

Creating community in the transition between kindergarten and school life

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Abstract: The transition between kindergarten and school life has long been an international focus. In Denmark, political attention is given to the idea of community as a key element to children’s wellbeing in general and during times of transition in particular. Inspired by sociological theories we set out to explore the ambivalence of community. We analyse how kindergarten teachers and children navigate dilemmas between sameness and difference in a Danish experimental project that aims to ease the transition between kindergarten and school by encompassing the need for a cohesive class community whilst accommodating the uniqueness and individual needs of the children.

Keywords: transition, community, early childhood education.

Introduction

The transition between early childhood education and school life has long been an international concern (Dockett and Perry 2013; OECD 2006; Petriwsky et. al. 2005). The Scandinavian model, in which early childhood education and care (ECEC) is based on a tradition of child-centred pedagogy provided under state legislation and funding, is often highlighted as a foundation for further school life, and ‘kindergarten class’ is seen as a smooth pathway to school entry (Dockett et al. 2006; Koch & Jørgensen 2023; Petriwskyj et al. 2005). In the Scandinavian countries the role of

comprehensive schooling and high attendance in ECEC is considered pivotal to the welfare state. Thus, in the after match of the Second World War both types of education have underscored the purpose of bringing up children to participate and take part in a democratic and inclusive community. A vision entailed in the developing welfare state (Koch & Jørgensen 2023; Ydesen & Buchardt, 2020).

In Denmark, the focus on children's transitions to school has shifted (and increased) since the 1990s (Odgaard 2023). Politically and within the field of education, it has been problematised that the child experiences too large a gap between the two kinds of institutions. Thus, continuity has been a guiding mantra that has led schools and kindergartens to work closer together (Hygum 2005). However, contradictory to the pedagogical ambition, recent research shows that rather than making school life more attuned to the child and inspired by a child-centred approach, the logic of school life has penetrated the organisational procedures of everyday life in kindergarten (Plum and Schmidt 2020; Stanek 2020).

In this political and societal landscape, a Danish municipality is testing a new mode of organising the transition to school. The approach has been developed from the bottom up and the idea stems from the leadership of a local school and a nearby kindergarten. Contrary to the dominant practice of starting school in the summer, the tested approach is more fluid in terms of allowing children to make the transition from kindergarten to school at different times of the year. Thus, the year is divided into three dates of enrolment: one in spring, one in late summer and one in autumn. Rather than standardising school readiness as a baseline to be met in summer, the ambition is to rework the practice of the school to make it encompass children when *they* are ready to make the transition¹. In that way, the school tries to adjust its practice to meet the needs of the child whilst paying extra attention to the ways in which these transitions are made, so that no matter when the child starts, they become part of the community of the class.

This perception of the class as a community encompasses historical ideas embedded in the welfare state. However, it also reflects a renewed interest in the idea of community circulating in the Danish political-educational context at present, in which the notion of community is rearticulated as an answer to new challenges. Described as a 'crisis of well-being' among children and as a need to include all children in regular (as opposed to special needs) schools and kindergartens, the concept of community

¹ The decision about when the child is to be enrolled is made by the parents but guided by the kindergarten teachers.

(re)appears on the political agenda as a mean to solve such needs and crisis (Schmidt 2024). Thus, as a concept, community can be seen as a floating signifier (Laclau 2007) in political-educational debates: never really specified, but attached to promises such as generating belonging, wellbeing and unification. This is not to say that there are no political-educational discussions happening, but the debates around inclusion, for example, seem to focus on lack of resources, lack of competence among teachers or questions about the role of diagnosing children (Frederiksen 2024; Nordahl et al. 2018; Weirsøe 2021). Community as a phenomenon is not discussed, but figures as a desirable given.

