

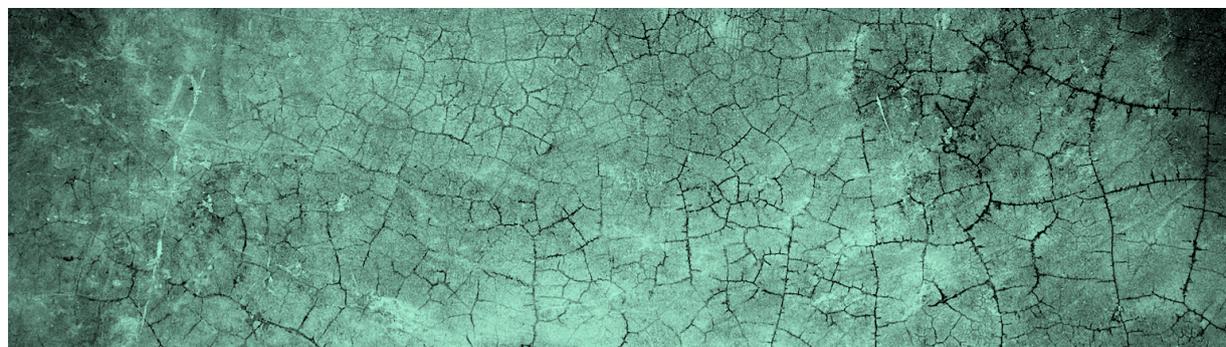
# Outside belonging: A study of bullying in a daycare institution

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*Abstract:* In this study of bullying during children's play and other interactions in a daycare setting, the empirical data are based on interviews with staff and notes from discussions with staff and with two special education teachers. The results confirm that bullying is a complex phenomenon, as many and varied forces, both human and non-human, were found to play a role in the construction of bullying in this daycare setting.

*Keywords:* belonging, human and non-human forces, intra-action, peer group, social exclusion anxiety

## Topic and problem

The present study investigates how human and non-human forces influence children's participation in play and interaction in a daycare institution. In Norway, 97% of children aged 3–6 years spend their days at long-daycare centers, which are professionally facilitated. According to § 1 of The Norwegian Daycare Act, the daycare institution is to be a safe place offering togetherness and friendship for all children. Playgroups are often initiated and controlled by the children, and it is not a given that every child will have a positive experience of participation in this community. In particular, the phenomenon of bullying in daycare institutions is not widely discussed (Kristensen, 2014); as compared to school bullying, for instance, there is little systematic research-based knowledge of this issue. Indeed, the term *bullying* rarely seems to be used by daycare teachers when describing unwanted behavior among the children. For example, in the story of the four girls discussed later, the manager of the institution does not refer to bullying but talks about a gender-based phenomenon called “girl problems” that daycare staff encounters from time to time. The manager told me that they were unable to figure out why this happens. The present article focuses on how human and non-human forces can undermine the

conditions for children's play and togetherness in a daycare setting, contributing to or leading to exclusion.

The empirical data on which the article is based were collected in interviews with staff and parents from one zone of a long-daycare institution, and from group discussions that included the same staff, as well as two special education teachers and the researcher.

### **Research and current debate**

Several theoretical frames have been developed for understanding the phenomenon of bullying. Much of this research explains bullying in terms of aggression, where the bully is perceived as an aggressive person who is intent on wounding or hurting another person in a social situation (Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992; Olweus, 2009). Others have discussed how bullying can happen anywhere that people come together in a social setting, not only in schools but also in daycare institutions (Craig & Pepler, 1995; Midtsand, Monstad, & Søbstad, 2004; Perren, 2000).

Some more recent studies of bullying indicate a shift of emphasis, suggesting that bullying need not always be an intentional action, as in the NOU report by Djupedal (2015, p. 2). This view is shared by Rabøl Hansen: "Bullying is the systematic stalking or exclusion of one individual in a place where this individual is "forced" to stay" (Rabøl Hansen, 2005, p. 16, my translation). Hansen's account suggests that bullying is not necessarily a relation between one bully and one victim but may occur within a community of more than two individuals in a location that the victim cannot leave, as for instance in a daycare institution. Björk (1999) had previously challenged the individualistic understanding of bullying by showing how it can create a sense of belonging in a group. Scott (2009) expressed concern about how informal groups, such as playgroups in a daycare institution, are built around mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, so creating a social context for bullying. Scott argued that changes in the group's hierarchy can threaten its inner order, leading to anxiety and fear of exclusion among members of the group.

