansson points out, it's important for children to be with someone they value, but the importance of that something is inversely related to hierarchies of the firmness of children's friendships. Hans thus leaves his LEGO bricks to maintain his self-organized play-community with Erik. The most important is to be together, and less important is about what.

Community-oriented play-communities

In contradistinction, to be together about something is what is most important in community-oriented play-communities. Being a part of the institutional community of children and the we-community with its underlying expectations in the institutional choreography can combine with a play-community. Here, children open and close their self-organized play-communities according to we-community ideals. If the play-community is sustained, even newcomers' access is enabled, as in the example below in which different boys enter and leave the play-community according to the stages of the game unfolding:

> Six boys are in the gym room playing a ghost-game. Jannik (who created the game) is the 'supreme ghost' and in charge of rules. When you hide behind the door, you have a safe space and can't be attacked. Sigurd climbs up the stall bars. As two 'ghosts' crawl after, he comments: "They couldn't climb, you can't climb". The ghosts accept – they climb down, while they confirm: "They couldn't climb". The conversation among the boys is otherwise "oo, ooo, oooo…". To recognize the ghosts, the ghosts walk with their upper arms raised to shoulder height and their forearms hanging down. When attacking, they raise their forearms and use their hands as claws. Sylvester says: "Now I'm a human being". Sylvester participates legitimately peripherally in the play. He is protected by the others if the game gets a little wild and being a human being is accepted as an exemption from the game. The game expands to include 'wizard ghosts'. After that, "ram, ram, ram" are conversational sounds in combination with "oo, oo". Sylvester uses me as a safe space as the only one, but the other boys accept that he is untouchable when he stands behind me sitting on the stool. He has his dinosaur with him. More boys enter the gym room and get access to the ghost-game. Rules are repeated and accepted for participation by newcomers and old members of the community. As a part of the game the role as ghost, wizard ghost and those who are hunted change continuously; without changing the rules of the game. When Sigurd

> protests at being caught, the answer is immediately: "Then you are out of the game", and Sigurd accepts.

As a part of the social language in play, the children read each other and make changes in the play without conflicts and allow diversity of access to participation, like Sylvester passing in and out the play, participating on the sideline having extra safe spaces and involving his dinosaur without losing his access to participation. Due the value that "being together about something" hierarchically overrules "being together with someone", behavioural sanctions in the self-organized play-community are regulated by defined rules. When Sigurd tries to change the rules for being caught, he is immediately reminded by the community of the sanction of being excluded. Sigurd is aware of this, corrects his behaviour and confirms taken lines immediately to avoid exclusion.

Mixed relational play-communities and community-oriented play-communities

The three kinds of communities of children have one more variant: when the communities mix. The complexity and changeability, Frønes describes, increase, and challenge development of the play when, among the children, there are a firm relationships or friendships. Then the relational hierarchical positions put the something the play is about under pressure and thereby the maintenance of the play-community under pressure as well. To solve such challenges, mastering the social language in play is important, as seen below when Sidse tries to extend the self-organized play-community and develop the play in terms diversity of access and at the same time take care of Karen's wellbeing and protect their relational play-community:

> In the gym room, Zandra and My are building a tent. So are Sidse and Karen. The play-communities become interwoven, so to speak, when the children discuss how to organize a campfire. They discuss for a long time on how to sit. Karen draws herself back to her and Sidse's tent. Sidse calls to Karen: "Come on. It's just a campfire with singing and roasting campfire bread on a stick". A discussion about the tents starts: Sidse to Zandra: "My tent is the best". Zandra: "No mine is the best". Sidse: "Mine is also the best". Zandra: "Yes, these are the two best". Karen interrupts the argue by calling from their tent to Sidse: "Then you saw I wasn't there." Sidse invites: "Then you came anyway". Karen isn't coming. Sidse continues to encourage Karen to come: "Then you saw there were monsters at your campfire". Zandra

> suggests: “Sidse, then the three of us can play together”. Sidse responds: “Yes”. Karen responds from the tent: “But the two of us played together”. Sidse goes to the tent for Karen. Zandra invites her back: “Sidse wouldn’t you join me in my tent?”. Sidse responds: “Yes”. Karen in a whimpering voice: “But you’re playing here”. Sidse puts Karen in the camp and puts her soft toy named Kissy next to her: “Then Kissy will take care of you”. Sidse joins My and Zandra in their tent.

Even though Sidse gets several invitations and positive responses in the tent discussion, the hierarchy does not change. To maintain their friendship Sidse continues to suggest ways of participation for Karen, and when she refuses Sidse returns to their tent, which can be seen as a confirmation to Karen that her position in the relational hierarchy is not under threat. By offering Karen her soft toy “Kissy” a physical connection is maintained in their relational play-community, and by joining My and Zandra Sidse maintains her participation in the community-oriented play-community as well.

In summary, the analysis demonstrates, how children accept and navigate as part of the we-community and reuse and reinforce relationships by sharing their institutional everyday lives and being part of an institutional we-community opens the access to participate in community-oriented play-communities. Communities can be sustained as long the defined values in play are accepted and respected. On the other hand, maintenance is easier in relational play-communities, and even though it is very demanding and involves conflicts and compromises, children have a willingness to give up the something that the play is about to stay together and confirm each other’s emotional importance.

