

## SPECIAL EDITION

IS THERE KNOWLEDGE ABOUT HOW TO HANDLE CHILDREN UNDER THREE IN ECEC?

# Play for learning and learning for play: Children's play in a toddler group

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*Abstract:* There is a concern that children's right to play is restricted as a result of the governments' narrow focus on school preparatory activities and learning. Play and learning are rights embodied in the United Nations convention on the rights of the child. This article discusses how play and learning are organized in the everyday life of a Norwegian toddler group. Critical voices claim that there is not enough structure and that there should be more teaching and mapping to facilitate early intervention in Norwegian kindergartens. The article suggests that the critics' claim can be countered by asking if there are too few teachers with adequate education and too large groups of children.

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This article aims to discuss the early childhood education and care institutions as an arena for playing and learning by focusing on the participation and inclusion of the one year olds. After the terrorist attack in Norway on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July 2011, in which a terrorist attacked and tried to destroy our democratic system, many have realized the importance of strengthening democracy and the democratic tradition, which is deeply linked to our childhood education and care. Thus, children's inclusion and participation have become more important than before. This article discusses how play and learning, as rights embodied in the United Nations convention on the rights of the child, are being organized in the everyday life of a Norwegian toddler

group, and challenges that might occur. Although play and learning, as well as inclusion and participation, have been important research issues on early childhood education and care (see, for examples, Berthelsen, Brownlee & Johansson, 2009; Hogsnaes, Angell & Nordtømme, 2010; Johansson & Samuelsson, 2007), there is still a need for more knowledge about *learning* as an important tool for *play* in the context of democratic education. This article focuses on how learning and play are presented in a political context and how play might be important in the democratic education process. It also shows how play, children's inclusion and children's participation are necessary components for a more holistic concept of learning.

## LEARNING AND EDUCATION IN A POLITICAL CONTEXT

The official documents that describe early childhood education and care in emphasize that learning is a product of teaching and a result of pre-defined goals (St.meld. nr. 16 (2006-2007), 2007; St.meld. nr. 41 (2008-2009), 2009; NOU 2010:8, 2010). The early childhood education and care institutions are considered as pedagogical institutions and arena for learning (Barnehaugen, 2005). The learning outcomes are anticipated to be important criteria of the quality of early childhood education and care (Østrem, 2010). Thus mapping the outcomes of learning becomes a necessary instrument in order to measure the quality of the institutions. In Norway, as in many other countries, the new liberalism has opened up for ideas from the free market capitalism, and the vocabulary used in education is much more like economic language: talking about efficiency, cost savings and “what works” (Seland, 2011). The authorities in Norway are concerned about the increasing number of young people leaving school before the age of 19 years. Another issue of great concern is the language acquisition among the minorities with a mother tongue other than Norwegian. Although kindergarten in Norway is voluntary, it is regarded as a part of the education and “life-long learning”.

Critics say that the kindergarten has too little structure and that there should be more teaching and mapping in order to provide early interventions (Johansson, 2010). An expert committee led by Peter Østergaard Andersen, assessed the tools used to map the language skills of children in early childhood education and care (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2010-2011), and concluded that none of the tools were suited for general mapping of all children as there were problems with validity, reliability as well as credibility in all the tools. But, the government, apparently, still wanted to continue with the mapping strategy. Thus, early childhood education and care is increasingly expected to provide returns, like better results at school. In this way, more emphasis is given on knowledge like literacy and mathematics. The traditional pedagogical work in kindergartens to support the children’s whole personality, based on interactions with the children and the child group, does not fit in this new economic logic (Johansson, 2010). This reductionist view on *learning* may be opposed to the broader concept of *education*. It might be

claimed that we are moving from education to learning, but according to Biesta (2006), something has been lost in this shift. The World Organization for Early Childhood Education (OMEP) expressed its concerns about this issue at the OMEP World Assembly and Congress in Gothenburg (OMEP, 2010):

*Today, because of political and financial problems, most governments are overemphasizing the swift development of literacy and numeracy skills for our children when they start school. This results in dramatically restricting the holistic approach to early childhood education.*