In terms of educational research, notions such as ‘pedagogy of community’ and ‘community didactic’ (Fisker 2024; Jensen and Brinkmann 2011; Rabøl-Hansen et al. 2022) have been suggested as counternarratives to different survey-based schemes informed by a more individualistic understanding of inclusion and well-being. In such understandings well-being and inclusion can be tested and measured through questions directed at the individual child. In educational research, the entrance through the concept of community marks another way of viewing the child. That is, seeing the child – and his or her reactions and ways of behaving – not as something that resides in internal dimensions to be measured, but which has to do with the interplay that is at stake in the educational context. E.g. contributions to the field of critical psychology have shed light on the importance of being part of child communities in everyday life more generally and in times of transition in particular (Marschall and Munck 2022; Stanek 2012).

In this paper, we take a sociological approach to analyse the dual educational ambition embedded in the (re)organisation of the school start, which involves creating a community whilst paying special attention to the needs of the individual child. Based on our fieldwork, we explore the following research questions: What types of organisational practices using a fluid school start are being established to fulfil the dual ambition of creating class communities and embracing children’s uniqueness? How do kindergarten teachers and children navigate the dilemmas of sameness and difference to create communities in the transition between kindergarten and school? Through sociological perspectives on community, we try to open the concept to the structural and conflictual aspects embedded within the phenomenon, and through such an entrance point to the difficulties and tensions that are at stake at a pedagogical level. Thus, rather than discussing what hinders the formation of a community, we point to the sociological ambiguity at play in a pedagogical setting.

We start by presenting the ‘fluid school start’ model as it takes form in a Danish rural setting and presenting our empirical material. We then conduct an analysis drawing on sociological perspectives on community. Revisiting Ferdinand Tönnies and his characterisation of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*, we outline characteristics embedded in the phenomenon of community from a classical sociological standpoint. We then look at the attraction and also the impossibilities that, according to Zygmunt Bauman (2007), characterise our longing for community in a floating modernity. Our analysis is structured into two parts. First, we consider the shaping of a common will as a central element of community. We show how some children adopt the role of what the kindergarten teachers term ‘caravan leaders’, who convey the morals, habits and understandings embedded in the common will to the other children. We also observe here how deviation is continually at play and how it is navigated by the teachers and children alike. Second, we turn our attention to the creation of what Tönnies terms a community of locality. We show how place is, on the one hand, created as a common space accommodating the transition to school, while, on the other hand, it is conquered and inhabited differently by the individual children.

The Fluid School Start

In Denmark, children are enrolled in compulsory education the year they turn six. It is possible to obtain permission from the municipal council to postpone a child’s school enrolment for a year when it is substantiated in the child’s development (LBK Nr 989 27/08/2024, § 34 stk. 2). At present, three types of school transition models are practiced in Danish municipalities. The first involves children starting school and an after-school club² in summer; the second, which is widely used across the municipalities, sees the children starting their after-school clubs in spring and school in summer. The children will then spend the entire day in the after-school club, which is typically located on the school grounds, until they start school in summer. The third model, in which children start school at variable times, is known as a ‘rolling school start’. Not many municipalities use this model and it is usually trialled on an experimental basis (Stanek

² Children in Denmark have formal education between 8 am – 2 pm, they will usually go to an after school-club until they reach the age of 10 years old. This enables both parents to work full hours while having their children cared for. Parents pay a fee for their children to attend.

and Vendelbo 2019). The fluid school start model presented here is one of these organisational experiments.

The leadership of a local school and kindergarten initiated the fluid school start experiment and it has been approved by the local authorities. The school and kindergarten are both placed in a small town in a rural area in Denmark³. The two institutions are located 200 metres apart next to a local training arena with which they cooperate on local initiatives. Around 400 students aged from 5 to 16 years attend the school daily. Children from 5 to 9 years of age can also attend an after-school club, as mentioned above. The kindergarten has 57 children in its care who are divided into different groups, one of which is called the 'big group' – a group that the eldest children join the year before they start school. As part of the fluid school start experiment, the kindergarten and the school joined forces to establish a position called the 'Co-creating Kindergarten Teacher'. This is a kindergarten teacher who is designated to work on ensuring a smooth transition to school by preparing the children and following their progress as they enter school life. On an organisational level, this position is supported by an arrangement for the children who start school in spring, late summer or autumn to start some kind of curricular activity as part of the big group from January. Each child is assigned a 'school friend' from the present kindergarten class and starts visiting the school on a weekly basis from this time until the first school-starters are enrolled in spring. At this point, these children have established their everyday lives in the existing kindergarten class and will be part of the following year's kindergarten class when it starts in late summer. Meanwhile, the children from the big group, who start in late summer or autumn, will spend most days at the kindergarten, but will also be part of school life for two days a week and on theme days. For the children starting in autumn this practice continues until they leave kindergarten and fully start school.

