

Fun and laughter promote well-being in early childhood education and care: Pedagogy of fun and big humour

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Abstract: In Danish early childhood education and care (ECEC), fun is often emphasised as a key pedagogical tool but is used rather unreflexively. While well-being and happiness have been studied in various ways, the potential of fun is not included in theoretical discussions regarding happiness and well-being, although most people identify having fun as a fundamental reason for being happy. A researcher and three student assistants spent six months in three ECEC settings with a focus on episodes characterised by fun and laughter. Participant observation and interviews were conducted. Empirical data illustrate how fun appears in ECEC as laughter, smiles, attentiveness, intensity and ecstasy. Fun arises momentarily in a sense of lightness and freedom, as a means of communication, in physical play, when rules and expectations are broken, in frivolous references to lower body functions and in experiences of excitement. Pedagogues use fun based on child sensitivity, improvisation, courage to let go of control, informality, energy and a sense of humour. Danish humour philosophy distinguishes between small humour and big humour. Pedagogues with the ability to practice big humour are preferred in order to establish an ECEC culture characterised by fun, laughter and episodes of small humour that promote well-being in children.

Keywords: fun, well-being, humour, pedagogy, early childhood education

Introduction

In Denmark, the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) includes an objects provision with regards to the promotion of children's well-

being. A strengthened pedagogical curriculum prescribes that ECEC should help support a happy childhood—a life with space and time to be a child—which is considered valuable in itself (Ministry of Children and Education, 2020, p. 16).

In early childhood pedagogical practice, we often see an emphasis on play and fun as key pedagogic tools. Children's play is a common theme explored by many researchers, but the term "fun" is generally used quite unreflexively (Fincham, 2016, pp. 15 and 7). We all know what "fun" means and what it feels like, but we also acknowledge that it means different things to different people.

Whereas well-being and happiness have been studied in various ways, the potential of fun is, in absentia with regard to almost all theoretical discussions on what makes children happy and promotes their well-being. Its absence in discussions is odd, especially because most people identify having fun as a fundamental reason for being happy (Fincham, 2016, p. 3). This peculiarity was also noted by Goffman (1961): *"Because serious activity need not justify itself in terms of the fun it provides, we have neglected to develop an analytical view of fun and an appreciation of the light fun throws on interaction in general"* (p. 17).

This paper considers the phenomenon of fun in ECEC in appreciation of the light fun can throw on interaction (Goffman, 1961). The aim was to show how fun appears in the everyday lives of children in ECEC and to discuss what it implies for professional pedagogues to use fun more consciously in pedagogical practice. This was done in order to fulfil the objectives provided by the curriculum mentioning children's well-being as well as to examine playful, curious approaches as the starting point for inclusive processes for the child (Ministry of Children and Education, 2020, pp. 7 and 16).

The research questions were: (1) How does *fun* appear in the everyday lives of children in ECEC? (2) What characterises pedagogues' use of and approach to *fun* in Danish ECEC pedagogical practice?

Background

The sociology of fun

The theoretical starting point of the study was Ben Fincham's model or *schema of fun* developed to represent the various factors that are present in

fun. The model is presented in his book *The Sociology of Fun*, published in 2016, and attempts to depict the important elements of fun and how it is experienced, emphasising *temporality*, *deviation from the norm*, *relationship to commitment*, *relationship to responsibility*, *relationship to anticipation*, *relationship to interaction*, *identity* and finally, *distraction*—in the sense that you need to be so engrossed in experiencing fun that you are not able to think about it while having it (Fincham, 2016, p. 40).

Drawing on Podilchak (1991) and Blythe and Hassenzähl (2004), Fincham characterises fun as an experience of immediate pleasure with interactional and phenomenological features. He emphasised the social nature of fun in the sense that fun only emerges in social bonds and is nourished by an equality condition between members (Fincham, 2016, p. 34). Having fun implies that we are distracted from the self, no longer having our self-definition, concerns or problems as a focus. Joy is the joy of a repeated act; it does not imply an idea of progression as in other forms of pleasure. Additionally, the idea of transgression in the form of rule breaking is often cited as fun in itself (Fincham, 2016).

Research on fun in ECEC

Prior qualitative research on the phenomenon of fun and laughter in ECEC is characterised in a literature review by Koch (submitted) as falling into one of three different categories: (1) concerned with children's development of humour in relation to psychological theory, (2) describes children's experiences of fun or (3) preoccupied with children as cultural producers of fun.