In the ExBus project (Exploring Bullying in Schools), Danish researchers (including Scott and Hansen) have developed an understanding of bullying as a social phenomenon constituted by multiple intertwined forces (Kofoed & Søndergaard, 2009). Those theoretical and conceptual advances offer a new understanding of bullying, contributing to knowledge about the forces that create bullying and how those forces become entangled in different ways and with different meanings. These new theories have inspired cooperation between Danish and Norwegian researchers (Dalum Christoffersen, 2014; Helgesen, 2014a; Stender Petersen, 2014) and show how daycare staff and parents may initiate actions that contribute more to exclusion than to inclusion among a group of children.

A number of researchers have come to see bullying as a social and cultural phenomenon rather than as an individual problem (Dalum Christoffersen, 2014; Helgesen, 2014a; Stender Petersen, 2014; Søndergaard, 2009). Understood as a complex phenomenon constituted by many intertwined forces, both human and non-human (Stender Petersen, 2015), bullying may not be a result of upbringing or personal history, or of daycare staff or management (Søndergaard, 2009). The next section introduces some key concepts that help to illuminate the intertwined forces that together create, maintain and sometimes prevent bullying.

### ***Perspective and agents***

I understand bullying as a complex phenomenon constituted in intra-actions among various human and non-human forces. This perspective views the world as a construction, in which everything is created by disparate and ongoing processes (Haraway, 2007). In such a world, agents may be human or

nonhuman beings, and the latter may include living and non-living creatures. The focus here is on the material realm—that is, what we can see and touch, including people, environments and objects (Barad, 2003). The concept of materiality also includes such elements as trees, animals and weather conditions. In the present case, children, parents and daycare staff work together, but they also work with non-human materialities such as documents, physical settings and children's spare time. In short, human and non-human influence each other, and as everything and everyone that influences something else has agency, they can be considered *actors* (Barad, 2007).

The diverse interactions of daycare institution, those present and prevailing practices can be thought of as a relational intertwining of the human and the non-human (Giugni, 2011, p. 14). Haraway (2007) characterized these relational entanglements of human and non-human as “a knot in motion”. In the present context, playrooms, outdoor space with trees, water and toys, along with educational practices, are understood as a collection of relational knots, intertwining and moving together when they meet. These can constitute and mutually influence each other; the materialities that surround us influence how we act, and we become and act together with our surroundings. From this perspective, bullying is seen not as a problem of one aggressive person seeking to dominate others but as an effect of the relational entanglements of many human and non-human forces. The bully as a person does not exist prior to the bullying but becomes a bully in intra-action with their human and non-human surroundings.

### ***Intra-actions***

The theoretical concept of *intra-action* is central to my understanding of how bullying is created. Adopting Barad's idea of human and non-human beings as actors, it follows that the daycare institution's geographical location, playground, educational documents and physical furnishings are all actors, along with the children, staff and parents. The effect of these actors' encounters is significant in the creation of bullying, as the subject (the bully or bullying) occurs or emerges from the intra-actions of both human and non-human actors (Stender Petersen, 2015). The term *intra-action* is introduced as an alternative to *interaction* to highlight that there is no absolute divide between subject and object (Lenz Taguchi, 2012, p. 15). Whereas interaction describes the relations between at least two persons or between a subject and an object understood to be clearly separated from each other, intra-action eliminates this separation and focuses on the effect of the meeting between the different actors (human and non-human) (Lenz Taguchi, 2012, p. 15). According to Hultman (2011), actors are created by combinations in ever-changing and ongoing intra-actions or networks. In the present context, bullying is often tied to the human body by describing the bully as aggressive and the victim as weak. Instead, we must consider how these forces interact and actively construct a world where someone becomes aggressive or weak because they are left outside the community. This perspective can help in identifying what reduces or increases anxiety in a group of children.