The fluid school start is made possible through a strong commitment from the teachers as well as the leaders of the school and kindergarten. As the headmaster of the school said at a meeting with the parents of the upcoming kindergarten class:

We want the children to experience fewer changes so that they can calmly transition into school life and not have to first be in an after-school club and meet the adults there, then [meet] new adults in the kindergarten

³ The school also enrolls children from other kindergartens in the municipality. However, as they are not part of this setting, these children will start school in summer.

class and then again in the first grade. Could we design a school that suits the child [instead of the structures determined by the local authorities]? And also, I forgot to say, it is a way of creating an option for the children other than postponed school enrolment, so that these children can still be with the children they play sport [or do other activities] with outside school (Fieldnotes).

Thus, the overall pedagogical ambition of the fluid school start is to follow the child, and what is termed their level of ‘maturity’, so they do not start school too early and have the time to develop before entering school. Within this logic, increasing the amount of time and preparation provided at kindergarten helps the child become ready. As such, it is the late autumn start, in particular, that is seen as an opportunity to include more children in the community of the class. The pedagogical concern embedded in this approach is that some children will start without the basic skills to attend and be part of a school community. These skills are not so much a matter of academic competence, but refer to their ability to “go to the toilet on their own [and] put on their outdoor clothes, so that there are not so many things that the children have to pay attention to.” Also, it is about getting a “feel of how it works [at school], how you get from A to B, how it works when we have lunch and breaks... Being familiar with the culture at this institution.” This idea of basic skills and familiarity with a school’s culture is central to the idea of community in this model. As the headmaster says:

We have had many thoughts around why we want to try out this [new organisational mode for school start]. Why is it important to the community of children to feel competent once they enter their new arena? And to feel that you can actually make a difference in your new community? That you do not leave kindergarten too soon, because you will carry that with you into school life (Fieldnotes).

The term community is widely used in our empirical material and takes on different meanings. Sometimes it refers to the surrounding local community (parents, local associations such as school boards, sports clubs etc.); sometimes it refers to smaller groups of children playing together or who have developed a friendship. Mostly, however, it refers to the school or the class as a particular kind of community that carries culturally embedded rules and routines to master before becoming a fully-fledged member of the community. As we will discuss in the following section, this idea of what might be seen as a shared consensus on how to perceive and live school life reflects classical theoretical thoughts on community.

The Empirical Material

The fluid school start is examined in this research project primarily through participant observation and informal conversations (Hastrup 2007). As researchers based at the university college of the region, in which the experimental project took place, we were contacted by the headmaster of the school. In a dialogue with the headmaster and staff, we made the design of the project. We participated in parent meetings and sat in on conversations between pedagogical staff and parents. We observed everyday life in the kindergarten and in school, especially around the times of transition. In addition, we conducted several interviews with the children who were the first to be enrolled in the fluid school start approach. These interviews took the form of drawing interviews, fairytale telling and walking interviews with children at the school (Kampmann et. al. 2017; Marschall and Grumløse 2022)⁴. The observation notes consist of detailed descriptions used to gain in-depth knowledge of what happens in practice, but with an understanding that, as researchers, we are outsiders who cannot uncover the full inside picture (Geertz 1973). Besides following formal ethical codes of conduct, situated ethics were an integrated part of our research, meaning that the ethics have been negotiated in situ with the participants (Kousholt and Juhl 2024). Thus, we have paid particular attention to the fact that the children should have the opportunity to decline the invitation to be interviewed and that such a refusal can be expressed in different ways and during different stages of an interview.