*This situation is destroying the basis and the sense of early childhood education. This results in the loss of crucial values, creativity, imagination, open mindedness, expressive arts, thus deeply affecting the right and the joy to learn through play.*

In the present article, we suggest an alternative perspective on learning, a wider notion that includes education in a broad sense. This perspective goes beyond the school-knowledge like literacy and numeracy, and includes a more holistic overall human development (Greve & Løndal, 2012), which is crucial in the development of democratic values. Humans are shaped and developed by interactions between self and culture, and it is about understanding the world we live in (Løvlie, 2003). Children are agents of their own learning and meaning-making processes and participate within their cultural context (Berthelsen, 2009). According to the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2002), meaning is constituted at a deeper level before a conscious reflection. This means that even small children, without verbal language abilities, might constitute meaning just as well as older children and adults. This meaning-making process is present in the children’s play activities. It is therefore highly relevant to discuss play and its place in children’s lives, and whether children miss important qualities if the time and conditions for such activities are reduced (Greve & Løndal, 2012).

## PLAY

It is claimed that play is children’s natural way of being (Øksnes, 2011). But apparently, in official documents as well as in society at large, play seems to be regarded first and foremost as a

means of learning (St. meld. 41 (2008-2009), 2009; NOU 2010:8; Rasmussen, 1996; Øksnes, 2010, 2011). By distinguishing between the so called “good” and “bad” play, adults shed moral value judgments of children’s play out of what will serve predetermined pedagogical goals. But for children, play does not have any determined goals; play is an end in itself. The German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer’s contribution to the understanding of the term ‘play’ seems to be appropriate and interesting in this regard.

*Play clearly represents an order in which the to-and-fro motion of play follows of itself. It is part of play that the movement is not only without goal and purpose but also without effort. It happens, as it were, by itself. (Gadamer, 2004, p. 105)*

Gadamer (2004) believes that play could not be seen as an instrument to formal educational objectives, but rather as a goal in itself. This does not mean that play has no impact on children’s development. Children experience play through their spontaneous behavior, and this happens without cognitive reflection (Gadamer, 2004), or as a pre-reflexive cognition (Merleau-Ponty, 2002). Through play, children create meanings beyond the conceptual meaning (Guss, 2003a). In drama play, children enter a “magic room” where anything could happen (Guss, 2003b). This perspective corresponds with the statement from OMEP cited above, defending the children’s right to play.

According to Berit Bae (2012), play is an important way for children to express themselves, hence a reductionist and instrumental view of play from adult’s perspective is opposed to children’s right of expression embodied in the United Nations convention on the rights of the child.

## METHODS

This article is based partly upon re-analyses of data from my PhD-project about friendship between two year old children in a Norwegian kindergarten<sup>1</sup> (Greve, 2007), and partly upon data

from a post doctoral project about one year olds. The data consists of video observations of 20 children in a Norwegian kindergarten (*barnehage*), which was captured during two periods of about eight months each. The children were divided into two groups, with 10 children in each group. The children were aged from 10 to 36 months. There were four adults working in each of these groups – but only one of them had a formal teacher education.

The everyday life of the children in the kindergarten was observed. This included free play situations - indoors as well as outdoors, during meals, and circle time. All the observations were done with a hand-held camera. The duration of observation could last from 30 minutes to two hours. Observations were made both on a single child as well as on a group of children.

Through different examples, I will now discuss play and learning as participation and inclusion of the one year olds in the kindergarten.

## PLAY AND LEARNING AS PARTICIPATION AND INCLUSION

The United Nations convention on the rights of the child states that all children have the right to have one’s opinion taken into account (article 12) and the right to freedom of expression (article 13). In this section, I will present three different examples from the everyday life of small children’s play. First, I will present an example when one child plays with objects. The second example is of a play together with a teacher. The third example is of a play with a group of children, supported by a teacher. In these examples, all adults are called “teacher” regardless of their professional education as the children would not know or pay attention to the adults’ formal education.

### *Play with objects*

According to Gadamer (2004), the play itself is the subject and the children (or adults) are being played. In many of my observations, I have seen that children are “captured” by toys or objects in the environment and are literally “dragged” into play.