The body of literature studying *children's development of humour* (e.g. Hoicka et al., 2008; Sezgin & Hatipoglu, 2017) often refers to the American developmental psychologist Paul E. McGhee, a pioneer in humour and laughter research, who describes four stages in the development of humour (based on Piaget's theory of cognitive development): (1) incongruous actions towards objects, which appears at about 18 months of age and is closely related to pretend play; (2) incongruous labelling of objects or events, which appears at about the ages of two to three years and is closely related to the development of language skills; (3) violation of important characteristics of objects, which appears at about three years of age related to the fact that children begin to develop conceptual thought at this time; and (4) linguistic ambiguity and jokes, which appear at about the ages of seven to eight with the onset of concrete operational thought (McGhee, 1989).

Research studying *children's experiences of fun* contributes with a broader and more phenomenological enquiry of what children find funny, under what circumstances and how the children behave afterwards. The studies typically explore children's experiences by either asking the children if or what they find funny or by observing and interpreting children's bodily expressions of amusement, such as smiles and laughter. An example is Eleni Loizou's qualitative studies of "humour in childhood" searching for factors that could describe nursery children's humorous behaviour and events. She points to free play, adults who play along, incongruence and violations of expectations as best to evoke young children's humorous behaviour and experiences of fun (e.g. Loizou, 2007).

Studies concerned with children as *active producers of fun* explore children's behaviour through a child's cultural lens in search of the fun and humour that grows out of and is exchanged as part of their peer culture. This strand of research implicitly or explicitly calls upon modern childhood sociology, which considers children as active participants and worthy of social study in their own right (James et al., 1998). An example is Coates and Coates (2020), who observed 220 children drawing in pairs and collected accompanying narratives from the children, leading to the identification of 60 humorous episodes characterised by excitement, laughter, changes in pitch and rapid verbal exchange. The drawings were often seen to actively trigger humour that took on a life of its own as children engaged in joking and wordplay linked to the recognition of common experiences.

The pedagogical potential of fun

The instrumental use of fun and humour has been extensively investigated in high schools, in relation to university teaching and in various dissemination activities (e.g. Banas et al., 2011; Davies, 2015; Ellingson, 2018; Hovelynck & Peeters, 2003; Morrison & Quest, 2012). When it comes to younger children, we found no studies that illuminate fun either as a didactic approach or as a fundamental way of being and interacting with children. Current research to some extent suggests answers to the question of what young children find funny, under what circumstances they experience fun in ECEC and how they behave afterwards. Several studies agree that fun and humour create a fertile ground for children's relationships, learning and development and have a health-promoting effect that helps to create well-being in children (Søbstad, 2013; Vejleskov, 2000, 2002). In addition, paying attention to children's laughter may help point out important situations in which specific children experience well-being (Søbstad, 2006, p. 42).

Nevertheless, we found no primary peer-reviewed empirical studies that aimed to explore the pedagogical use of fun in ECEC. The theme is addressed by Broström (2021), Flaten (2021) and Kibsgaard (2019), but in the form of secondary textbooks interpreting other research studies that suggest how to act pedagogically in relation to different practice settings involving young children. Thus, within the area of *fun research*, there seems to be a preponderance of older psychological studies and an alarming lack of pedagogical research that conceptualises fun as an element in ECEC pedagogy as an area of study in its own right.

If ECEC pedagogues are to qualify in using fun purposefully in their pedagogical practice, we need more pedagogical knowledge of how fun appears and might be used as a key pedagogical tool in ECEC. The present study aims to address this knowledge gap.

Methods

The study combined ethnographic observations, interactions and dialogues with children and focus group interviews with pedagogues. It was explorative and inspired by phenomenology and reflective lifeworld research (Dahlberg et al., 2008) in the sense that it sought to know how the implicit becomes explicit and heard and how the assumed becomes problematised and reflected upon. Reflective lifeworld research is an empirical research approach that allows the phenomenon to guide the research through an open and unbridled attitude. In using it, researchers should engage with the field in order to let things show themselves and, in the present context, strive to sense everyday life in the way it might be experienced by the children and pedagogues.