The Possible Impossibility of Community – An Analytical Entry

As a concept, community is often traced back to the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies who, in his characterisation of evolving modern times, differentiated between two analytical kinds of social formation, *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* (Tönnies 1955). To Tönnies, the natural condition of human life is to stay together (ibid, p. 59). It is this close bond of dependence that characterises the organic formation of *gemeinschaft*, or what is typically translated as *community*. Thus, community is, to Tönnies, an organic formation that cannot be reduced into parts such as individuals (ibid, p. 37ff). Those people who are part of a community inhabit it not by choice

⁴ In total, we made participant observations for 15 days over nine months and facilitated different kinds of interviews with 38 children.

or rational decision making, but because they exist in and through the common will of the community. Tönnies talks of a community of locality based on a common habitat in a physical sense (ibid, p. 48), but also about a community of mind based on the kind of shared understanding that resides in, for instance, a language or a religion – a basic consensus on how to perceive and live in the world. Thus, the people of a community are linked together through the place they share, the activity they share but also the emotions, morals and habits that tie them together. To Tönnies this organic social formation – understood as an ideal type – is contrasted by the ideal type of *gesellschaft*, which is typically translated as *association* or *society*. *Gesellschaft* constitutes a social formation of free agents acting on the basis of calculations of what might be gained or achieved through an assembly (ibid, p. 52ff, 74ff).

Picking up this idea of *gemeinschaft* as a certain quality in the way of being united, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman states that:

“And so it is easy to see why the word ‘community’ feels good. Who would not wish to live among friendly and well-wishing people whom one could trust and on whose words and deeds one could rely?” (Bauman 2001, p. 2)

Analysing the shifts in social formation through modern times, Bauman argues that community is in one sense a longing that characterises the insecurity of people in the constant flexibility and risk management of a fluid modernity. On the other hand, it is a constant thread in the modern construction of individuality, because the kind of sameness and dependence that it requires implies a showdown with the ideological meritocracy on which the global elite build their privileges (Bauman 2007, p. 23, 62ff, 77). Thus, Bauman shows how the longing for community can be seen as quest for security in a world where traditional bonds of belonging are dissolved, but also how the realisation of community seems to require a sameness and dependence that contradicts the way in which we celebrate diversity today and the idea of being an individual with reference to one’s inner self. Sameness, Bauman argues, was in a Tönnien time something you were born into, as your lifeworld was constituted by the people inhabiting the same area, the same rhythm of time, same way of working, believing and celebrating, whereas today this way of life has eroded and sameness is something you strive to obtain in the ambition to create community (ibid, p. 19ff, 39)

One could argue that such sociological characteristics of societal development seem far from the social life that unfolds in schools. However,

what they illuminate is the longing for community that is at play in recent political-educational trends, and the impossibilities that may not be obvious when community is put forward as a solution. Or put differently, there is an ambivalence that, from a sociological standpoint, could be embedded in the very phenomenon of community.

We do not mean to question the important social-psychological insights on the potential for children to participate in and feel part of a community in school life (Højholdt and Kousholt 2018; Stanek 2012). It is exactly this need or longing for a social bond to stabilise one's social existence that is the fundamental assumption behind Tönnies' idea of community. What captures our interest is how that quest for community is played out in a modern school, celebrating diversity and an individual's uniqueness and needs. What kinds of dilemmas do teachers and children navigate in this possible impossibility?

Entering their analysis through the theory of practice, Schwartz and Mardahl-Hansen (2021) develop the concepts of 'communifying' and 'diversifying' actions to point to the simultaneous movement that unfolds when teachers work to create a community in a school class (*ibid.*, p. 8). They argue that teachers strive to create a social environment of togetherness, but also that these communifying actions are set in an institutional setting of academic schooling in which differentiation and sorting children into future pathways is always at play. The ideal of a strong class community based on shared norms and values is central to the professional work of organising the school as a social practice. However, this practice also involves that some children in their behaviour come to make visible, and thereby take on the position, as that which deviates from the norm (*ibid.*, p. 11). Thus, it is central to Schwartz and Mardahl-Hansen that creating community in the school is full of dilemmas for the professionals. From a Bauman-like perspective, one could say that they show how the meritocratic ideology of being sorted into future pathways based on your talents contradicts with the longing for community.