### ***Social exclusion anxiety***

To sharpen the researcher's analytical view, it may be beneficial to highlight which social mechanisms can create insecurity in groups that may sometimes tip over into bullying. To understand these mechanisms, the term *social exclusion anxiety* (Søndergaard, 2009) is helpful. When a child's affinity to a group is being tested, this prompts certain processes that may, in extreme cases, be described as bullying. A fear of loss of companionship can be seen as central, and this is what Søndergaard (2009) refers to as social exclusion anxiety, building on theory concerning the basic human need to belong to a community. When this affiliation is tested, it can result in anxiety about rejection—for instance, about losing affiliation to the playgroup in a daycare setting (Helgesen, 2014a). Children want to play

because it is fun, but they also play because they want to be part of a community. The informal social order within a playgroup can create a lot of insecurity for children, determining whether or not they are accepted in the group (Helgesen, 2014a) as they negotiate the rules of play through constant bickering, reciprocal assessments and mutual correction. While assessments like these are found in all groups, their character is likely to vary from group to group (Søndergaard, 2009). According to Søndergaard (2009), being assessed as worthy of group membership is a feature of all social settings, as is the possibility of being assessed as unworthy. When children negotiate rather than play, this may indicate insecurity about positions within the group (Helgesen, 2014a). Social tensions within a group may indicate that children are unable to come to terms with each other, and this can escalate into conflict, resulting in repeated rejections (Søndergaard, 2009). These circumstances can activate a fear of not being accepted, leading to insecurities among the children.

Social exclusion anxiety is seen as central to the social mechanisms that create bullying, as this anxiety can be managed by identifying a common enemy to attack. Schott explains the phenomenon as follows:

Bullying occurs when groups react to this anxiety by projecting the threat to the group's inner order onto certain individuals, and these individuals are systematically excluded and seen as "other". Even where these processes appear to benefit the group as a whole, the bullied individuals are robbed of the social acceptance they need to maintain their human dignity (Schott, 2009, p. 249, my translation).

When arguments about position disturb the inner order of the group, exclusion anxiety is activated and projected onto a specific individual, who is then excluded from the group. The anxiety is reduced when transferred in this way to someone else, helping to re-establish order in the group. All group members feel this anxiety, and to re-establish their connection to the group, they participate in the rejection. According to Søndergaard (2009), the rejected individual then loses their capacity to negotiate the terms of inclusion.

Negotiations over position may not always amount to bullying, which occurs only when negotiation becomes locked into a pattern of repeated rejection of a particular individual. For instance, when Per invites everyone wearing blue trousers to join the game, Ole is not allowed to play because once again he is wearing trousers of the wrong colour. This may be a repeating pattern; even if Ole tries to adapt by choosing the "correct" token of acceptance, he may find that the rules are changed repeatedly.

### ***The daycare institution context***

In the autumn of 2015, a special education teacher invited me to participate in a group working on a case reported by a manager of a daycare institution. The problem was defined by the special education teacher as "exclusion in a children's playgroup". This situation arose in a zone I refer to as Maurtua in a long-daycare institution in a small Norwegian town. In this zone are 15 children, two assistants and an educational leader. Maurtua is located in a separate building and is the only zone using nature as an arena for learning and play. The other zones are located in another building.

The reported case deals with four girls—for present purposes, I will refer to them as Mina, Oda, Marianne and Sanna. The girls were in their final year in daycare, and all were five years old. They lived in close proximity to the daycare institution; some were next-door neighbours. They saw each other in their spare time and participated in many of the same activities. The staff reported actions among these girls that they did not understand and could not put into words. They could see

that the children were not happy, but they were unable to make sense of the situation or to initiate helping actions. In short, the daycare staff felt powerless.

The work to determine what might be done to change the girls' situation started that same autumn and continued through the autumn/winter of 2015/2016. I participated as a partner with two special education teachers and also participated in meetings between the manager, the special education teachers and members of staff. I never met the children. After my work with the group was over, I interviewed the staff in that zone and the manager of the institution. I also wrote to the girls' parents, asking to interview them, as they also worked with the staff to address these problems; only one couple responded and agreed to participate.

## **Material and method**

The empirical material on which the present analysis is based includes conversations and discussions in meetings involving staff, the manager, the two special education teachers and myself as the researcher. The notes I took of conversations and discussions during these joint meetings can be taken as written renditions of what was said. The group met seven times during the eight-month period. One of the special education teachers put a lot of work into analysing the situation in Maurtua, based on observations of the children and staff, along with notes from the discussions referred to above. The researcher had access to this report. The empirical data also included qualitative research interviews conducted after the group discussions ended. These included a focus group interview with daycare staff and parents and one interview with the manager alone. All interviews were taped and subsequently transcribed.