The field studies took place in three randomly selected ECEC institutions located in a larger city. Three ECEC students in their last year of education were trained in qualitative data gathering (participant observation, focus group interviews with professionals and child sensitive enquiry). They spent seven months doing fieldwork, one student in each institution. The ECEC settings represent average Danish municipal institutions for children 0-5 years with an obligation to follow the strengthened pedagogical curriculum. The fieldwork was organized to take place during the practice placement period - a mandatory element in the Danish pedagogue education. The students performed participant observation in an apprentice role (Wadel, 2015) while engaged in daily routines and activities, writing field notes from the playground, indoor, and on excursions. During the last month of their stud-

ies, they acted as non-participating observers in a spectator role (Wadel, 2014), following the children and pedagogues without interacting. During the entire period, the students and researcher met in reflection workshops—approximately once each month—to qualify the data gathering and reflect on preliminary findings.

When the data collection had formally ended, all field notes and interviews were transcribed into written text. In order to identify patterns and themes in the collected data, a content analysis was performed by the researcher to search for cores, consistencies and meanings in the entire qualitative material (Patton, 2002). Five categories of themes were identified that appeared central as a common pattern in the field notes while searching for elements that made the children laugh. The themes were named at a descriptive level: physical play, excitement, reference to lower body functions, breach of expectations and social contact and communication. The themes are unfolded in the findings section.

As a supplement to the participant observations, three focus group interviews were conducted in each ECEC setting with all pedagogues¹ gathered on staff-meetings to explore their use of and reflections on fun as a pedagogical theme. The pedagogues' approach to *fun* is interpreted with reference to the Danish philosopher Harald Høffding, who, in 1916, published a still highly relevant theory of *big humour* that can help us understand, expand upon and emphasise the importance fun, laughter and humour can have for children's well-being.

Findings

Empirical data from the ECEC settings demonstrate that *fun* appears in a wide variety of ways, combined and integrated in all kinds of activities during daily practice. Our general impression was, in accordance with the theory of Fincham (2016), that *fun* as a phenomenon shows itself to us in the forms of laughter, smiles, attentiveness, intensity, frivolity and even ecstasy. It appears momentarily in a sense of lightness, freedom and apparent purposelessness. It exists as a basic mood between people that could be turned up, nurtured and made room for—or closed down, limited and wrapped up in seriousness and purposefulness. *Fun* appears to be a means of appreciative communication. It shows up in relation to physical activity, as well as in play and games.

¹ Pedagogues in Denmark uphold a three-and-a-half year long education on BA-level.

What makes Children Laugh?

All the empirical data were coded to identify five categories of external circumstances, which we saw as inducing laughter in children, as described in the following paragraphs.

Physical play, involving activities such as running, jumping, sliding, swinging and tumbling, was seen in correlation with laughter. Other empirical studies support that, especially in early childhood, laughter and an experience of fun are often connected to bodily experiences of speed and a tickle in the stomach caused by the influence of gravity and a sense of adventure (Fincham, 2016). In the field, we saw an immense array of examples of children laughing during free play while moving, playing, challenging and developing their bodily competences, especially on the playground, where the surroundings were designed with vigorous physical activity play and experiments in mind:

Three 3-year-old girls lie down on the grass on top of the hill—then they start rolling sideward down the slope one after the other. They laughed loudly and repeated the exercise several times. They then start rolling with direction towards each other and by bumping into another child, they laugh even louder.

Equivalently, we also saw physical play directed by adult pedagogues leading to children's laughter. Nevertheless, the children appeared to have even more fun, or at least laugh with a louder volume, when a situation arose spontaneously, unexpectedly or improvised, as in the following example, when a girl broke from the script in an adult-led activity by climbing onto the back of a pedagogue:

The children warm up for running on the ball field. Most have smiles on their faces and participate vigorously. A girl climbs onto the back of MIKKEL [pedagogue] lying down doing push-ups. MIKKEL reacts by saying in a joking tone that the girl has to do push-ups herself. He then rolls her off his back so that they both fall to the ground laughing.

Excitement is another theme that appeared to induce laughter and an experience of fun in the children. This could either be excitement and anticipation in connection with courage to do the opposite of what adults expect—as when we see a group of peers excitingly awaiting the reaction of adult society to their challenge of rules:

The group of children run up a small hill—they stop and laugh while they stand looking down towards the pedagogues. They appear to await the situation, as if to see how long they can stay at the hill before a pedagogue decides to climb up and tell them to follow her back down to the road.