These insights are important to our analyses of an organisational experiment that aims to reconcile the longing for community and the concern for the individual. The core ambition of the fluid school start is to satisfy both in the transition from the social order of kindergarten into that of school.

Being a Caravan Leader of the Community

As shown in our presentation of the fluid school start, the ambition to introduce and make children ready to enter the culture of the school is a central element of the big group's weekly visits to the school and the preparation done in kindergarten. Thus, the co-creating kindergarten teacher in the big group will rehearse many of the elements that the children will experience at school, such as raising your hand when you want to say something, waiting your turn, paying attention to the assignment given by the teacher, and rules on how to treat your classmates. For instance:

The children in the big group eat their packed lunch together. They talk about how they will be dressed for Halloween. The co-creating kindergarten teacher hushes as the voices become louder, and one of the children helps her out by announcing to the group 'you have to dine, before you shine'⁵. As a bit of turmoil later appears, the co-creating kindergarten teacher says her praise to some of the children, 'I can see that several of you are sitting with the quiet sign [one hand in the air, one hand in front of the mouth] –well done, you!' (Fieldnotes)

According to the ideas and visions of the fluid school start, this rehearsal of school signs (the quiet sign) and school mantras ("you have to dine before you can shine") can be seen as a way of making children ready to engage and feel competent in the community of the school, thereby enabling them to inhabit and become a full member of the community. In a Tönnien sense one might say that it is a way of embedding the children into the common will of school-community, establishing morals and shared understandings. Also, the emotional aspect Tönnies points to can be traced in the practice of the fluid school start: It seems vital that it is not only the teachers who build relationships with the kindergarten children when they visit the school, but that the common will is established in and through 'school friends' who are assigned to take care of – and introduce – the newcomers.

This idea of establishing what can be seen as a common will in and through the emotional bond between the children seems central to the differentiation that occurs when the children are to be sorted into spring, summer and autumn starts. The kindergarten teachers take individual meetings with the parents in which each child's readiness and individuality is discussed, and it is continually emphasised that spring starters have the

⁵ The correct translation would be: "You have to eat before you can show off", which would rhyme in Danish. We have made the translation to keep the rhyming effect.

ability to be ‘caravan leaders’⁶. As the kindergarten teacher says about a child:

She is really curious and wants to attend. And I am thinking then she can start in spring and get those months in before the summer holidays; and then she can be the one who is part of the continuity when the rest of them come in late summer. She can be the one to say: ‘This is where we keep the crayons, and these are the rules we have in this class.’ Because it is so close to her nature that she is such a good caravan leader (Fieldnotes).

As such, the child’s readiness to attend school is not only about maturity in terms of a curiosity in relation to numbers and letters, but more importantly a willingness to subdue oneself to the common will embedded in school life and an ability to pass it on. As a kindergarten teacher says about a child:

Everything has been just excellent. She has been able to follow the routines and all the demands and expectations that we have had in relation to her and the rest of the group. She has just been able to relax and be in that. And she has had the capacity to help those who might need it (Fieldnotes).

As we visit the school and conduct walking interviews with small groups of children, this idea of caravan leaders seems to materialise in front of us:

We are outside in the playground and a girl, Esther, says that the bell is out of order, but otherwise it would ring, and they would have to do assignments. She says, ‘then it is assignments, assignments, assignments.’ I ask, ‘what are assignments?’ She looks at me as if I am a bit slow on the uptake. Then she replies, ‘that is the time in which we do assignments.’ Cecilia, another girl who has been listening, says in a tone much like when you explain something to a younger child, ‘that is where we go to our drawer, then Charlotte [the teacher] stands in front of the blackboard, and then we do what she tells us to do. Sometimes we make patterns or write something or tell the others what we have been doing this weekend.’ I repeat what she has just told me to be certain that I have got it right, and she gets up from the swing where she has been sitting and says, ‘I will show you. She illustrates by moving her body to a pretend drawer, pulling it out, walks back again, pretends that she sits in front of

⁶ In Danish ‘caravan’ does not refer to a vehicle, but only takes on the meaning of a procession – a group of people travelling together across a desert. Thus, a caravan leader would be the child leading the procession of children into the transition of school enrolment.

a table and opens a book, continually explicating what she does (Fieldnotes).

