

## “It is not that I didn’t already know these places, but I never thought of them like this.” Methodological approaches to community research in early childhood education in Denmark

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### Abstract

The aim of this article is to discuss how participatory methods might contribute to research concerning the development of inclusive, socially just and community-oriented pedagogical practices within the field of early childhood education, as well as contributing to shared knowledge production about relations between kindergartens<sup>1</sup> and local communities.

The article starts from a critique of dominant political and institutional approaches in Denmark to patterns of cooperation between kindergartens, parents, and local communities, which often in practice lead to top-down and compensatory approaches to cooperation, in which parents are expected to adapt to the agendas of the institutions. We argue that there is a need to develop alternatives to these approaches. This article explores how kindergartens might respond to the needs and views of parents and local communities, rather than the other

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1 We use the term kindergarten for early childhood institutions for children aged 0–6 years old.

way around. We explore this by asking what (local) communities for children and parents are and might be, and how kindergartens as significant shapers of children's lives and experiences might create links between children's lives inside and outside of the kindergarten.

We discuss how communities, pedagogues and children might cooperate in pedagogical research processes and how such research processes affect (understandings of) children's lives, communities, and kindergartens. Furthermore, we look at how these cooperations and insights might contribute to the development of more inclusive, community-oriented pedagogical practices. Our findings show that shared explorations of the many relations between kindergartens and communities have the potential to build more respectful and reciprocal dialogues and innovative pedagogical practices. Yet at the same time they show that this is an unfinished, imperfect endeavor that requires continuous attention to the complex and changing nature of communities, and to the closures and exclusions entailed by any community practice. Also, the findings point to an understanding of communities as performative phenomena that develop and grow through the very process of involvement and shared engagement. We argue that participatory, community-oriented pedagogical research methods should reflect these dynamics.

The article describes and discusses research methods, showing how participatory research methods can deepen our understanding of the complex roles of early childhood education for children and communities, while also inspiring inclusive and community-oriented pedagogical practices.

#### **Keywords**

Action research, pedagogy, early childhood education, community, participatory research, democracy, Denmark

## **Introduction**

During recent decades in Denmark, increasing political attention has been paid to early childhood education as a field of learning and prevention (Heckman, 2006), with the potential to counter inequality and create social mobility. However, studies show that these aims are often interpreted in ways that contribute to inequality, because they result in universalistic, individualistic, and compensatory approaches that render invisible or stigmatize the knowledge, identities, and everyday lives of children and families (Percy-Smith et al., 2019; Prins, 2019; Urban & Swadener, 2016).

We share this critique and argue for the importance of involving children, parents, and communities in the continuous development of early childhood education, emphasizing how necessary it is to develop approaches to inclusion and equality that are more democratic and place-sensitive and that respond to culturally diverse lives. Inspired by such writers as Freire (2005), May (1999), and Yúdice (2005), we term this endeavor 'community pedagogy'. The article builds on our previous work with cultural diversity, equality, and democracy in education (Prins, 2019; Thingstrup, 2012, 2016); we work with an open concept of community, in which we explore what community might mean in relation to kindergartens. This concept builds on findings from a combined-methods, participatory research project, "Community Pedagogy in Kindergartens", which was carried out in two different parts of Denmark. The research

group cooperated with kindergartens and community members to explore and develop what community pedagogy might mean theoretically, methodologically, and practically in the specific local settings.

The article is mainly methodological. We describe the research processes in order to discuss how place-sensitive, community-oriented research methods must be continuously adjusted, and to discuss what we have learned about potentials in methodology and the challenges of community-oriented research. The methodological discussions cannot, however, be separated from discussions about the focus of the research processes, namely community pedagogy in kindergartens. The article is, therefore, both methodological and pedagogical: it discusses what community pedagogy in kindergartens might mean in practice and how community-oriented research processes might contribute to these pedagogies. Also, we discuss what our successes and difficulties with community-oriented research might teach us about relations between early childhood education and communities.

After a brief presentation of the Danish context and the issues addressed by the project, the article discusses our theoretical and methodological inspirations, and the methodological design that we have developed. The analyses are structured around three types of methodological research activities: community workshops, pedagogues'<sup>2</sup> workshops, and children's workshops. The analyses show how these research activities each contribute with new perspectives on the relations between kindergartens and communities. We discuss how these perspectives might inspire the development of more inclusive and place-sensitive research methodologies, pedagogical practices, and understandings of communities.

### **Brief presentation of the Danish context and the research project**

Denmark has a long history of state supported early childhood education dating back to 1919 (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2017). During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as an aspect of the development of the welfare state, kindergartens developed from an initial focus on the protection of children at risk to accommodating all children (Grumløse, 2019; Gulløv, 2017). During this process, the field of early childhood education expanded both quantitatively (i.e., more children attending kindergartens for longer periods of time) and qualitatively (i.e., an increased focus on the content, as well as the expectations, that kindergartens contribute to children's development in specific ways) (Kampmann, 2004).