During free play, Ola (31 months) finds a wooden hammer, and starts immediately to hammer with it saying “Au, au, it hurts in my teeth”. This is a theme from a story from a well known Norwegian children’s book, about two small “trolls” living in the mouth of a young

1. Together with a colleague at Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences, Knut Løndal, we have re-analyzed video-taped observations from our PhD projects, but here I will present only my part of the observations of one and two year old children in a Norwegian *Barnehage* during two periods of approximately eight months each.

boy, making holes in his teeth. Ola knocks the hammer at the table and says: “Knock, knock – teeth”. One of the other boys approaches him, saying “Don’t knock”. Ola takes no notice of him, the other boy goes away, and Ola walks around in the room, hammering at the floor, at the sofa, and at the walls. There are eight children in the room, in all sorts of activities (free play) and one teacher sitting on the floor. Ola continues to hammer, sometimes he is singing, sometimes he says “Au” and other phrases from the story. When another teacher is entering the room, Ola approaches her, looking at her and says “Au, it hurts my tooth”. The teacher does not notice him; she talks to the other teacher and soon leaves the room. In some occasions, the teacher wants to take the hammer away from Ola; apparently because she is afraid he might hurt some of the other children. But Ola clings to the hammer and refuses to give it away. This goes on for 13 minutes, until one of the other boys wants him to join a hit-and-run-game outside the room.

Ola is captured by a toy he finds randomly – a hammer. He is fascinated by the story of the two trolls in the mouth of the boy, which he knows very well, and with the hammer in his hand, he becomes one of the trolls and at the same time the boy who complains about his hurting teeth. Ola’s actions are intentional, he is dragged into the “magic room” (Guss, 2003b). If the teacher would have been more attentive towards him, she could have captured his symbolic play with the hammer and supported his efforts to enter into the magic room of drama play, may be together with some of his peers. But in this example, the teacher has to look after many children, and she is required to have her attention in many places at the same time. Thus, she could not engage in the play together with only one child. When the other teacher enters the room and Ola approaches her, she pays no attention to him because she has to give a message or discuss something with the teacher present. By neglecting Ola’s approach, Ola’s right of expression is not met.

It is not possible to say exactly the learning outcome of Ola’s activities. But in my opinion, it is obvious that Ola gets some important experiences that he can build on in further play. He seems to have entered the “magic room” of drama play (Guss, 2003b), which is essential for inclusion and participation in further play. These experiences could possibly have been developed

further if the teacher had the possibility of supporting him, and including other children in the play as well.

#### *Play and learning together with a teacher*

It may be a concern that the younger children are more invisible than the elder children who can verbally express themselves. In a busy daily life, with many children and few teachers, the one-year olds are not always able to compete on equal terms with the two- and three-year olds, their voices are not heard and their traces are not noticed by the teachers (Greve & Winje, 2012). Therefore, it is crucial that there are not too many children together in the group. Gunnar (17 months) is sitting together with a teacher on the floor, with Duplo blocks. Gunnar tries to put the blocks together, but he does not always succeed. The teacher is talking softly to him, singing, imitating his initiatives and showing him what to do. She is encouraging Gunnar, at the same time she lets him follow his own wishes and whims.

Being one of the youngest children in this group of ten, Gunnar is sometimes overlooked by the teachers and by the other children. Therefore, it is of great importance for him to have some time alone with the teacher, or in smaller groups of children. In this example, Gunnar can have the blocks for himself and practice putting them together, without having to compete with the older and the more skilled children. His trial does not appear to be a targeted training process, but an intuitive interaction with the blocks. At the same time, Gunnar is confirmed by the teacher’s soft talk with him, and his initiatives and participation is appreciated by the teacher. His experiences will probably be of importance for his future play with other children, as well as for his well being here and now.

#### *Play and learning together with other children*

The younger children may benefit from their relations with the other older children. Sometimes the youngest may learn from the older children just by observing them. And if the younger children are included in the play with the older ones, they might as well be confirmed as meaning making contributors.

