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Communities of children: participation and its meaning for learning

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Abstract
This article is concerned with ways in which children's social lives appear to have meaning and with children's subjective orientation in the transition from kindergarten to school. The article presents the development of theoretical concepts for ways in which we can understand children – by the aid of the analysis of empirical data dealing with children's subjective views of the life they are living and participating in. In other words, if we wish to understand children and children's actions, we also have to conceptualise the world in which they live just as that world is seen by children at the place where they stand and where they participate. The article covers on the one hand the presentation of the principal findings of a major research project and on the other a more detailed exploration of the concept of communities, including definitions of what children share and of how what they share links to what adults arrange for them. It also presents arguments for how a social approach to children's issues paves the way for more productive measures than an individual approach offers.

Keywords: Children's communities, child perspectives, social practice, participation, starting school, transitions.

Introduction
This article is based on research carried out in a Danish context during a period when the start of children's schooling has been on the political agenda. This has been a period when there have been heavy focus on suggestions that Danish children do not learn to read fast or well enough – compared with children from other countries; a period when, fuelled by these discussions, teaching plans have been introduced into daycare and increased demands have been made on academic content in school – starting out with reception classes, which has now become obligatory for all children (Ekholm, Mortimore, David-Evans, Laukkanen, & Valijarvi, 2004; Ellegaard & Stanek, 2004; Haarder, 2005; Skolestartsudvalget, 2006)

This period can be characterised by its heavy focus, both professional and political, on what adults believe that children need in and through their kindergarten and pre-schooling. This article will illuminate this field of study from another angle – without this implying that it is divorced either from the political debate or from adults' wishes as regards children. The article will focus on the transition from kindergarten to school from the viewpoint of the children and will present analyses of how this transition presents itself to the children and what appears to be significant for children in this pre-schooling. The focus is on what children as subjects seem to be directed towards and engaged in and is based on a faith that what children are engaged in is relevant knowledge for adults who have specific wishes for children – such as that they should achieve higher academic standards.

Empirical data
The empirical data on which the article bases its analyses has been collected by following a particular group of children from different kindergartens into the same reception class and afterschool care and on into 1st grade. The empirical material has taken its point of departure in a particular reception class. Taking as my starting point this school – situated in a sizeable provincial

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town on Zealand in Denmark – and the prospective reception class, I could find those kindergartens that would potentially send children to that school. In fact, 21 children started in the class I was following, and these children had gone to eight different kindergartens. I managed to observe 15 of the 21 children in four different kindergartens during the course of the spring, in other words during the last six months of their time in kindergarten. I subsequently followed the group of children for the first three months of their time in reception class, in their classes, in the breaks and during the afternoons in their afterschool care, and repeated this for the first three months of 1st grade.

The primary research method was to observe the children and in addition to interview some of the children and all the primary professional adults around the children – in other words the reception class teachers and the class' primary pedagogue[i] in the afterschool care as well as the class teacher in 1st grade and the head of the reception department. In addition I have taken part in some of the meetings held by the professionals about the children and have had access to minutes from other meetings.

The theoretical basis

The article takes its point of reference in a range of perceptions of social practice that are particularly indebted to social practice theory (Chaiklin & Lave, 1993; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999) and to critical psychology or the science of the subject (Dreier, 1979, 1997b, 2008; Klaus Holzkamp, 1985; Tolman, 1994), which in turn is fundamentally inspired by Marxist philosophy and dialectical materialism. In a Danish context, this theoretical base has been incorporated into research into childhood and further developed by, among others, (Højholt, 2006, 2008a, 2008b, 2012, in press; Højholt & Kousholt, 2009; Kousholt, 2008, in prep; Morin, 2008b; Røn Larsen, 2012; Røn Larsen & Stanek, 2015; Stanek, 2013).

The theoretical basis for the article sees people as fundamentally active *social* beings, which means, for example, that when we wish to understand the actions of an individual child, we must understand those actions by looking at what other children and adults around that child are doing. Against this basis it becomes relevant to address the research question about communities, for, even though the point of reference is the theory of people as social beings, we lack knowledge about and concepts for children's participation in and across the various institutional contexts in which they find themselves. We lack "concepts allowing us to focus on *how* they participate and *link* their participation in different places – and how through their involvement they *develop* the ways they participate" (Højholt, 2000, p. 44, my translation), and it is precisely this kind of knowledge that the present article is attempting to contribute. The question is, then, not whether children are social beings but how the social dimension is acted out and acquires meaning.