The interview as research method must be understood as an active interaction between multiple people (Tanggaard & Brinkmann, 2015), as a meeting or a conversation between interviewees and researcher, producing accounts about the interviewees' reality (Staunæs & Søndergaard, 2005, p. 54). Through her presence, questions and remarks, the researcher is also a participant in interviews and meetings, which can be seen as negotiations about relational power (Foucault, 2000). Following interviewees' and participants' stories enables the researcher to take a back seat, creating trust and inviting discussion of real concerns rather than merely reflecting the researcher's interests. One of the study's limiting factors was the researcher's lack of information about the conditions for participation in play and togetherness from the children's point of view, as there was no opportunity to observe the children or talk to them.

Using a semi-structured approach, I made an interview guide, listing subjects I wanted to know more about while remaining open to follow up topics initiated by the interviewees (Tanggaard & Brinkmann, 2015) (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2011, p. 47). The written renditions and interview transcripts were not corrected by the participants; the researcher asked questions about what she wanted to know, raising challenges from her point of view in the subsequent discussion. For instance, while the special education teachers defined the situation in the group of girls as involving unstable positions and recognisable as exclusion, the manager and staff characterized it as "a common girl problem". This influenced both the meetings and the interviews. As staff had discussed the situation many times with many different people, they were used to having their practices scrutinized and assessed by others. All contributions were treated with respect and taken seriously. This trust was prerequisite for the joint meetings and was certainly advantageous during interviews.

The analytical strategy was inspired by interactionism (Järvinen, 2005, p. 29), searching in the empirical material for "descriptive performances" (Järvinen, 2005, p. 30) such as key phrases, utterances and acts that could help me to answer the following question: How might materialities such

as physical location, neighborhood and documents, as well as staff, parents and children, contribute to social anxiety and fear in the children's play and togetherness? This question promised to illuminate how bullying is produced in a daycare institution and formed the basis for repeated reading and listening to the empirical material to derive relevant concrete descriptions of different events. The descriptions are presented as four narratives; these are not understood as an organized sequence or plot but rather as a collage, capturing how networks or intra-actions are materialized in subjects and things to create the conditions for the children's play and togetherness (Fortier, 1999, p. 44).

### **Empirical material: narratives from Maurtua**

#### *Narrative 1: Social tensions in the group*

The daycare staff told me that at first they thought the girls were playing, but closer observation revealed that this was not the case. They said that the girls used negative looks and comments when they were together, and there was also some bad language. When playing, the children made up their own rules, and these could be changed during the play. According to staff, they could not assign these actions to specific children, as the situation kept changing in terms of who was allowed to play or not. In her report, the special education teacher wrote about conversations between the educational leader and the children about friendships and best friends, including preferred playmates and who substituted if they were not there. The report indicated that Sanna and Marianne wanted to play with each other; none of them chose Oda or Mina as their first pick, nor did these two choose each other. While Sanna chose Oda as a second pick, Mina was the only one of the girls who wanted to play with a boy as her first pick.

Based on the staff accounts and the special education teacher's report, my interpretation was that the girls were uncertain about their positions in the group. It seemed that they were unsure about whether they were inside or outside the group, and the fear of being left out led them to try repeatedly and in different ways to fit in with the group. My understanding of the situation is that the children used different strategies in attempting to stabilize their position—for example, negative comments as rejection and negative looks as ignoring (Johnsrud & Solberg, 2009). Changing the rules for play may be a means of keeping a competitor out (Helgesen, 2014a), and bad language, which was observed across the four girls, is understood as insulting (Helgesen, 2014b). As they were repeated, I interpreted all of these negative acts as exclusions. The girls handled anxiety by transferring it to someone else who was judged unworthy of belonging to the group. According to Rabøl Hansen (2011), to address the lack of a community, a new one is built by including some and excluding others. Where the formal aspects of daycare life lack this sense of community, or the sense of community is weak, children may build their own informal order, consisting of *us* and *them* (Rabøl Hansen, 2011, pp. 492-493). According to Rabøl Hansen (2011), bullying creates a community for the children to gather around while being anti-social as some are pushed out of that same community. The need to belong to a community and the anxiety of being pushed out can create a bullying community (Rabøl Hansen, 2011).