Historically, Danish kindergartens have had a strong tradition for experiential and child-centered pedagogy, focusing on creativity, free play, and homeliness,

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2 We deliberately use the term 'pedagogue' to translate the Danish term, *pædagog*, rather than the English term, teacher, in order to retain the distinction between teacher and *pædagog* in Germanic and Nordic countries. By using the term pedagogue, we wish to draw attention to the rich cultural and ideological history of the trained professionals who work in the ECEC (see Petrie et al., 2009 and Cameron & Moss, 2011 for discussions of the profession, confusion of meaning, and the cultural hegemony that is entailed in the translation into English)

working with a broad concept of learning. Kindergartens have generally been considered important spaces for children's democratic socialization because children are expected to gain practical experience of democracy as a way of life in kindergartens (see Ahrenkiel et al., 2012; Gilliam & Gulløv, 2017; Prins, 2019).

In recent years, a competing understanding of the role of early childhood education has entered the discussion. Inspired by neoliberal ideas, as mediated through OECD-policies, there has been an increasing focus on parents as consumers and welfare institutions as service providers, the aim of which must be satisfied customers (Ahrenkiel et al., 2012; Hjort, 2008; Kristensen et al., 2015). These sets of ideas coexist, resulting in highly ambiguous discourses and practices regarding children's learning and relations between parents and kindergartens.

Despite long-standing ambitions that early childhood education should counter societal inequality, studies show that kindergartens offer differentiated opportunities for participation for children depending on class, ethnicity, and gender: the cultural, linguistic and everyday life experiences of some children are seen as resources, resulting in pedagogies in which children are regarded as competent and given opportunities to have an influence, whereas other children are seen as lacking in relevant experience, resulting in pedagogies that are compensatory and hierarchical (Palludan, 2007; Prins, 2019; Åkerblom & Harju, 2019).

To understand these tendencies and to explore the possibilities for political and pedagogical alternatives, our research project built on theoretical inspiration from critical multiculturalism (May & Sleeter, 2010; Nieto, 2010), critical pedagogy (Freire, 2005; Giroux, 1997), post-colonial theory (Phillips et al., 2020), and critical race theory (Ladson-Billings, 2009). These traditions offer a critique of the disconnections between education and communities, arguing that the insensitivity of educational systems to local communities and forms of knowledge leads to a reproduction of colonial, national, or racial power structures. Furthermore, these traditions point to the empowering potential of resource-oriented pedagogies, and the need to build on the collective experiences and identities of children and families. While these traditions are well-established in settler-colonial contexts, especially Anglo-Saxon and Latin American countries, they are relatively new to a Danish context, where national identity builds on strong ideologies of homogeneity, and where universalistic welfare provisions and child-oriented, experiential pedagogical traditions have tended to downplay the importance of other collective (ethnic, cultural, racial) identities (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2017; Gullestad, 2002). The research project, therefore, aimed to explore how these international traditions might contribute to a Danish pedagogical context, and what methodological approaches might support this endeavor.

In continuation of this, the ambition of the research project was to explore and develop resource-oriented pedagogical practices in kindergartens through a focus on and involvement of communities. In practice, we approached the question of relations between kindergarten and communities as a *pedagogical* question, meaning that

pedagogues were the main participants and facilitators of contacts to other participants, and that the investigation started from the kindergartens.

A note on the language context: The Danish language does not have one word that translates into ‘community’, but several words that each capture different dimensions of the concept, namely ‘local community’ (*lokalsamfund*), ‘neighborhood’ (*nærmiljø*), and ‘group belongingness or group identity’ (*fællesskab*). In much of our dialogue with participants in the field, we used the English term in order to retain an empirical and theoretical openness towards the different and interrelated dimensions of place and belonging, and to remind ourselves not to limit our focus on communities to the local, physical place, but to retain an openness towards many types of communities in children’s lives, e.g., interpersonal relations between children and transnational communities and identities (Millei, 2018). At the same time, the diversity of Danish words for community reminded us to continuously think about the non-identity of the different dimensions of community (especially the tension between the physical space and identity dimensions) and how their complex interrelations play out in different contexts.

### Methodological inspirations

Methodologically, our project combined qualitative traditions that approach questions of participatory knowledge production, subjective meaning-making, place, and everyday life in different ways. More specifically, we combined action research and ethnographic approaches.

Our main action research inspirations were critical utopian action research (CUAR) (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2016; Thingstrup, 2016; Tofteng & Bladt, 2020) and systemic action research (SAR) (Burns, 2014; Burns & Worsley, 2015). Like most action research traditions, both traditions share ideals of knowledge production through participatory processes, critical epistemologies, and the ambition to contribute to democratization (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003), but differ on several points relating to practical approaches and theoretical understandings.