Children's history

My concern with communities of children relates to the fact that we know too little about the significance that children have for each other, while at the same time we have substantially organized our society around the idea that children live very large portions of their lives in or across institutions – together with other children. Another aspect of an understanding of children that my research question is directed towards is that we have to understand children as individuals who bring their history with them when they start out in a new institution. It is important here to bear in mind that what I am trying to direct attention towards is a particular view of that history. Psychology has traditionally been involved in looking at childhood or early family history – at narratives that, speaking bluntly, can be associated with psychodynamic attachment theories and

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mother-child relations (Bowlby, 1969; Bowlby & World Health Organization, 1964; Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975; Stern, 1998). Throughout my research I have been trying to extend the perception of people's 'history' and in the analyses presented here I shed light on the significance of children's institutional history and of the history linked to life with and among many other children. If the article directs attention at 'the significance of other children' this should not be taken to mean that I am arguing that the family is without significance but should be seen as indicating meanings in institutional history that have been overlooked and that challenge any one-sided focus on family history.

When children in Denmark start school and afterschool care they carry with them a kindergarten history, and that personal history has a significant influence on their actions towards other children that they encounter both at school and at their afterschool care. If, then, we wish to understand children and their actions at school, we should first achieve an insight into the relations they are part of across the various places they occupy in their everyday lives. With this in mind, I shall now present an empirical example – an example that besides presenting theoretical points can also demonstrate how I as a researcher navigated cross-institutionally – together with the children – in generating empirical data, and how the analyses have been conducted by drawing links between and across lives led by children (Dreier, 1997a, 1999b) through their subsequent institutional life.

Empirical example

Using the following analysis I intend to show, firstly, how a group of boys I have followed through the research project appear to participate differently in the community of children, and, secondly, how they appear to create conditions for each other's participation. One of the objects in focusing on children's communities has been to analyse *how* children are *co-creators* of each other's *opportunities for participation*. Later I will analyse an example of two girls to argue for the significance of the concept of participation and, in particular, for its double meaning. In this first analysis I focus on two of the boys. You will be introduced first to the boys at their kindergarten – on the kindergarten's football pitch:

> *Five boys are on the kindergarten football pitch. Four of the five boys are playing a football match, while one boy manage to blow like a referee's whistle. Peter is one of the four football players. He seems to be 'captain' of the one team – yes, in fact you might have cause to see him as the captain of both teams, for it is he who manages and allocates all the players' tasks. He decides who is on whose team, who will be in goal and who will play upfield. Even though another boy is carrying the referee's whistle and the red and yellow cards, it is Peter who tells the referee when to blow. He decides the rules of the game and reverses previous rules as the game develops, changing the team's make-up whenever he pleases. A sixth boy, William, is off the football pitch and does not therefore take part in the football game as such. Once in a while he tries to move onto the asphalt, but each time he is sent off again, and his set task is to fetch the ball every time the others kick it off the pitch.*

The boys' opportunities for participation look more or less the same regardless of where I meet them in the kindergarten; each time it is the same 'captain' and the same 'ball-fetcher'. These differing positions in the community of children have many different meanings, as another example from the kindergarten analyses will help to illustrate.

> *In a situation where the same group of boys once again find themselves on the kindergarten's playground but this time not on the football pitch, Peter feels thirsty at a point when the children are not allowed inside. On the pretext that he needs to have a pee, Peter goes in regardless and then takes a drink of water, but also tries*

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> *to get some water carried out to the playground. The adults notice his attempt to bring water out and stop him. Back on the playground, the water-fetching develops into a game or joint challenge to the boys – i.e. to work out how to fetch water from the toilet. A couple of the other 'footballers' also try to bring water out, but like Peter they are 'discovered' and prevented from bringing water out with them. In the end William offers to try – and he manages to succeed in getting into the toilet and fetching water in a cup, which he then carries out to Peter under his sweater.*

The adults see Peter and the other 'footballers' as those who are 'on the ball', so to speak. They have to keep an eye on them, for they can hit on ideas that 'aren't allowed', like fetching water from the toilets. William on the other hand is not a child that they need to keep an eye on to quite the same extent. He does not do as many 'cheeky things'. William is described by the adults as being a little too reserved. A note of a transferral meeting between the kindergarten and the school records how kindergarten personnel use words like 'transparent' to describe him. I will not go deeper into an analysis of the staff's description of the children here. The point is to indicate that it seems possible to trace a reciprocity between the ways in which the boys participate in children's communities with each other and the way in which adults in the institution think and describe the children, which in turn has meaning for the opportunities the children have to act both noticed and unnoticed in that institutional space. In that way links are established between a) what the boys do based on their opportunities for participation in children's communities, b) the boys opportunities for action in relation to an institutional framework and its rules and c) the way 'the adults' perceive the boys' potential actions.