Both Cecilie and Esther later show us how to be a school friend for the newcomers. With physical gestures they illustrate how you must look into the eyes of the newcomer and greet them with a happy face “so that they do not get sad,” take their hand and teach them “the right things,” not “bad things.” What is interesting is that this explication of social rules reflects a dominant idea that is central to the research of classroom management, namely that problems in the classroom can be effectively prevented if the teacher establishes and enforces clearly defined rules for social behaviour (Nordenbo 2011). Only in this case, it is not the teacher who defines or enforces; it is the caravan leaders Cecilia and Esther who take on that responsibility. As such, the creation of a school community, in which certain morals and understandings define the basis of a common will, does not depend solely on the teacher, but becomes an educational task assigned to the children as caravan leaders of the community.

However, this creation of a common ground simultaneously raises the dilemma that some children are unofficially appointed as ‘leaders’, thereby creating a differentiation between those starting in spring and those starting in summer and autumn. The role of sorting children into different categories is not an academic matter here, as indicated in Schwartz and Mardahl-Hansen (2021), but a matter of ‘maturity’ and ‘individuality’ in terms of being able to ‘go in front’, as expressed by the kindergarten teachers. As such, the meticulous communifying preparation required to create a common will also potentially makes some children deviant to that will.

This potential deviation can be found among the children at this school when, for instance, they are asked if they all do what the teacher tells them, and a girl replies:

‘Yes, all of us, except Viggo. Sometimes he gets angry.’ Viggo [an autumn starter], standing nearby, looks up and the expression on his face changes as he is about to leave our little group. I say, ‘really, is there something that you can get angry about? That happens to me a lot, Viggo.’ The girl continues, ‘yes, and sometimes he hits, and he also teases. That is what Viggo does!’ (Fieldnotes)

Thus, the physical withdrawal from the group is manifested as Viggo seems to want to leave once his behaviour is highlighted as deviant from the norms that the rest of the class obey.

Likewise, the potentiality of being different from the rest is present among the parents of the autumn starters who talk about feeling sad or having a stomachache, as they see the other parents posting on Facebook on the day their children start school. But parents of spring starters also worry about their children becoming too good at being caravan leaders in the sense that they will take on a policing role, thereby being a nuisance to the other children.

The ambition to wait for the children and let them make their transitions to school at a different pace from each other is a diversifying act that is meant to embrace each child and their individuality. At the same time, it is a communifying ambition, as the children take on the shared responsibility of teaching each other the norms of the school's culture. In a Bauman optic, the creation of norms and social rules can be seen as an attempt to create a sameness and dependence that manages the instability of a modern life in which children attend school from different families with different norms and social regulations – classroom management in a floating modernity. But the fluid school start is also an endeavour that celebrates diversity and the individual as one residing in oneself (individuality and maturity). As such sameness might be pursued in terms of the rules everyone has to obey; but rules are not just a sameness, they are bended in different ways. For instance, the boy Oscar talks about starting school. He says:

'I was surprised. I thought I would just make friends. I did not think I would be teased. But someone is teasing me at the moment. And that is Hugo!' Charlotte [kindergarten teacher] asks, 'what does he tease you about?' Oscar replies, 'he hits me all the time.' Charlotte asks, 'do you know why he does that?' Oscar: 'no.' Charlotte says, 'do you think he might want to be part of what you play?' Oscar says, 'no, he is part of almost all the playgroups.' Charlotte, 'so he is a good person to play with?' Oscar replies, 'to some he is, to others he is not.' (Fieldnotes)

Oscar points to the fact that Hugo is not following the norms about how to treat one another at school. His behaviour is, to Oscar, an example of what is difficult about the transition into the school community. He points to an obvious deviation from the common will – the sameness established in terms of shared norms and rules, which to Oscar constitutes the ground rules of a social bond between them. Thus, Oscar sees Hugo as one who cannot be depended upon. But Charlotte does not refer to the common rules, or the sameness that they share. Rather, she seems to navigate the communifying movement by making Oscar see a different side of Hugo – a boy who wants to play and upon whom Oscar could potentially depend on

to be a good playmate. What is interesting is that this navigation is mirrored among some of the children as well. As one of the children shouts to one of us to come and see her, a girl, Cecilia, says, “Sometimes she does that when she gets frustrated. You just have to wait a little.” As such, Cecilia takes on a role that entails ideas of caravan leadership by not only explicating shared rules and ways of behaving, but also how such rules might be bent to accommodate differences in children’s behaviour. Like the teacher, she navigates the dilemma between sameness and difference.