CUAR was developed in Denmark in the 1980s (Nielsen et al., 1999) and builds on critical theory. The central question of CUAR is, “How do we want to live?”, meaning that processes of change and exploration never focus solely on practical solutions, but always consider solutions in an everyday life perspective and as approximations to the good life as a shared phenomenon. This is sometimes termed *utopian drafts* (e.g., Lau & Sattrup, 2018; Nielsen & Nielsen, 2005); underscoring the unfinished, imperfect, and processual nature of change. The utopian cannot be attained in any absolute sense, but the shared explorations of the utopian dimension provide direction, as well as critical perspectives for continuous questioning and experimentation. A classic method is Future Creating Workshops (Husted & Tofteng, 2007; Jungk & Müllert, 1984) aiming to create a space organized around critical and utopian perspectives on everyday lives, in order to transcend the specific, contingent situations that form existing problem

understandings towards developing complexity-sensitive understandings of everyday lives as collective and empowering social action.

SAR explores and addresses problems as part of complex social systems (Flood, 2010). Working from a critique of understandings of problems as produced by root causes and of change processes as linear, SAR focuses on problems as basically systemic, i.e., as products of interconnected and relational dynamics, and on change as complex, ever-changing, and unpredictable. Therefore, problems cannot be understood or solved in isolation: exploration processes must involve actors from many parts of the system, opening up for theoretical and practical insights into the layered dynamics of the system, resulting in what we might term as place-sensitivity. This understanding of change means that the focus is on “systemic solutions not just problem solutions” (Burns, 2014, p. 7) and on “system wide learning” (Burns, 2014, p. 4). Key methods in SAR are workshops and community inquiry processes involving many actors (sometimes hundreds or thousands (Burns & Worsley, 2015), bringing actors from different positions together in collective processes of inquiry and change.

Both approaches to action research emphasize the involvement of many actors to explore the positioned and contextual nature of issues, and both emphasize negotiations concerning problem definition as a central and continuous part of workshop processes. We developed a design that combined both approaches with inspiration from critical geography (Massey, 2005), community mapping (Perkins, 2007) and narrative cartography (Caquard & Cartwright, 2014), in order to facilitate processes in which participants explore specific places and communities in their lives and engage in exploring the potentials.

Our ethnographic work was inspired by traditions that emphasize the sensory and place-based nature of subjective experiences, especially the work of childhood researcher Kim Rasmussen and anthropologist Sara Pink. Rasmussen developed methodologies for guided tours and photo elicited interviews for the production of knowledge related to the way children engage with physical and social places and their processes of meaning-making (Rasmussen, 2004a, 2004b). Pink developed place-sensitive ethnographic methodologies, in which tours through physical space produce knowledge about subjective meaning-making and sensory experiences related to places and placemaking (Pink, 2008).

The empirical data from the action research processes consists of posters, photographs, and sound recordings. We worked with two kinds of posters: visual mappings, in which workshop participants wrote keywords on large collective posters to represent places that they had identified as significant. The posters were hung on walls, making it possible for everyone to view and comment on the keywords and to discuss and negotiate their meaning. Another type of poster was collective posters produced by the participating pedagogues. On these posters we wrote keywords from the pedagogues' reflections during workshops on significant places and communities and on their ideas for action projects. These posters, too, were hung on the walls, constituting a shared

summary and documentation of reflections that invited continuous discussions about the different ideas. We ended up with a total of 12 posters with mappings of significant places and communities and 6 posters produced by pedagogues for their action projects. During workshops and the follow-up meetings connected to the action projects, the research group took photographs and fieldnotes to capture interactions, emphasis and atmosphere. Photographs and fieldnotes were meant to qualify the research groups' knowledge production and were not shared in the same way as the posters. However, we shared our reflections on the research processes during the follow-up meetings with pedagogues which meant that our understandings were continuously qualified. Furthermore, we recorded sound from all workshops and follow-up meetings to capture as much dialogue as possible, with a total of 22 hours of sound. We also understand these recordings and fieldnotes as ethnographic data, in line with our combined methodological approach. The empirical data from the ethnographic field work consists of photographs and field notes from guided tours with the children in the neighborhood, and from field visits to the two ECECs. We viewed, read, and listened across the data-material with a focus on actual and potential connections between the ECECs and (local) communities. For this article we have analyzed topics and examples connected to the engagement of the pedagogues: We have focused on the examples, quotes, and reflections that we found the participants themselves (especially the pedagogues) were most invested in, and we have shared our observations and analyses with the pedagogues during the process, to ensure that our analyses resonated with their understandings. In this way, the analyses presented in this article are not separate from the processes they describe, rather the analyses are part of a shared learning and action process over time. We will further explain the data production and selection below, when we go into detail with the different workshops.

The combined design across participatory research and ethnography produced nuanced insights into similarities and differences between the two geographical settings we worked in, and the many ways in which these settings were lived and understood by the participants, thus enabling us to study communities and ECEC as specific, place-based practices of meaning-making.

### **Methodological design: Aiming at spatial sensitivity**

In the following, we will present how we worked with these inspirations and transformed them into a complex, place-sensitive methodological design. In order to show how we sensitized our design to the specific places, we need to give a somewhat detailed description of the two kindergartens and their communities.