The concept of community

My reason for focusing on children communities is linked to aspects of my theoretical starting point. Dorte Kousholt makes use of the concept of community as a specification of the concept of practice and describes her application of the concept as follows:

> "It is a perception of participants as conditions for each other and co-creators of each others' possibilities. This should be understood in both a 'positive' and a 'negative' sense – participants in a community can contribute both expansively and restrictively to each other's possibilities. The concept of community can be seen as an analytical view of people's collective life with each other, one that directs its focus at how what is collective is organised and recreated through people's actual dealings together and in relation to each other. It involves on the one hand an awareness of what the collective is, how this is organised and how it structures the participants' possibilities, and on the other hand it involves an awareness of how the collective has a different appearance and different significance for participants in communities." (Kousholt, 2006, p. 32 , my translation)

In communities, then, we structure each other's possibilities, and at the same time the collective both appears different and is given different meaning. The point of using the concept of communities is to underline the fact that people act together, that on the one hand we create conditions for ourselves and others and on the other we have the opportunity to alter those collective conditions that appear different to us and to others. It is, therefore, a concept that can underline and draw attention to *connections*. The point is that, despite complexity, opposing rationales and conflicts, actions are collective.

The concept of a community of practice has been adopted from the Danish translation of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's concept (Lave & Wenger, 1991), which points towards an

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understanding of the meaning of the societal for a subject's actions. For me there is a point in underlining precisely this view by means of the concept of communities of practice. The sociatal structures should be understood as ubiquitous and not something that 'floats above us' or 'somewhere out there'. Societal structures should be seen through the participant's production and reproduction of the societal institutional arrangements (Dreier, 2006).

Mørck criticises research that includes teachers and pupils as participants in the same community of practice (Mørck, 2006, p.39). Mørck's argument is that teachers and pupils will typically have widely differing positions and reasons for participation in relations of action (see my earlier comments on the complexity of action relations). Her understanding of communities of practice links to Lave and Wenger's joint explanation of the concept, which includes the wording that "participants have a common understanding of what they are doing and what it means for their life and their communities" (Mørck, 2006, p.38).

It is fairly self-evident that pedagogues, teachers and pupils will participate in the practice of social institutions from a variety of positions and for a variety of reasons, but my analysis also shows that, if we look at these categories on their own, then the category of pupils, for example, or in other words children, will not participate in social practice from one and the same position either. Children certainly do not always exhibit a common understanding of what they are doing. Often, childrens' play appear to be a prolonged negotiation concerned precisely that common understanding of the content and pivotal point of their play. To say that children and adults do not form part of social practice for the same reasons and that they have varying perceptions of what that practice is to be about does not alter the fact that they form part of that practice as mutual conditions for each other's participation. My use of the concept of communities of practice is intended to sharpen the analyses of participants as conditions for each other and, both in an extended and a restricted sense, co-creators of each other's possibilities in an ongoing societal reproduction. And here I can certainly see contributions from both teachers and pupils to a common practice.

It is important to point out here that I make a distinction between the concepts of children's communities and children's communities of practice by including adults in children's communities of practice, while the term 'children's communities' connotes the childhood life that children spend a large part of their time at institutions participating in without the direct participation of adults. And I would again like to stress here that adults continue, of course, to be participants of a kind in children's communities, even when they are not physically present, just as 'the other children' have a significance at times and in places where they are not physically represented. It is important to emphasize that what we have here is a conceptual and theoretical devision. The examples that have been given of the analysis of footballers and water-bearers illustrate how children's communities and children's communities of practice should not be seen as separate but closely bound to each other and mutally co-constituent. The possibilities for action of individual children are linked in a complex network to the actions, possibilities for action and ways of thinking of other people. The point of the analyses has been to show how important it is that children's adults gain a close insight into and understanding of what is at stake for individual children in the community of children those adults are not directly involved in. For this reason I have needed the above-mentioned concepts to be able to direct particular focus on these situations.