Inhabiting a Place of Sameness

The transition between kindergarten and school is not only a transition into certain morals, habits, and ways of understanding. It is accompanied by a physical move into another kind of territory, even though it is in the same small town only 200 metres away from the kindergarten. In a Tönnies sense, one could say that it is a transition into a new community of locality.

Being part of the local community is – as described earlier – central to the kindergarten as well as the school, which constitutes the major public institution in the small town. Thus, several children tell us about the school as a place of familiarity prior to its introduction in kindergarten. For instance, one girl tells us how she used to attend gymnastics at the local sports arena opposite the school and afterwards she would go with her mum to play on the school playground. Other children explain how they have siblings, cousins or an aunt who go to the school, making it a somewhat familiar place prior to their own enrolment.

As a physical place, the school is therefore known to some of the children. Other children who live further away, or do not have relatives in the local area, do not have that prior knowledge. They enter the physical place for the first time when they start in the big group and come to visit the school. The physical move and experience with the school as a locality is as such an important part of the transitional work, also in terms of creating community. When the spring starters begin their school life, whilst the summer and autumn starters are still going to kindergarten and attending school two times a week, the leader of the kindergarten stresses the importance of talking about their days at school “not as visits, but as ‘going to school.’” That they are not just someone who drops by, but that they are already “part of the community of the class.”

Likewise, the kindergarten teachers make the point that even though the autumn starters are not fully enrolled until autumn, they should have a seat

in the class and a wardrobe to match the children starting in summer. The late starters are in that way continually linked to the physical space of the school and the social rituals and routines that go along with it.

However, these communifying actions are not univocal, but entail diversifying movements aimed at addressing the individual needs of the child. The following observation is from one of the days in October when the kindergarten teacher and group of autumn starters attended school:

Most of the children are outside, except one boy (an autumn starter) who is allowed to stay inside in the classroom during breaks. The kindergarten teacher shows me a corner of the classroom. She says that she will design this part, so that the boy can sit here and play with Lego. She will also find a beanbag for him that only he can sit in. He will then be encouraged to take a break every twenty minutes on his beanbag. She asks him whether he has tried out earmuffs in the kindergarten he attended prior to the one he goes to now. He has, and she asks him whether that helped him. He confirms this, but says that they were also annoying, because he could still hear noise. The kindergarten teacher reflects on whether the school might have some that they could try out (Fieldnotes).

Whereas the rest of the classroom is furnished with wooden tables and upright chairs placed in a formation like a horseshoe, the furnishment is done differently, with different rules attached to it when it concerns this individual boy. The kindergarten teacher navigates the sameness of the place that the boy is to inhabit as part of class community by redesigning a corner of that common space to meet his (different) individual needs.

As we do the walking interviews with the children, they show us what to them are the most important places to know as a newcomer. Several of the children want us to see the library. However, as other scholars have shown, a physical place is not just a dot on a map, it is socially-materially made into a space through the children's engagement (Bollig and Millei 2018; Ladru and Gustafson 2018). Thus, the physical place 'library' is not made into the same space by the children: Whereas two of the boys quickly retreat to a corner where big cushions are piled, another boy takes the researcher to the different bookcases explaining to her how you can only borrow three books, and what you need to do to "beep them" out of the system. Meanwhile, the other two boys have built a fortress out of the cushions. Although the library as a place inside the school is depicted as being the same and is highlighted as a common place of interest, it is not the same space to the children. It is interesting to them for different reasons and inhabited in different ways. Thus, both the teachers and children navigate

sameness and difference as part of the physical place; a locality historically designed to create sameness and thereby unification (Larsen et al. 2013).