We anchored the project in a cooperation with two kindergartens and aimed to broaden the level of cooperation with as many actors as possible, including children in the kindergarten, their parents and other community members, collaborating with pedagogues as gatekeepers and facilitators. In many ways, the two kindergartens were similar, a major difference being the geographical and political distance from

the capital, which affected the sense of local identity. One kindergarten is located in Copenhagen (the capital of Denmark), in a former working-class neighborhood that has undergone a certain degree of gentrification over the last few decades, and where the group of children (and parents) is mixed in terms of class and ethnicity. Just over 100 children aged 0–6 attend the kindergarten, where they are divided into age groups. Many of the staff have been working at the kindergarten for many years and some of them are residents of the area. In recent years, however, the kindergarten has experienced a series of organizational changes, including a change of management, and there has been some change of staff, many of the new staff living outside the neighborhood.

The other kindergarten is located in a rural town in the north of Denmark, where the historically strong fishing industry is now in decline. In recent years, the kindergarten has merged with other institutions and is now the only publicly funded kindergarten in the town. This means that the kindergarten recruits children from all over the town, and that the group of children is mixed in terms of class and ethnicity. Recent decades have seen increased numbers of migrant workers and refugees in the town. Competing stories about these migrations circulate, and some are characterized by cultural and racial othering and constructions of non-belonging. Other stories focus on the cultural and economic resources to the community represented by the newcomers. Approximately 100 children aged 0–6 attend the kindergarten, where they are divided into age groups. Many of the staff have worked at the kindergarten for many years, almost all are residents of the area, and they feel a strong local attachment.

The difference in physical distance from the capital had practical implications for our methodological design: The urban kindergarten was located close to where we live and work, enabling frequent visits. Our empirical work stretched over a period of approximately a year, encompassing workshops, meetings, and ethnographic fieldwork in and around the kindergarten. In contrast, the rural kindergarten was located at a considerable distance from where we live and work, making transportation a substantial barrier to the physical presence of the research group. Therefore, we developed a methodological design that condensed and intensified the empirical fieldwork (Pink & Morgan, 2013), a large body of which took place over a period of just one week. Furthermore, we designed regular online meetings with all the participating pedagogues during the next six months as a format for following the pedagogues' action projects.

These differences affected our relation to, and negotiations with, the participants and meant that the specific order and organization of the empirical activities was different in the two settings. Also, some of the activities we had planned were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic and various COVID restrictions. However, the types of processes and research ambitions were similar. In both cases, the collaboration was initiated by us, as we contacted the kindergartens. Neither of them had previously worked explicitly with community pedagogy, but both found the concept and the research project's methodological approach meaningful and inspiring. The main



attraction for both kindergartens were the participatory approach and the fact that the project aimed to build on the pedagogues' experiences, knowledge, and ambitions, rather than working from an approach and a problem definition formulated by someone else. Both kindergartens were involved in other projects which they talked about as "must-do projects", that represented yet another task and took up their time<sup>3</sup>, as opposed to "want-to-do projects" that addressed issues they felt were central and meaningful to their work.

The central research method was workshops, followed by follow-up meetings over a 6-month period. True to the basic understanding of action research across traditions (Nielsen & Svensson, 2006; Reason & Bradbury, 2012), the aim of these workshops was both *an exploration*, in order to create new understandings of the issues at hand, and *a development of practical responses* and actions that address the issues. We aimed for both processes to involve as many (types of) participants as possible and to unfold in democratic ways that were sensitive to the lives and knowledge forms of the participants. As we worked with a combined inspiration from participatory research and ethnography, we produced ethnographic data during the workshops in the form of sound recordings, photographs, and field notes. We designed three types of workshops: community workshops, children's workshops, and pedagogues' workshops, that differed in terms of participants and aim: *Community workshops* were aimed at community members and had as their main aim to invite diverse (and possibly invisibilized) everyday life perspectives into the discussion about the experience and aim of kindergartens; *children's workshops* were aimed at a small group of children from the kindergartens and had as their main aim to involve children in reflections about places and communities that were important to them; and *pedagogues' workshops* were aimed at kindergarten staff and had as their main aim to create a space where pedagogues could reflect on their knowledge about significant places and communities and discuss how they might develop new approaches to the involvement of these through pedagogical action projects. The pedagogical action projects were formulated by the pedagogues, who framed actions and experiments that addressed what they felt were important dimensions of the relation between communities and kindergartens. We held follow-up meetings with the pedagogues, at which we discussed the progression of the action projects. Because the pedagogues were the main change agents, they were present in all workshops, and mediated the collaboration with children, parents, and local communities.

As action projects, the two geographical settings produced results that were, in some ways, very different, mirroring the place-based differences between the kindergartens and our attempt at sensitivity towards these differences. As a research

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3 These were often initiated by the municipality and, especially in the rural ECEC, they often built on understandings of knowledge as decontextualized and standardized and of research as the application of evidence-based methods.

project this diversity contributed to valuable knowledge about community research across settings. In the following sections, we will analyze the research processes and present our findings. We have structured our analyses around the different workshops because they each illustrate different perspectives on communities and community pedagogy. In order to convey a sense of the situated, place-specific nature of the workshops, we will give fairly detailed descriptions of the processes and negotiations of the workshops.