Children as conditional for each other

Let us continue a little further with our particular example.

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As we approach the end of spring, the big children from the kindergarten in question are on a visit to the school they will start attending after the summer holidays. The boys from this kindergarten are all going to start at the same school, but they are divided into three classes. On the school visit the children meet their future classmates, and on this visit Peter realises that he will be in the same class as William after the summer holidays. When the boys return to the kindergarten later that same day, I observe that Peter spends a lot of time walking round with one arm around William's shoulder and that, when they play football that afternoon, William has suddenly come onto the football pitch.

One aspect that this part of a broader analysis can illustrate is that we must understand children (and people as a general rule) as conditional for each other's possibilities for participation. In the observation presented above, what is noteworthy is the way Peter contributes to creating the conditions for William's possibilities for participation in the community of boys at the kindergarten. But at the same time these conditions also work the other way around. Peter cannot participate from the position he has unless the other boys place particular conditions at his disposal. However, what the analysis has particularly contributed to clarifying in my reflections throughout the research process is the way in which social conditions structured by adults in a completely different space, far from kindergarten children's life on the football pitch, can have concrete meaning for children's participation. The fact that a group of adults at a nearby school divide children into various classes and present this distribution to the children appears potentially to have major significance for the children's future possibilities for participation.

Structures as conditional for children's participation

According to my observations and analyses, what gives William a new and more central position in the community is neither fortuitous or individual or something that happens 'inside' William' but an interplay between the structuring of school classes and what this structuring sets in motion between the boys in the entire group of boys – in other words what the boys choose to do when confronted with the prospect of the new structures. Put in more theoretical language, this is precisely the dialectic between the structures and the subjective actions analysed out in the particular example given above and exemplified between William and Peter. The concept of structure here becomes one that is applicable to grasping the specific life of the indvidual in societal contexts (Dreier, 2006).

If we follow William and Peter into the schools reception class, we find them together with their mates from their kindergarten every single break. Even though this group of boys have ended up in three different afterschool care centres, they take turns to meet up at each other's care centres. When they start school, knowing each other from their kindergarten plays a major role in determining 'who they go around with', and this is a pattern that applies to all the children starting in the class I am following. Mutual relationships from previous contexts – in other words, the children's institutional history – is brought into the new community of practice. Peter can often be observed sitting, looking out of the window, when the other classes are out on the playground. He often sits, sending messages through the window to the other boys from his kindergarten, and when the doors between the classes are open, he sends signals to the others using gestures or by shouting across to them.

The boys he is signalling to also have their focus and attention on the kindergarten community. In the breaks, they come into the classroom to him or wait for him out on the playground. Even

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though the other boys have their attention directed at assembling the children from their kindergarten, the fact that his children's community from kindergarten has been broken up seems to create problems for Peter when he starts school. To be the 'captain' for a child community that he is no longer close to has become a more difficult task.

The analysis of Peter as subject here indicates the significance of gaining an insight into children's personal histories, their involvement and their direction of focus. Peter did not appear to be disinterested in school and the tasks his teachers attempted to involve and engage him in, but his subjective participation could be characterised as split between the school's agenda and the major task of dealing with the conditions for his possibilities for participation in the children's community. His attention was taken up primarily with attempting to control his social life, which had been fragmented and pieced together in new ways thanks to decisions about children's placement in various schools and classes, which had been dictated by social demands and structured by adults. This is conditions of life that all school children starting at school are confronted with and which they have to find their way into and out of. At the same time, conditions for finding a personal way through are different for different children. As an individual, Peter with his subjective intentionality appears to be directed towards assembling a large group of boys in order that they can, for example, play a game of football. His subjective intentionality appears to be linked to his experiences of when life as a child in institutions is fun, but the conditions under which he assembles a large group of boys alter in the transition from kindergarten to school.