The example could be interpreted with reference to Bakhtin and be seen as child opposition to adult power as described by Tallant (2015), or it could be understood as a child manoeuvre to gain control and experiment with autonomy as a member of the peer society as described by Corsaro and Eder (1990). In any case, the expectation of a specific approving/disapproving reaction from the adults appears to give rise to the children being excited and laughing together.

Another form of excited anticipation is illustrated in the following example, in which a boy, John, is tickled by a pedagogue:

John laughs loudly as he is caught and tickled by a pedagogue. John is generally a boy who laughs a lot when excited, as if he is seeking out experiences that lead to a feeling of excitement in the stomach. He often plays wildly, jumps around and throws himself onto his stomach in front of the other children.

Reference to lower body functions. A third theme for young children's laughter recognised in the data was frivolous references to genitalia and excrement. White (2016) described how the lower body serves as a common source of humour among children. She argues that children's discussions of defecation, genitals and other body parts negate or dethrone cultural norms and hierarchies and therefore lead to laughter with peers. Accordingly, we saw children giggle and refer to lower body functions both when playing, celebrating and having fun with friends. We also heard them refer to lower body functions when they approached adults in a searching, playful way:

Magnus comes running towards me. He has a play shovel in his hand, which he fills with sand. He hands the shovel towards me and says, "Look, it's full of farts and poop!" He laughs loudly, and I smile at him.

Children find it funny to use immoral and impudent words, perhaps as a phase of life, when they struggle to gain control of their lower body functions (Kibsgaard, 2019):

The boy Isak farts loudly as he leans forward to grab another piece of fruit. The pedagogue BINA starts laughing. So does Isak, and the other children follow suit, as BINA waves her hand in front of her nose to illustrate that the fart smells.

Breach of expectations. Deviation, incongruity and broken expectations constituted another theme commonly described as a characteristic feature of humour and laughter (e.g. McGee, 1989; Sezgin & Hatipoglu, 2017). Fincham (2016, p. 38) mentions rule breaking often as being funny in itself. In our empirical data, we saw children laugh and become amused when things were very obviously turned upside down:

*A pedagogue arrives with a picture lottery game, and a group of children quickly gathers around the activity. They played the game for some time while naming the drawings on each card. One boy, Magnus, then deliberately starts mentioning things that are **not** in the picture. This leads to great excitement from the rest of the children. The loud screams attract more and more children who gather around the game, watching and laughing.*

Søbstad (2006) argues that children would describe incongruence as something nice, strange and foolish at the same time. He explains how children notice incongruence in the forms of grimaces, unusual clothing, movements or appearance compared to what they are accustomed. Such features subsequently make them feel surprise and experience fun, for example, by watching theatre shows where actors have big noses or if someone utters something strange or unexpected:

The group of children and pedagogues are seated in the theatre. The show is about to start, and there is a general mood of excitement among the children. The story is Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf. Several of the children laugh when they listen to the actors' silly and animated voices. When the wolf eats the grandmother, several of the children laugh out loud. The same happens when the wolf eats Little Red Riding Hood. The show ends with a bang—suddenly and without warning, loud music blasts out of a speaker. The children are surprised; many laugh loudly. Some children start a spontaneous communal dance, while others begin to cry.

Social contact and communication. In the field, we also saw how laughter not only appeared as reflexive responses to fun or humour. Laughter and smiles were also used by the children as important social signals. Very

often, we saw the children use laughter as a basic form of communication. It could be in order to establish contact with an adult, it could be as a signal or invitation to play or it could be in recognition of another child:

As I [the student] walk next to the stroller, the boy Hans often looks at me and sends me a big smile. I smile back, and Hans becomes slightly shy and turns his head the other way. Soon after, he seeks contact again with a big smile. I respond by smiling back. This time, Hans laughs out loud when he succeeds in making contact with me.

We observed that children use what Søbstad (2006) characterises as social laughter, closely related to a smile as a communication form. This was confirmed by Addyman et al. (2018), who studied the social facilitation of laughter and smiles in preschool children and found that children laughed eight times as much in reaction to the same humorous event while in the company of other children rather than on their own.