### **Community workshops: Involving or calling forth communities**

Participants at the *community workshops* were local community members (shopkeepers, campsite managers, church choir leaders, teachers, scout leaders, etc.), present and former kindergarten parents, pedagogues, and management. Approximately 45 participants participated in the community workshop that took place on a weekday evening and lasted three hours. The thematic headline of the workshops focused on places, experiences, and communities in the local community. More specifically, we asked participants to identify and reflect about places (past and present) for children and families. The headline was intended as an open invitation to a joint exploration, from where participants could contribute with ideas, experiences, and questions, thinking with and against the focus on place, thus both expanding, nuancing, and challenging the focus, situating it in complex everyday life contexts. With a starting point in a specific geographical place (the local neighborhood), we produced posters in the form of visual maps of significant places identified by the participants (Caquard & Cartwright, 2014) and their connections to communities (Burns, 2014). We facilitated a process involving local community representatives and pedagogues, in which we asked about the actual and potential connections (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2005) between the kindergarten and communities in the lives of children and parents outside the kindergarten.

As the local community members and parents arrived at the workshops, they seemed hesitant and puzzled about why they were invited into this process that did not resemble anything they had experienced before. After a short while, however, the atmosphere changed, and the participants increasingly felt at home, contributed, and told stories of the many connections they knew of in the local community. The stories sparked further stories and reminded participants of other places and communities that were important to children and families, but that they had not considered in this way. The workshop participants drew on their experiences from many different positions: as pedagogues, professionals, parents, local citizens, etc., who were engaged in a variety of community connections. Some of them compared their present experiences to the ones they had had as children in the same neighborhood.

The discussion pointed to many places and communities: some were well known – almost iconic (e.g., the harbor in the rural town and the library in the urban town), others were unfamiliar to many of the participants (e.g., the Faroese migrants' culture

center). Some places were familiar to most participants, but were represented in ways that created new insights into the meaning of them. Together, the participants created narratives of the multiple ways places and communities related and reached out to each other. There were stories of a lady in the neighborhood who extravagantly decorated her balcony for Christmas to please the children of the kindergarten, and which children often made sure to pass on their walks with parents and kindergarten. There were stories of daily rituals involving going to the local store on the way home from kindergarten, of a sculpture in the main square where children played, and parents met friends and neighbors. There were stories of how well-known places were used in creative, non-intended, and potentially dangerous ways, as when children played at the harbor or young people climbed onto the roof of the school. The workshops were characterized by a lot of laughter, as joyful memories of past and present relations to places were shared, and by thoughtful dialogues as stories of communities and places were brought forward that were unknown to other participants.

This can be characterized as an explorative, layered approach to places and communities, in which participants did not simply reproduce hegemonic interpretations of places and communities, but rather joined in curious explorations of their value and importance for different (groups of) people. Participants reflected on the changing functions of places over time (that the same place might be used in different ways and by different people during different times of the day, or be used in different ways according to the season), and shared stories about changes in their own past or present relations to similar places (how they experienced places differently when they became parents from when they were children). In this way, nuanced and sensitive representations of places and communities unfolded. Although the community workshops were held in the kindergartens, the kindergartens were not explicitly discussed very much, reflecting the fact that by focusing on communities rather than pedagogy, the kindergartens were positioned within the framework of everyday life: as one important place among many in the participants' lives.

During this process, a strong sense of local community identity was expressed, in the sense that participants communicated an awareness of and interest in each other, and at the same time of the rich, diverse, and resourceful shared community they created together. Especially in the rural context, strong discourses of "everybody knowing everybody" and "everyone is welcome to join – if they want to", can be seen not just as more or less accurate descriptions of the existing local community, but also as performative productions of a community spirit that was evoked during the workshop dialogues, contributing to an awareness and understanding of being a local community with a common cause and common responsibility for creating good lives for children and adults. Statements of this kind did, however, contain certain ambiguities, connected both to the fact that the closeness of a community can be claustrophobic as well as comforting (making not to be intensively involved a legitimate choice) and to the fact that, despite the invitation implicit in statements of this kind, some groups

were notably absent from the workshops and at first invisible from the discussions: for instance, newly arrived refugees, which possibly reflected their status in and relations to the community.

Through this type of discussion, the participants, and especially the pedagogues, became aware of the many ways in which they were already cooperating with the local community, and went on to talk about new ways of cooperating with local community members. In some cases, participants reached out to each other with ideas for cooperation, or exchanged contact information at the workshop in order to develop the ideas further. At the follow-up meetings, the pedagogues told us how, in the days and weeks following the workshop, the participants greeted each other when they met around town, and told each other of new connections, communities, and places they had come to think of since the workshop, continuing the workshop processes.