To support children’s self-organized play-communities in the institutional choreography, it is required for pedagogues to pay attention to which types of relations and values make sense for the children at hand. The different types of self-organized play-communities need different types of support from them, depending on whether the something is the most important to protect and sustain or if the firm relationships or friendships are the most important component in the self-organized play-community.

4.0 Discussion of self-organized play-communities: Challenges

In keeping with the aim of the article to broaden our understanding of children’s self-organized play-communities, a discussion is presented on the effects of children’s opportunities to have and set up their own communities

apart from institutional choreographies governing their self-organized play in institutional everyday life.

Frønes argues that:

> The premises for a solution thus become different when constituted by unequal parties; the solution should be found through negotiations between equals. The motivation for resolving the conflict is also strong, as social position, communication and further socializing depend on it being resolved. (Frønes, 1994, p. 164, my translation)

According to Frønes' argument, relationships between children are as essential as children's relations with pedagogues, as they need experience in participating in communities other than staff-implemented ones. The ECEC setting is an important arena for children to build relationships and friendships and, as argued by Steinsholt and Ness (2016), is an arena for many children in which friendship gains substance because in their play-communities, they can be visible to each other by showing and sharing emotions. However, this visibility depends on opportunities to participate in communities. Participation involves time: time for negotiations, disagreements, and adjustments in the play community, which are all essential for acquiring and mastering the social language used in play communities. Such a perspective on the allotment of time is challenged by current institutional choreographies, where, as described in Schmidt's (2019) categorization, daily routines and learning activities have the pedagogue's attention, whereas play activities are viewed as "in-between" activities that children engage in by themselves. As an in-between activity, its duration will often be determined by factors extraneous to the children's own negotiations, disagreements, and adjustments. Its existence as subordinate to the institutional choreography means that self-organized play will be ended according to the organization of daily routines and pedagogues' activities, and hence by means beyond children's influence.

In everyday institutional choreography, children's self-organized play-communities are often interrupted during the day, and their play areas are often changed. As described, children arrive at different times in the morning, and in the afternoon, they leave at different times. This implies that areas in ECEC settings open and close during the day, and children's play areas change with the number of children and ECEC staff present. This organizational practice is quite similar to a typical day in Danish ECEC settings, as Winther-Lindqvist (2017, p. 102) describes. Winther-Lindqvist sums up that the practice reserves about 50% of the day for children´s play. This

seems to allow children plenty of time for their self-organized play. However, its status as an in-between activity has an impact on children's time as well as their play environments and play affordances, and their self-organized play is frequently at risk of being suspended according to the institutional choreography for reasons on which the children have no influence.

Organizationally, it is important to be aware of the risks of interrupting children's play. According to Weldemariam (2014), it takes a very long time, if it is even possible, for children to restore their play when interrupted, and this has an impact on how children experience building communities on their own. Frequently, interruptions during self-organized play prevent children from developing their skills to read each other, negotiate, adjust behaviours when they disagree, and respect each other's diversity as a part of the complexity involved.

Interruptions obviously complicate children's affordances for learning how to acquire and master the social language of play and can lead to an imbalance in the institutional choreography. The imbalance, as I shall argue, involves a disregard of curricular aims in the *Strengthened Pedagogical Curriculum* stipulating that ECEC settings should "support interactions and connections […] among the children themselves" and "develop a language that enables them to understand themselves, each other and their surroundings" (Ministry of Children and Education, 2020, pp. 56–57). Such learning is afforded essentially by play-communities; therefore, children's time and space for self-organized play need to be given due (professional) pedagogical attention and be regarded and supported as more than in-between activities.

Conclusion

Communities of children in kindergartens can be regarded from different point of views and they are part of an overall institutional choreography. Further, communities of children in kindergartens can be regarded from the view of institutional community of children and as a shared institutional we-community to which children have a prescribed legal right of access. However, views and perspectives are also found in children's self-organized play-communities to which access needs to be achieved given requirements set by the community in question. Self-organized play-communities, moreover, have their own language, and children's mastering the social language found in play has an impact on their access to and maintenance of participation access. Three general different types of self-organized play-commu-

nities were established: relational play-communities, community-oriented play-communities, and conflictual play-communities.

Present article has had its focus on the two first types of community but has also studied communities mixing types. The findings of the paper open a discussion of the importance of children's opportunities to have time for participating in self-organized play-communities and practice to acquire and master the social language in play.

From the findings presented, the paper constructs the argument that if communities of children on their own are essential for children's acquisition and mastery a social language in play and if that mastery is essential for reaching essential ECEC-curricular aims, children's play-communities should have a new choreographic status: a status on a par with daily routines and learning activities. As a result, children's self-organized play-communities should have the pedagogues' attention and support and be recognized as much more than in-between activities. Further, to consider the children's own perspectives, children's self-organized play-communities should be pedagogically underpinned in accordance with how the play-community in question is organized and which values are prioritized by the children involved.

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