The special education teacher's report provided little information about who was excluding whom. As staff were unable to assign these actions to specific girls, it was difficult for them to recognize these as exclusions. According to Søndergaard (2009), bullying positions are not necessarily stable; the bully needs not be one particular individual, as everyone may play that part. Changing positions may be a feature of this group.

What is likely to contribute to fear and insecurity in the group? If exclusion cannot be tied to one person's qualities alone but is something that can occur in certain situations, this means that

different social practices can create and maintain inclusion and exclusion. In the narratives below, I discuss some of the forces that may contribute to anxiety and insecurity among these girls. These forces do not necessarily operate at an individual level but can be seen as intertwined; they intra-act, strengthening or twisting, displacing and transforming each other (Søndergaard, 2009).

*Narrative 2: Visiting each other's houses*

Both staff and parents told me in the interviews that the children liked to visit each other's houses in the afternoons. In the interview with Mina's parents, her father said:

*It was normal that she wanted to make arrangements to visit one of the others or to have someone visiting her. This caused her a lot of stress. She had to visit someone because it seemed she was afraid to miss out on something that would be important the next day in daycare. She couldn't rest at home.*

Mina's mother said that Mina wasn't always invited to visit because Marianne said she wouldn't come if Mina was there. The staff also said they saw the negotiations between the children about who could go home with whom as very stressful for them. The discussion about who could visit where could start when they arrived in the morning. Staff told me that Mina might tell Sanna that she had visited Marianne the day before, but that when Marianne arrived, she would deny this.

My analysis of what the parents and staff told me in the interviews is that inviting someone over could be used as an efficient means of excluding someone—for example, inviting some and not others to a birthday party could be excluding. Mina might say that she was invited to Marianne's house when in fact she wasn't in an attempt to form an alliance with Marianne to gain entry to the group. If the children were unsure whether or not they were in the group, telling a lie may represent an attempt to make themselves seem an attractive playmate. The children's negotiations seemed to take place both in daycare and at home, starting and ending the day in negotiations and so contributing to the constant insecurity about their place in the group that some of the children were living with. The parents seemed to contribute indirectly to this by facilitating the children's afternoon visits, which the children apparently used as a means of gaining access to the community, and of keeping certain people out. In this way, the visits to each other's houses had the unintended effect of creating more insecurity and anxiety about whether or not they belonged to the group. According to Søndergaard (2009), everyone has a need to belong to a community. As Mina was not invited to visit the others at their homes and was not a preferred playmate in daycare, it seems to me that Mina in particular had no sense of belonging to the informal playgroup.

*Narrative 3: Staff contact with the children*

In her report, the special education teacher wrote that during a one-and-a-half hour period, only one member of staff talked with the girls while two others hardly talked to them at all. Further on, she noted that during a table-based activity involving all five of the five-year-olds (the four girls and one boy), the adult did not respond when Mina talked to her. The same child tried to talk to the other children around the table but received no answer. At the joint meetings in which I participated between the special education teacher and staff, the staff confirmed that they did not have the same level of contact with all four girls. One assistant even confirmed that she had little contact with Mina, saying that Mina often seemed sullen and rejecting when she arrived in the morning.

In the interview, staff said they were worried about the children: "We could see that they weren't happy" and, according to the educational leader, it was "often discussed". She also stated that

these challenges caused much frustration in the staff group, which could affect their daily work—for instance, they would sometimes lose patience or get angry. According to the educational leader, they would resort to yelling, which did not make them feel proud of themselves and may have influenced how they discussed their challenges, as in the theme of “the nasty girls”. At the same time, the educational leader showed a lot of understanding of the girls’ unhappiness and that something needed to be done: “You could sense their hearts almost falling out of them. They were so stressed about being accepted and liked, and tried so hard to appease one another.”

My analysis of these statements is that staff stories tended to classify the children, locking them into negative categories such as “sullen”, “rejecting” and “nasty”. None of the adults did anything to break this pattern; in their own words, they felt powerless. It seems that the children were allowed to choose their playmates and what to play, with no adult supervision. This happened despite the educational leader’s insistence that they were focused on being stable adults for all the children. Conversations with the special education teacher also revealed that the educational leader is known as a good educationalist. Nevertheless, it was clear that the contact between adults and children was not as good as the apparent intention. If Mina experienced being ignored by the adults on several occasions, this might contribute to weakening her position in both the formal group and the children’s group. As I see it, the feeling of being powerless would then predominate, and this may also indicate social exclusion anxiety among the staff (Dalum Christoffersen, 2014). Because their professionalism is at stake, they may do nothing because they are unsure of what to do. This in turn may diminish the children’s opportunities to participate in the informal community; when the adults seem not to bother, this is likely to create insecurities among the children. The children’s trust in adults is weakened when they are left to create their own informal community both in daycare and at home. When children are denied help to create common rules for interaction, this can create insecurities in the group, leading to exclusion.