The workshops did not provide easy answers to the question of the relations between communities and kindergartens, or even present a clear picture of who the communities were, or what their needs and perspectives were. Instead, the process demonstrates that communities are not simply there to be discovered or involved, but that the very process of exploring communities can contribute to the continuous production of community identities.

This is different from the settler-colonial contexts, where community pedagogy was originally developed. In these contexts, certain specific communities, e.g., Indigenous groups, have a much stronger sense of identity and of what types of community knowledge to include in education (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015) than what we see in the Danish context. The Danish context reminds us that community identity and place-sensitive knowledge is also always the product of specific processes of *community production*, meaning that community identities are relational and dynamic and always involve negotiations of belonging, invisibilization, and differentiation (Yudicé, 2005).

### **The pedagogues' workshops: Reconsidering pedagogies with a view to communities**

Participants in the *pedagogues' workshops* were kindergarten staff, both pedagogues and management. 11 staff members participated in the pedagogues' workshops. The thematic headline addressed the question of community from the perspective of the kindergarten. More specifically, we invited the pedagogues to name and explore places, experiences, and communities for children in and outside the kindergarten. We facilitated processes in which pedagogues thought about significant places in the kindergarten, what the places meant to different children and explored who might or might not belong in the different places. These questions were meant to invite reflections about the experiences and everyday lives of children and parents. In contrast to the bewilderment of the participants in the local community workshops, the pedagogues' workshops constituted a recognizable setting to the pedagogues, because they

were used to working together, even though the specific workshop method was new to all involved.

To some extent, the pedagogues began their exploration processes with the introduction of the question about community in the invitation we sent to the kindergartens to participate in the research project. When we arrived at the kindergarten, the pedagogues told us that our invitation contained questions about the kindergarten of a kind different from how they themselves mostly talked about it, and that, even before the workshops began, this had sparked off new reflections about children's everyday lives outside the institution, about existing connections to explore and who to involve. At the workshops, pedagogues explored how the various places and settings in the kindergarten offered different opportunities for participation to different children and parents. They discussed how they might develop these spaces to become more inclusive, for instance by reconsidering how they introduced new children and parents to the kindergarten, how they might show interest in the culture and language of ethnic minority parents and how they could organize their work so they had time to get close to individual children and learn about their lives in the kindergarten. Also, they discussed what they did or did not know about places and communities outside the kindergarten that were important to children and families. This led them to explore how they as pedagogues might expand the opportunities for participation by learning more about how children and parents experienced these places and communities. These reflections can be understood as ways of *challenging* the disconnectedness between kindergartens and the local communities, widening the pedagogical perspective by thinking about the kindergarten as just one setting among others in an everyday life context.

Other themes that pedagogues raised at the workshops, related more specifically to the work environment of pedagogues and its pedagogical implications, e.g., how busy schedules made it difficult to accommodate for some children's needs. In this discussion, some children and parents were presented as more challenging than others, either because the pedagogues were unsure about how to support their participation, or because their ways of participating in the ECEC disturbed the work of the pedagogues (e.g., when children did not have proper outerwear, making field trips difficult). This led to a pedagogical discussion among pedagogues about how parents could be taught to accept or adapt to the ECEC, thus *reproducing* the disconnectedness between the ECEC and the local community by foregrounding the institutional agendas rather than questioning the ECEC as being co-productive of processes of exclusion<sup>4</sup> (see Thingstrup, 2019, for a discussion about this). This double process of reproducing and challenging (dis)connections between ECEC and local communities

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4 These issues are familiar from other action research projects about ECEC (e.g. Lind, 2019; Prins, 2019; Thingstrup, 2018). The recurrence of these themes – across projects with different focus points – tells us something about the importance of them for the work and makes the point, that all ECEC work must involve attention to its own conditions, and the risk of exclusion built into ECEC.

partly represented real disagreements between pedagogues, but also created productive discussions throughout the project about dilemmas related to the involvement of the pedagogues, interference in families' lives and the complexity of the roles of the ECEC.

At the workshops, the pedagogues talked about which workshop themes they found important and began a process of designing action projects that could translate the abstract ambition of community orientation into specific actions that they could carry out in their pedagogical practice. Action projects focused, e.g., on developing new ways of cooperating with parents, or on developing new types of field trips with children as a novel way of engaging with the local community (see below). In the rural ECEC, the research group followed the projects through online follow-up meetings. At follow-up meetings, we shared reflections about how the actions and ambitions of the pedagogues had developed, as well as their understanding of the challenges, and we discussed how these developments might be understood. Also, the follow-up meetings had the function of maintaining continuous attention to the project in a busy working life.<sup>5</sup>

### **Children's workshops**

The children's workshops were designed as a two-stage process. Firstly, we cooperated with the pedagogues in planning and carrying out guided tours and walking interviews with children in their community. This activity aimed at engaging with children as knowledgeable agents by asking them about the meaning and importance of places and communities and through shared sensory experiences of place and placemaking (Pink, 2008; Rasmussen, 2004a, 2004b). Secondly, we designed research workshops with children, in which children could talk about the meaning of the places they had visited, inspired by photos taken during the walks. This two-stage method combined inspiration from Kornerup & Petersen (2015) and Husted & Lind (2016) on workshops with preschool children, and from Rasmussen (2004a, 2004b) and Pink (2008) on walking interviews and photo elicitation interviews. Combining these methods, we aimed to combine the sensory and reflective dimensions of children's places and placemaking. By involving pedagogues in the workshops, we hoped to introduce into the pedagogical discussion new perspectives on children's situated and differentiated experiences, and thereby open up for new ideas about how to develop pedagogical practice.