Fincham (2016) stated that fun as social communication is nourished by an equality condition between members. Thus, pedagogues who are willing to play along on a child's terms have an advantage in supporting experiences of fun:

BINA [pedagogue] talks like Donald Duck when the children arrive at the dinner table. It triggers an incredible amount of laughter from both children and adults. BINA repeats her duck sounds again and again while setting the table and handing out knives and forks to the children. The children laugh louder and louder each time. In particular, Jasper and Harry, who are the only three-year-olds, are laughing hysterically.

Our field notes contain many examples of how laughter and experiences of fun are contagious and how they lead to an evolution of an atmosphere of lightness, freedom and feeling good. A basic mood among group members is facilitated by an adult pedagogue who manages to nurture, accommodate and balance a special atmosphere instead of closing it down too soon or in a disrespectful way.

Pedagogical Approaches to Fun

In the ECEC settings, we observed pedagogues, who, in different ways and to different extents, manage to nurture and accommodate interludes of fun or special pedagogical situations characterised by an atmosphere of fun.

One example is ROBERT having lunch with a group of children:

The pedagogue ROBERT sits by the lunch table together with five 3–4-year-old children. One child spontaneously sings out, “Angar-ang-ang-ang” [rhythmic gibberish that makes no sense]. Other children follow suit, happy faces moving back and forth. The choir is growing: “Angar-ang-ang-ang”. ROBERT breaks the noise asking, “Do you know someone called Anker? [a Danish boy’s name]” “Yes-yes-yes,” the children’s choir answers him, bursting with laughter. ROBERT has spontaneously created a narrative based on the children’s input. Suddenly, many children are apparently named “Anker”. “Me too!” “And me!” The children cheerfully look around the table, catching each other’s eyes. “And Amanda?” ROBERT asks. “Is Amanda also called Anker, or do I hear you wrong?” “Yes-yes-yes,” the children cheer. “You hear us all wrong!” ROBERT laughs, “Ok, then I hear you wrong,” and shrugs while smiling.

In the example, ROBERT joins in on a mood of jollity arising in the children’s spontaneous choir of rhythmical sounds during lunch. In spite of the fact that they are seated around the lunch table and are expected to maintain table manners, Robert does not stop the gibberish by categorising it as a disturbance. Instead, he recognises a pattern in the sounds and seizes the opportunity for amusement. He plays along and lifts the children’s gibberish to a new level—by suggesting the Danish boy’s name “Anker” as the centre of the attention. The children find the suggestion funny—probably because it is characterised by incongruity and frivolity—and they play along, assigning leadership to ROBERT of the unusual and seemingly purposeless lunch activity.

Another example is MILO having a circle-time activity with a group of 15 children:

The pedagogue MILO reads a story. Most children sit quietly and listen. The boy Eric begins to make quiet farting noises with his mouth while laughing a little to himself. A girl on the other side of the circle joins the game. MILO interrupts the reading, asking the children not to disturb and then distributes some characters from the book to approximately 10 children, who are chosen on the basis of a raising of hand. The children seem very excited and eager. When their given character is mentioned in the story, the child in question must run a lap around the circle. As the game progresses, many children start to squeal, and there

is loud laughter in the room. The atmosphere and the volume continue to grow to the point of being almost euphoric. MILO stops the activity twice. First, to say that you can only run around once. A second time to say you shouldn't scream when you run. Finally, MILO gives up and asks all the children to draw birthday cards. The atmosphere becomes calmer and more concentrated, with only small bursts of frivolity.

In this field note, MILO initiates a learning activity with the oldest group of children (4–5 years of age). They are seated on a picture on the floor, designating where each is supposed to sit. The children know the book and what they are supposed to do. In the beginning, the activity was strictly adult-led, based on school logic. MILO stops the glimpses of fun that come from the children, probably recognising them as disturbances. She does not join the children's laughter but reacts by changing the script and engages the children more actively in the circle activity by asking them to run when their character is mentioned. The situation is still very adult-led, but with the increased physical activity of the children, the atmosphere of fun among them is contagiously growing in volume and excitement. MILO finally gives in on her venture after struggling to maintain the rules of the activity for a while, without any success. She closed down the exaggerated atmosphere by getting the children started with a drawing task.