#### *Narrative 4: Friendship*

The conversations between the educational leader and the children about friendships and best friends showed that not all the girls in the group were popular as playmates; two preferred each other while the other two each seemed not to favor the other. Only one of them picked any of the other children in the zone as an alternative playmate. I was told that Maurtua had little contact or cooperation with the other zones; its location in a separate building with a separate educational platform meant that companionship with children in other zones seemed not to be a high priority. The girls had no opportunity to choose friends outside the zone; nor, it seems, did they choose anyone within the zone. From what I was told, it seems that the educational goal of using nature as an arena for learning may have isolated the children in Maurtua from children in the other zones. This also means that the five year-olds in Maurtua have fewer alternative friends if they do not get along with each other. My assessment is that how staff organizes educational activities can have a direct impact on the children’s opportunities to build friendships, which will also impact their happiness and their sense of belonging, inclusion and exclusion.

As non-human actors, the physical location of the zone and the educational platform seem to have influenced the children’s everyday life. When bullying is removed from the context where it is produced, the daycare institution as an agent seems not to be discussed. It seems important to reflect on whether the separated zone with its own educational platform may have the unintended effect of isolating the children from those in other zones, limiting their opportunities for friendship and increasing the level of conflict, anxiety and insecurity within the group.

## Discussion

The purpose of this article was to investigate how human and non-human forces can weaken children's play and togetherness in a daycare institution, contributing or leading to exclusion from the community. The findings indicate how staff can contribute to this situation, along with other forces such as children's spare time, parent participation, the institution's educational documents, its physical location and cooperation with the other zones that can contribute to increased levels of insecurity and anxiety. The next section takes a closer look at the effects of the intra-actions between these different forces.

### *The effects of the intra-actions*

The girls' opportunities to build friendships seem affected by a number of human and non-human actors. The first three narratives described actions that I interpret as excluding acts. I understand that Mina seems to be considered unworthy of membership both in the playgroup and in formal group activity (Stender Petersen, 2014, p. 56). Staff may not have identified the social tensions in this group of children as bullying. As the girls are categorized as nasty, and Mina is characterized as sullen and rejecting, the tensions among them can be interpreted simply as consequences of their mode of being. Based on what the staff said, their inability to act seems to contribute to producing a practice in which the children are left to themselves. However, children need stable support from adults in their collective and individual experiences; without this support, certain processes within the group can create anxiety and uncertainty. When these excluding acts intra-acted with each other and with home visits, the effects seemed to strengthen Mina's position as an outsider. Acceptance of her standing outside these communities can become part of daily practices and so becomes normalized. In the context of this zone, given its physical separation and separate educational platform and using nature specifically as the arena for learning, the staff of Maurtua may not cooperate enough with other zones. This in turn means that the four girls (and especially Mina) may not see children from other zones very often and so have very little chance of finding alternative friends or establishing a connection to other communities outside the zone.

When daily practices intra-act with home visits, pedagogical documents and the physical location of the zone, this seems likely to have consequences for the children's play and togetherness. I understand all these agents as a network (Hultman, 2011, p. 40) - as "knots in motion" that cooperate and move together when they meet. The effects of these meetings can weaken children's belonging to the institution's communities and, in the worst case, may contribute to or lead to bullying. Together, these effects seem to produce a practice in which Mina is not included either in formal group activity or in the informal playgroup. When these intra-acting forces produce repeating practices that do not allow Mina to belong to the communities, she can be understood as bullied.

## Summary

In my analysis of the presented narratives, I point to how non-human forces intertwine with each other, and with the families, children and staff, to create social practices that produce and maintain phenomena of inclusion and exclusion. As well as illuminating the complexity of bullying, this perspective highlights the importance of building a communal life in daycare institutions that can be experienced by all the children and offers an important means of preventing bullying.

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