However, our fieldwork took some unexpected turns and for several reasons the children's workshops were not carried out the way we had planned. In the urban ECEC, the workshops were cancelled altogether because of COVID-19 restrictions. In the rural ECEC, only the first stage of the workshops was carried out. Three pedagogues involved 15 children in the planning of walks in the local neighborhood, asking them

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5 See Husted et al. (2018), Thingstrup (2018), and Jepsen & Bonde (2019) for a discussion of this method.

what places they liked to visit, and what they would like to show to the visitors (us), who had come all the way from Copenhagen. Based on these suggestions, the children were divided into two groups. The groups went on different walks, which we took part in to see what the children wanted to show us and how they engaged with the places. The next day, we had planned to carry out the second stage of the workshops, namely the research workshop based on photos and experiences from the walks. But when a dead whale washed ashore on the local beach and the children were invited to the local museum to watch it being dissected, we made a quick decision to cancel the research workshop, joining the kindergarten on this trip instead. We regard this as a methodological responsiveness to occurrences in the local community,<sup>6</sup> and it was a way of prolonging the first stage of the workshops (walking interviews) at the expense of the second workshop stage<sup>7</sup>, which was partly replaced by conversations and reflections between us, the pedagogues, and children during and after the trip.

Even though the children's workshops did not take place as planned, the very introduction of the theme in the urban ECEC and the planning and carrying out of the guided tours in the rural ECEC produced some exciting insights and shaped the pedagogues' work. In the rural ECEC, especially, one project group picked up on the experiences and continued to develop ways to build on and expand children's engagement with the local community. During the process of engaging the children in the planning of walks in the neighborhood, the children pointed to places that (according to the pedagogues) were unsurprising, well-known field trip destinations. Although the places themselves were unsurprising, the pedagogues expressed delight in the children's engagement in decision-making, and the way this process changed the significance of the walks. The pedagogues had made some choices about which children to involve in the planning and the walks, reasoning that to five of the special needs children the process would be too challenging and chaotic, and that it would be better to shield them from these challenges. However, when the special needs children learned that other children were involved in planning the walks, their reflections showed the pedagogues that they, too, had views, experiences, and preferences. Therefore, as the pedagogues expressed it, they were forced to reconsider their decision about who to involve, and they became almost ashamed to think that they had apparently underestimated the children's knowledge and interest in their local community. At the follow-up meetings, the pedagogues told us how these experiences started a process among the pedagogues of reconsidering how to plan field trips in the local community in the future, asking children more systematically about what they wanted to visit. These discussions partly resulted in visits to well-known, iconic places, like the beach

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6 Also, we considered the practical-ethical legitimacy of standing in the way of an invitation to such a rare and spectacular event!

7 The cancellation of the research workshops was partly compensated for by the fact that pedagogues engaged in dialogues about the walks with the children, thereby supporting and gaining access to the children's reflections – and shared some of these reflections with us afterwards.

and the harbor, but also inspired trips to new places, as when a child suggested they visit a friend who had moved to another town, which meant that some of the children went on their first train journey. These processes were self-reinforcing, in the sense that the children increasingly suggested places to visit, making connections both ways between places they had visited with their parents and places they had visited with the kindergarten. Furthermore, the children suggested places that they often passed on their walks, but that the pedagogues had not considered as field trip destinations, for instance the local bank and the local hotel. One of the pedagogues remarked “It is not that I didn’t already know these places, but I never thought of them like this”. The pedagogues told us how this inspired creative processes among the pedagogues as well, who looked to new places and new people in their network for ideas for places to visit, and who became more aware of children’s engagement with places. By hanging photographs, posters, and maps representing the field trips on the walls of the kindergarten, the experiences were shared among children, offering new opportunities for dialogues, and, according to pedagogues, in some cases making it possible for new children (e.g., the special needs children) to become recognized as knowledgeable and explain the motifs on the photos to the other children, thus challenging hierarchies and sociodynamics within the group.