A third example is MIRIAM who encouraged a child to initiate some fun:

The boy Noah eagerly shows the pedagogue MIRIAM a huge toy spider that looks very lifelike. MIRIAM suggests that he can put it in the kitchen to scare the kitchen lady, MONA. Noah and three other boys run off. When they return, they laugh and giggle with each other in excitement. The pedagogue UNNA asks what they are up to. "Nothing," they reply, "But don't go into the kitchen!" Then they giggle again. UNNA replies that then she'd better go out see what's happening in the kitchen. The boys follow suit, and a few girls become curious and join them. The children arrive back again. They have been helped by UNNA to hide the spider a little better. Now, they seem even more excited about how MONA will react.

Here, MIRIAM playfully suggests that a child start something that might bring joy and excitement to the child and the group. She not only allows the good-natured teasing to happen, but, together with UNNA, contributes to building the excitement. MIRIAM later tells us that she found the idea of the children scaring MONA with the spider funny herself and enjoyed sharing

and encouraging a feeling of excitement in Noah and the children. Good-natured teasing that is harmless is a well-known theme to build excitement.

MILO's situation at circle time was recognisable to most of the pedagogues with whom we spoke. They explain how they often start a pedagogical activity with a group of young children and recognise the change in atmosphere from quiet concentration to restlessness and laughter, as in MILO's example. A pedagogue informer explained that MILOs "giving in" on the activity as a common reaction in everyday practice, when the children are no longer able to concentrate on an activity. She interpreted the children's reaction as a signal of when to stop circle time in favour of another and more purposeful pedagogical activity.

ROBERT later told us that, on the day of the lunch episode, he found himself in an extraordinary good mood. Everything felt like it was going smoothly. He felt exuberant and explained how his good mood affected the way he found himself reacting to the children's laughter around the lunch table. In other corresponding situations, he explained, he might just as well have reacted with annoyance and immediately chosen to stop the children's singing (just as we saw MILO doing, when she was challenged by a merry and buzzy atmosphere in the peer group that grew among the children and captured their attention). However, this day, ROBERT explained, he felt amused and let the good vibe rise to a higher level that included everyone around the table in the gaiety. At the lunch table, one could say that the children and ROBERT experienced *fun* as a social phenomenon that was culturally and socially mediated (Fincham 2016). They appeared to experience well-being by laughing together. After a short while, Robert deftly manoeuvred the unruly act of rhythmic singing back to calmness by a smile and a shrug, and the meal activities continued as usual but in a light-hearted mood.

A Pedagogy of Fun

An aim of the study was to obtain better knowledge of how pedagogues could work consciously and professionally with fun as an element in their pedagogical practice—in order to fulfil the objects provided by the curriculum mentioning children's well-being. Our empirical data provided us with an array of examples of pedagogues working intuitively with *fun* in their pedagogical practice. Søbstad (2006) suggests that in order to promote fun in ECEC, pedagogues could (1) support children's play, (2) support early attempts to create humour in the child through funny situations, (3) read rhymes and chants, (4) adapt fun to the child's intellectual level, (5) be a role

model in the use of humour and fun, (6) respect the child's individual style of humour and the child's individual differences in relation to fun and (7) work on contagious laughter. The examples of ROBERT, MIRIAM and MILO support Søbstad's theory, and we saw the same pattern in the empirical data from our focus group interviews when we asked pedagogues to provide us with more examples. ROBERT and MIRIAM both succeeded in working with fun as an element in their encounters with the children—unlike MILO, who, to some extent, held on to her adult-planned activity and closed down the children's experiences of fun.

With reference to Søbstad's seven points, ROBERT supported the children's play (1) with rhythmic gibberish. Instead of closing down, he allowed and nurtured the chanting (3) initiated by the children (2) on their intellectual level (4). In addition, MIRIAM was a role model (5) in suggesting a good-natured tease that excited the children on their level (6). She supported the experiences of fun along the way (2) and allowed the fun and excitement to spread to other children (7).

MILO's practice did not include fun as a meaningful element, but was rather characterised by seriousness, didactics, learning goals and control. She perhaps intended to support children's play (1) when she introduced the run around the circle, but then was too disturbed by the children's laughter and excitement and afterwards reacted by ending the play/circle time activity. The laughter and excitement were interrupted, and MILO regained control. In contrast, the practice of ROBERT and MIRIAM that nourished and accommodated the child experiences of fun was characterised by improvisation, child sensitivity, timing, courage to let go of control and informality.