In the particular example of Peter, he ended up giving the impression to his reception class teacher that he had difficulties in concentrating At a meeting with various professionals dealing with the children a speech therapist (ST) and the reception class teacher (RCT) exchanged the following comments about Peter:

RCT: He doesn't know what we are supposed to be doing, he doesn't understand the tasks and he loses the plot. Sometimes he sits there looking out of the window. But then he can – I mean, if you put him on the spot, like in that rhyme thing we just did, I put him on the spot at one point and asked "What, um, have you got a suggestion?", and then he simply came out with an answer! But it looks as though he's bored. I mean, a mix of him being bored and losing the plot and

ST: And kind of a bit restless, isn't he?

RCT: Yes, that, too. He sits there and fiddles with things all the time. His hands need to be placed on his thighs or wherever you feel they should be placed if you want his attention.

ST: I think of him as a boy who is very motivated to learn as long as he has that calm and structure around him.

RCT: I think so, too.

In this extract from a longer conversation, what strikes me is on the one hand that the reception class teacher explains that Peter can answer her question when she asks him directly, and on the other that the speech therapist judges that Peter 'is very motivated to learn'. The speech therapist is aware that structures create the conditions for children's development and learning. She considers that Peter needs 'that calm and structure around him'. For the speech therapist, creating that calm and structure involves moving Peter from his new class into a special class with fewer children, which can be seen as expressing the perception that concentration will materialise if only Peter

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cannot see so many other children – a perception that is very common in those who work with 'children with special needs' (Morin, 2007, 2008a, 2008b; Røn Larsen, 2011, 2012; Stanek, 2013).

The point I wish to emphasise in this analysis is that it appears that Peter lacks concentration most when he *loses his overview* of the other children. From the perspective that I have chosen for the analyses of my observations, it appears that 'calm and structure' is to be found by, for example, on the one hand helping him and his kindergarten friends to find places and ways to make the arrangements they wish to make – in other words to support them in what appears to be important for them. On the other hand, that 'calm and structure' can be achieved by taking as a starting point the child life that he finds himself amidst – that is, a period in which the children's communities are being split up between various places and are thereby more difficult to uphold. It is, however, not simply a matter of looking back into the life of a child. We also need to address the children's everyday life in a particular and situated way. It also appears to be relevant to take a close look at what is being played out for Peter in the framework of his new class – what is it that he is 'lacking concentration' in?

If we wish to understand what come across as Peter's 'difficulties in concentrating' – in other words the particular way in which Peter chooses to take part in classes at school at the start of his time in reception class – we need to start by understanding the *reasons* for him acting in the way he does. And the reasons for him acting in the way he does need to be seen in a particular and situated way. We need to take a closer look at the contexts that Peter finds himself in when he becomes more concentrated on making arrangements with children from his kindergarten than on following the agenda that his reception class teacher attempts to involve him in.

Reasons for action

One of the new classmates Peter meets is Patrick. Patrick and Peter are to share a table from day one, which means that these two are closest at hand to help each other when they are working on their various school tasks. It also means that they have to hold hands every time the class goes anywhere, for example on a tour of the school, to and from the gym and the library or when they are out on an excursion.

Patrick has started in the same class as two of his friends from kindergarten, Tobias and Michael. Tobias and Michael have been placed next to each other, and it follows that they, too, like Patrick and Peter, are closest at hand when they do their schoolwork and have to hold hands when they go on a walk outside the classroom. It appears to be very important for Patrick that he signals to Tobias and Michael that he would really like to continue being 'best friends' with them. He puts a lot of energy into trying to follow their conversations and latching onto their games in the breaks and in the afterschool care. Tobias and Michael do not exclude Patrick, but it does not seem to be as significant for them to send clear and reassuring messages to Patrick.

In the kindergarten I usually observed the boys together from morning to afternoon, and if they were not together it was extremely rare for this to be a separation structured by adults that they needed to deal with. At school, conditions structured by adults – in the above example, who will sit next to whom – appear to confront children with unequal possibilities and limitations. It looks as though the positioning of Patrick, Michael and Tobias in the class might be the reason for Patrick feeling that it was very important *not* to collaborate with Peter. Every time the class is to go for a walk, I observe Peter reaching a hand out to Patrick and Patrick hiding his hands and refusing to hold his hand. When doing his schoolwork, Patrick usually turns his back on Peter and signals in a

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variety of ways that he is not interesting in working with him. On the other hand, every time he has the chance, he moves across and sits next to Tobias and Michael instead. The teachers often tell Peter and Patrick that they have to hold hands and help and be nice to each other, but this makes no difference to Patrick's reluctance.