Apart from sparking a creative process among children and pedagogues that inspired not only different field trips but also more field trips, the increased engagement in public spaces had the performative effect of becoming seen by people in the neighborhood, in this way placing the institution as a visible community in town. At follow-up meetings, the pedagogues told us that they had observed that more cars stopped to let them pass when they were crossing the street, and more people in shops and offices waved to the children as they passed their windows. This shows that community engagement was not just a case of children and pedagogues walking through the pre-existing physical space of the local neighborhood (Massey, 2005), but was also a case of placemaking. In the first place, the new pedagogical approaches to field trips seemed to change the children’s qualitative relationship with and the meaning of the local community, strengthening their positions as community members, and touching their feelings of ownership in a way that might tentatively be described as citizenship. Secondly, the pedagogues stated that they had come to expand their understanding of the relations between community and early childhood education.

When the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in restrictions on the possibilities for engaging in the local community, the scale and type of engagements and field trips changed in the rural kindergarten, and the pedagogues and children had only the same few outdoor places to visit again and again. At the follow-up meetings, the pedagogues explained that they increasingly used these trips to create space for and direct attention to children’s own activities and interests, even when it was ‘only’ snails or flowers and the games that these gave rise to. They talked about this experience with a



sort of tenderness, embracing both the quirky and the mundane aspects of children's engagement in the places through paying attention to the details and the potentials that came with this (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2016), directing pedagogical attention towards the sensuous and processual qualities of children's relations to place. In this sense, the research processes and the pedagogues' action project opened for new approaches to and understandings of not just the children and the local community, but of children as agents and co-producers of places and communities (Massey, 2005).

### **Final reflections and perspectives**

In this article, we have explored the practical, political, and research potential of community pedagogy. We have given examples of what community-oriented pedagogical work in kindergartens might be in practice. We have shown that pedagogical attention to children's communities, as well as collaboration with a broad set of community actors, contains potentials for new ways of engaging with children's places. This creates opportunities for transforming pedagogical planning, participation, and evaluation from an emphasis on activities and learning inside the kindergarten towards an openness to learning opportunities in everyday life experiences and engagements outside the kindergarten as well. For the pedagogues involved in the project, these new forms of engagement have continued even after the completion of the research project, because the pedagogues have continuously adapted the community-orientation to the specific changes in and outside the kindergarten (changing COVID-19 restrictions, new children, etc.). Further, we have shown that community pedagogy contains the potential to challenge political understandings of early childhood education as compensatory, and contributes to a rethinking of the role of kindergartens as community places, deeply connected to the many communities of children and families. Finally, we have given examples of what participatory, community-oriented pedagogical research methods in kindergartens might look like, and we have shown that they must involve many participants and engage in a continuous negotiation of community and place-sensitivity.

We have argued that creating inclusive, respectful, place-sensitive ECEC practices requires directing attention towards and showing respect for the everyday lives, identities, and communities of the parents, children, and pedagogues involved, and that community pedagogy might contribute to these ambitions. We have argued that research methodologies related to community pedagogy must in themselves express these qualities and must involve many community actors in respectful, place-sensitive research processes. We have argued that this involves maintaining an openness in the questions asked and the actors that are involved, keeping in mind that community involvement is always partial and positioned, representing the specific participants involved as well as the specific and systemic conditions of the involvement.

Our findings show that community-oriented participatory research not only has the potential to transcend and transform existing understandings and positions, but

also potentially (re)produces differentiations and exclusions, reproducing some of the blind spots of the existing practices and some of the views of the people and their specific (cultural and societal) positions. In our project, we saw that the very introduction of the question of communities opened for a reconsideration of community identities, and we found that this reconsideration led pedagogues to both challenge and reproduce the lack of connection between ECEC and local communities. We argue that this ambiguity makes it important to see both community research and community pedagogy as unfinished, ongoing endeavors to involve more people and to ask new questions about blind spots, excluded issues, and silenced groups. In this article, we have described one example of what this could look like in practice, attempting to make it clear how our methodological approaches were the result of shared negotiations and imperfect, ambiguous decisions, which in fact lead to imperfect, ambiguous pedagogies.

We have shown that even though participatory community research and community pedagogy are imperfect and ambiguous practices, they contain important pedagogical potentials, also outside the settler-colonial contexts where they were developed. We have shown how positioning the question about places and communities as a central concern for ECECs can draw increased attention to the diverse ways in which lives are lived across settings and to new understandings of places, communities, and children. As such, community pedagogy contains important alternatives to top-down political and institutional approaches to cooperation and social inequality. It points to the creative and democratic potentials contained in the involvement of children, parents, and community actors in pedagogical processes and decisions, thus challenging the universalistic and compensatory policy approaches that render invisible the knowledge and identities of children and families.

Community pedagogy was originally developed in settler-colonial contexts, where understandings of collective, ethnic, racial identities are well established. Working with community pedagogy outside this context, in a country like Denmark with strong ideologies of national homogeneity, has underscored the performative nature of communities. We have shown that community identities are shaped by the very processes of exploring them and by attempting to work in community-oriented ways. This highlights the need to work with communities as specific, employing collective processes in which aims, experiences, and identities are constantly renegotiated.

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The authors have not received funding for the research reported here and declare that no potential conflict of interest is associated with the study.

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