Gunnar (16 months) has been walking around in the room by himself for some time. He has tried to climb on a cupboard, plaid with some dolls. In one occasion, it seems like he is saying “ready – go!” to himself – although he cannot

pronounce the words verbally. But he nods his head and suddenly starts to run. But no one takes notice of him, and he does not continue. All of a sudden, some of the two year old boys enter the room, and they start to run around in a circle. Gunnar releases immediately what he has in his hands and starts running after the others. He doesn't run as fast as the older boys, but he participates according to his capabilities and qualifications. Sometimes the two year olds keep hold of him when passing by, and the teacher tells them to take care. In two occasions, Gunnar sits down for some seconds, before starting to run again. May be he needs to catch his breath or just have a little break.

This is also an example of children being captured into play. This time it is not an object, but the other children's activity that makes Gunnar join the play. May be Gunnar was already in a mood to run, as he previously had a little running session by himself, but due to lack of encouragement from others, he ended this activity. Now, when the other boys started running, he is immediately prepared to join them. The teacher does not take active part in this activity, but she is standing in the background, observing the children and telling them to take care. There might be lot of learning in this activity: adjusting to others, practicing running skills, comparing oneself to the other children, and so forth.

#### DISCUSSION

These three examples show the different ways of organizing play and learning in the daily life of a Norwegian toddler group, and some of the related challenges.

In the first example, Ola is playing with a hammer, and he is about to enter "the magic room" of the drama play as he takes the roles of various characters of the story about the tooth trolls. For the observer, his intentions seem to be quite clear, but neither his peers (telling him not to knock) nor the teacher (from time to time trying to take away the hammer) seem to understand his expressions. The teacher has to pay attention to all the children in the room, and cannot be involved in play with only one child. Her role in this setting is to watch the play, rather than to participate. From Ola's point of view, he might experience that his expressions and his meaning-making is not important or valued by the teachers. His voice is not heard in this situa-

tion, which is opposite to the intentions of the Convention on the rights of the child.

The other example is quite different. Here the teacher has her attention towards one child and she encourages his efforts to build with the Duplo blocks. Gunnar is confirmed as a person entitled of opinions and rights to practice important skills for future play.

In the last example, Gunnar is confirmed first and foremost by the other children. When playing alone, it seems that he does not have enough encouragement to go on with his desire to run, but when the other children enter the room and start running, he is "dragged" into the running activity and his participation is accepted by the others. By including Gunnar in the running, the other children confirm his right to participate according to his prerequisites.

#### CONCLUSION

In this article I have explained how political documents and the Norwegian government emphasize learning as a product of teaching and a result of pre-defined goals. In my opinion, it is necessary to critically discuss the notion of learning in a broader context, including *democratic education* in a more holistic view of children's life-worlds. Children create meaning in their spontaneous interaction with the environment and this play facilitates their overall development. It creates an interaction between the child and the world in a here-and-there movement (Gadamer, 2004). What needs to be further discussed is the teachers' role in these interactions. My impression is that when there are too many children in the group, teachers have to monitor the children's activities and thus have no time to interact properly with the children in their play. When only watching, it is difficult to capture the meaning in the children's activities, as seen in the example of Ola who was pretending to be trolls in the mouth of the young boy.

However, it is a challenging task to know when and in what way the teachers should intervene in the children's play. If the play is to be maintained, the pedagogical work cannot be governed by a strict goal-means-thinking (Gadamer, 2004), or mapping. The teacher's role may vary from active support to monitoring children's interactions, "on the basis of carefully observing the children *and* oneself as a caregiver" (Løkken, 2000, p. 74). In my opinion, this is far more important than all mapping activities and

a too strong concern for preparing children for school.

By interacting with the children in a playful way from the perspectives of the children, teachers can strengthen the children's experiences of participating and empowering their democratic education. To counter the critics' claim it is perhaps better to ask if there are too few teachers with adequate education and too large groups of children. The OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) report, *Starting Strong III* (OECD, 2012), emphasizes on high staff-child ratio, low group size and qualified teachers as the main criteria for quality. But to a large extent, this is a question of values that politicians have to answer.

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