But it is not only that the places are inhabited differently, some of the places within school are also known to some of the children, but are not obvious to others:

A boy, Carl, wants to show me the room in which the student council holds their meetings. We walk upstairs to where the secretary sits, and the teachers have their lunchroom. Nikolaj (another boy) says, 'I have not even been here before.' I am shown into the meeting room and we all (four boys and me) sit around a table. Nikolaj quickly gets up and randomly pushes buttons on the big screen at the end of the room. Carl talks about the things you can decide here. Apparently both him and one of the other boys are part of the council, and they gladly tell me about how they decided that the entire school should go to the capital to the fun fair, Tivoli. They all went to see the parliament first, singing their school song and spent hours at Tivoli afterwards. Carl says that he has been to Tivoli several times with his family. Nikolaj, who has stopped fiddling with the buttons on the screen and is now walking around picking up different items, says 'I was not allowed to go. My mum was afraid I would get lost.' (Fieldnotes)

The rooms in which the student council meet and the rooms where the teachers and staff gather are places that are well known to Carl. But not to Nikolaj. He has never been here before, even though he has attended the school for several months. We do not know whether Carl started in summer and Nikolaj in autumn, in which case it would give Carl more months to get acquainted. However, we interpret this difference in familiarity with the upper floor as a difference that could have more to do with the trajectories that each of them brings into school. Tivoli as a cultural institution and Copenhagen as a city are known to Carl and his family. Just as he seems at ease with his role in the student council. This is opposed to Nikolaj who fiddles with the interior, and who in other parts of our fieldwork said that his mother never brought his schoolbag back home. And that he did not bother borrowing any books from the library as they were not read back at his place⁷. This difference in trajectories makes Carl part of the communifying act of singing, seeing the parliament and going to Tivoli, whereas Nikolaj is outside of it. The diversifying movement is not only about the trip, but about who has access to different localities (and decision making) within school life.

⁷ For an elaboration of this point on different trajectories, please see Brown, Grumløse, Schmidt and Plum (submitted).

As such, this points to the fact that children may have different ‘individualities’ and ‘mature’ at different rates, but what they bring into school is not just their personalities and developmental stages, but also the diverse conditions of their lives outside the institutional structure of the kindergarten and school (Gulløv and Gulløv 2020). It is exactly this difference in conditions – the resolution of a shared purpose linked to the way of living – that Bauman points to as a constitutive force in the celebration of individuality and longing for community that characterises modern times.

Concluding Remarks

In Denmark, political-educational attention is given to the idea of the community as a key element of the children’s inclusion and wellbeing in general and at times of transition in particular. In this paper we set out to analyse the dual ambition of creating a community whilst practicing an organisational model of transition that seeks to embrace differences in individuals. A fluidity around school start which brings a tension between sameness and difference to the forefront. Based on sociological insights into the possible impossibility of community, we have shown how children and teachers navigate the dilemmas embedded in the dual ambition of the fluid school start, and how communifying and diversifying movements often are present simultaneously. Whereas it is “easy to see, why the word ‘community’ feels good” (to quote Bauman 2001, p. 2) in political-educational rhetoric, this paper highlights the intensified effort that is put into constructing community by the kindergarten teachers and children. Community is, in that sense, not just good. It is hard work that entails ambivalence and complexity.

This is not to say that it is meaningless or wasted work. The kindergarten teachers and leaders of the school were concerned that the children who had enrolled in autumn and had different individual needs could contradict the established routines. However, the leaders and teachers did not only experience a smooth transition into the community of the class, but they also noticed that the children began to form new relations that stabilised their social existence during their time in the kindergarten, and that they were able to carry this into their new lives at school.

Thus, our ambition in this paper has not been to question the role of community as an important social-psychological cornerstone in the pedagogical work of transition. But by focusing on the analytical potential

of sociological theories of community, we have set out to unravel the hard work, tensions and difficulties that are often overlooked in the political-pedagogical celebration of community as a solution to problems of exclusion and wellbeing.

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