Because fun is a phenomenological experience (Fincham, 2016), it makes sense that working with fun must be based on intuitive and sensory elements as well. What fun actually feels like is not very straightforward; thus, the pedagogue has to sense it and be able to react to it almost before a conscious awareness of it. Fincham (2016) describes fun as a state of *being* that is characterised by devotion, a special and positive atmosphere and sensation of letting go. It is a bodily experience but, at the same time, a social phenomenon understood in relation to others. He also emphasises the "now-ness" of fun as important and thereby points to the fact that fun has to occur—it is difficult to create on purpose.

There have been attempts to theoretically capture and describe the concept of well-being to a greater extent than fun (e.g. Ben-Arieh et al., 2014;

Ben-Arieh & Frønes, 2011), but there are many parallels between the nature of the two concepts. This is especially true if well-being is defined as in Koch's (2018) description of how knowledge of children's well-being can be gained only by sensing and interpreting children's bodies by bringing all forms of cognition into play with a refined sensitivity towards the child's bodily signals in the forms of sensations, moods and emotions (Koch, 2012, 2018). Similar to children's experiences of fun, children's experiences of well-being are perceived by adults as embodied and phenomenological knowledge (Austin & Halpin, 1988; Koch, 2018).

Small Humour and Big Humour

In 1916, the Danish philosopher Harald Høffding published an almost forgotten but highly relevant theory of *big humour* that could provide us with a new perspective to understand what it implies to work with fun as a central element in pedagogical encounters (Blegvad, 1972; Høffding, 1916).

Høffding (1916) describes laughter metaphorically as resembling "*a breath that removes a fluff*" (p. 51). He distinguishes between "small humour" and "large humour" and explains small humour in comparison to childish, spontaneous laughter, which is like indulgence and joy for nothing. Small humour is born of overflowing vitality and a sense of life, which leads the laughing person to relate playfully and questioningly to everything. It is the indiscriminate expression of a healthy and vigorous mind without fluff or external reason. Small humour has the form of fun in the moment. The immediate, non-reflexive experience of fun is related to freedom and relations of equality creation (Høffding, 1916). Høffding's description of small humour compares quite well to Fincham's (2016) 100-year later interpretation of recent international theory and empirical studies—as to our empirical description of children's experiences of fun.

Where small humour is spontaneous and based on everyday individual experiences, *big humour* is of a different and very special nature. Høffding characterises "big humour" as a state of mind, a total condition and outlook on life. It is the opposite of self-glorification and is a mindset that presupposes more than the other forms of laughter; it depends on life experience and reflection (Høffding, 1916).

In his work, Høffding continues to philosophise on big humour as formed through a purgatory in which the contradictions of life and the contending forces of existence have exerted their influence on the innermost core of

a soul's life. Individuals able to practice big humour have, through obstacles in life, developed a high-mindedness which, as a natural thing, carries the burden of others, the sadness that is the fruit of rich but painful experiences, the yearning that is aimed at a big goal, the understanding that sees everything in a larger context, or the sympathy that feels the pulse of life in the smallest, as well as in the largest—there is then an opportunity for a smile or a laugh everywhere (Høffding, 1916).

In a modern, pedagogical context, the distinction between small versus big humour could help us to explicate and develop the idea of what it takes for a pedagogue to facilitate and nourish fun in a daily ECEC environment characterised by an atmosphere of fun, light, laughter, energy and well-being. Høffding emphasises a main issue in the laughter that is characterised in big humour—that the approach and relationship to life is fundamentally positive and that the person, or practitioner, who is laughing or smiling are themselves embodied in the act. Høffding (1916) writes, *“There is in the big humour a double movement. It is an expression of assertiveness that is based on self-understanding. A championship that shows itself in limitation. Because only he, who clearly knows, where he stands and what he is worth above and below can assert himself”* (p. 57).

In our empirical data, we have noted that the pedagogues, who stand out as particularly skilled, in order to orchestrate an atmosphere of fun in ECEC, seem to sensitively practice their knowledge of the children's world, interests and preoccupations. Those pedagogues enjoy themselves and seem to find pleasure when things “play” and a light atmosphere arises. For example, ROBERT at the lunch table was playing along and having fun on his own premises and on the children's terms at the same time. Two parallel amusements, the adult joy and the children's joy, seemed to coexist in an easy atmosphere. The pedagogues are in the lead, but in a cheerful and deft way. ROBERT almost imperceptibly manoeuvred within the norms and frameworks in a joking and playful way—not dissolving institutional norms but sensitively leading the children back on track after their chanting gibberish. If the children's experiences of fun have the character of “small humour”, then ROBERT masters the championship of practicing “big humour”. In order to do so, he needs to integrate his almost imbodied knowledge of the children, be able to find and experience fun from an adult point of view and be patient. Similarly, Weinstein (1996) describes four important principles that are important if you want to establish a *culture of fun* in the management of organisations: First, you have to think about the people you are leading; you then need to lead by example. Also, it is necessary to enjoy

what you are doing, and finally, you will need patience, as changes do not happen overnight.

As a supplement to the practice of humour with a gaze for children's worlds, a pedagogue, consequently, has to be capable of bringing his/her own amusement into life: to feel well and be in a good mood and improvise on inviting children in—alongside with mastering and orchestrating important institutional values and norms. The pedagogue practicing big humour needs to be competent, confident, unpretentious, humorous based on self-understanding and know where he/she stands.

Because laughter and atmosphere are contagious, our findings also show how it can be advantageous to share adult humour and jokes with other adult at work. The atmosphere of laughter and lightness is transferred to the children, although they do not always grasp the source of the joy. The contagious character of laughter and good mood is supported by Lind (2021), who emphasize how adult's and children's well-being are inseparable from each other. Thus, pedagogues' work life conditions and possibilities to create an atmosphere of lightness, humour and fun have direct consequences for the children. They are role models in the use of humour and possess power to transfer and work with contagious laughter (Søbstad, 2006) if their work life conditions make it possible.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The characteristics of the Danish/Nordic child care tradition is a socio-pedagogical approach that values a homely atmosphere, informality, a personal relationship between pedagogues and children, and the children's freedom to play and influence everyday life (Kragh-Müller, 2017). Common key values are *democracy* that deals with children's autonomy and possibilities of participation; *caring* linked to a special relationship that targets and supports the child's needs; and *disciplinary values* defined as the system of underlying rules, norms and existing orders that regulate the children (Broström et al., 2017). The ideals of Danish ECEC are indeed compatible with an ECEC culture characterised by fun, laughter and episodes of small humour that promote children's well-being, as we have seen in our field notes. In this paper, I have argued that pedagogues with the ability to practice big humour are preferred in order to establish an ECEC culture characterised by fun. They are pedagogues with a positive approach to life, a mindset, and an outlook on life that is acquired through life experience and thorough professional reflections. However, the individual level cannot stand alone.

For ECEC institutions to cultivate and practice big humour on an organisational level, ECEC institutions must allow for and empower a pedagogy that acknowledges improvisation and deviation from the norm—because the core of humour and fun is transgression, excitement, play and spontaneity.

On a societal level, the traditional Nordic child-centred and socio-pedagogical ambition has to be balanced with the regime of new public management. The discourses of manuals and standardisation of pedagogical methods also challenge the traditional Danish child care tradition (Villadsen & Hviid, 2017).

Another important obstacle is that current ECEC workforce challenges in Denmark are characterised by increased requirements and new tasks in pedagogical work, aggravated staff-child ratios in ECEC institutions and less time in general to provide care for the children (Pade & Glavind, 2021). Big humour is not compatible with feelings of stress resulting from imbalances between job demands and resources to address these demands. Staff shortages are a source of stress and limit the capacity of pedagogues to interact with and provide well-being for the children on an individual level (OECD, 2020). Lind (2021) problematises how a separation between pedagogues' work life and the children's lives means that the organisational structures surrounding work with importance for job satisfaction are not included in the understanding of children's well-being in ECEC. After heavy debates for years, a law on staff-child minimum standards was finally included in the Danish Act on Early Childhood Education and Care in 2021, but the increasing number of children in ECEC institutions still leads to massive recruitment challenges (Glavind & Pade, 2022). This development threatens many Danish pedagogues' job satisfaction, mental energy and joy at work. Workforce challenges need to be solved at a political level, as well as handled in each local ECEC setting, if we are to succeed in the task of creating well-being in future Danish kindergartens for all children *and* the pedagogical staff.

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Statement

The study was undertaken with the understanding and consent of each subject and conducted in full accordance with ethical principles.

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