Seen through my eyes, placing Peter next to Patrick appears to be contributing to Peter using so much energy when he starts school on maintaining the children's communities from his kindergarten. Children have various reasons for acting as they do, reasons that have a bearing on the ways in which they participate in structures and act upon conditions. There are reasons for children's communities developing in the ways they do. And here the point of my analysis is that Peter's positioning next to Patrick – seen in conjunction with Patrick's actions – contributes to strengthening Peter's need to continue to direct his attention towards the community of children that as far as the majority is concerned lies outside the classroom.

Difficulties in one context links to other contexts

Difficulties in communities of children at school appear to have links both to life at kindergarten and to life at afterschool care. William's experiences of being positioned at the periphery of the community of boys for most of his time at kindergarten, for example, seems to take on a significance for him, so that his newly-acquired access to a place at the centre in relation to Peter makes him devote far more attention to retaining this social position than to participating in the school's agenda. Of greater concern for William is that it appears that during his time in 1st grade – for various reasons explained elsewhere (Stanek, 2011) – he needs to expend more energy on retaining Peter's attention, and that one of the ways that William discovers 'works' (he has actually already discovered this at kindergarten) is to be the one 'who does what you're not allowed to', as in the earlier example of the water-bearer. When he is 'cheeky', 'answers the teacher back' or 'doesn't do as he's told', Peter laughs, and they play together in the break.

Conflicts, challenges and positionings that play themselves out at kindergarten do not disappear simply because children move on to school and afterschool care. On the contrary, they seem to move on with them, not necessarily in unequivocal or direct forms but as historical experiences of ways and possibilities of participating, which are given subjective significance in the encounter with new constellations of communities. Communities of children appear to be extremely significant not only according to children's wellbeing at school, of course, but also for their possibilities for participation in the school's agenda. If we adopt this perspective, we can on the one hand initiate a discussion about how kindergarten can best tackle their task of 'preparing' children for school. On the other hand we can start to discuss the professional focus on children's social life *in* school, if the theory tells us that 'learning' cannot be separated from 'social life', but that learning should be conceived precisely as something that takes place *through* participation, which makes it especially important to work with what children are participating *in*. (Stanek, 2011, 2013).

Difficulties of participation

Let me go on to give yet another example from the analysis, which is useful in illustrating the point about the importance of incorporating knowledge of children's communities in professional work around children's learning, an example that can sharpen our appreciation of the significance of the concept of participation and not least its double meaning. The example relates to a girl called Marie who lags behind academically in relation to most of her classmates throughout reception class and especially in 1st grade.

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Marie starts in the reception class with her best friend from kindergarten, Frida. Frida and Marie started in daycare together when they were one year old and have followed the same path ever since. The girls have been very close, have played together every day both at the institution and regularly at home ever since their daycare days, but their relationship has also at times seen violent conflicts when Frida occasionally tried to distance herself from Marie – especially after the end of their time in kindergarten and when they started school.

Information about the girls' deeply shared and at times conflicted past is not passed on to the school in my material, presumably because, among other things, the conflictual development in the girls' relationship is not taken seriously in their kindergarten and because this are not regarded as relevant information to give the school. At the same time, the school itself make no attempt to seek out information of this kind. But in the particular case of Frida and Marie it seems as though these conflicts take on considerable significance, especially for Marie. The conflicts appear to revolve around disagreement between the girls as to how often and with whom they are to play. Aside from Marie, Frida has started school with her neighbour, who does not know anyone else. Frida feels some kind of obligation and interest in playing with her neighbour. At the same time she also knows a couple of the other girls, with whom she has gone to gymnastics. For Marie, on the other hand, Frida is her primary contact and she wants to retain her kindergarten friendship with her. The conflicts arise when Frida decides that she is going to play with some of the other girls she knows and does not wish to include Marie in the game. Marie is upset and feels frustrated at Frida's decision, and, unlike Frida, she does not have other children waiting for a chance to play with her. When Marie gets upset and frustrated, she also often ends up being very angry – often in ways that lead to her letting loose a mass of foul language. As a rule, adults and other children do not become involved in these conflicts between the girls until Marie has become angry, at which point it appears entirely understandable, seen from the outside, that Frida has no wish to play with Marie. The social situation around Marie develops during her time in reception class to the point where there arises a form of consensus between the children and the adults that it is easy to understand that it might generally be rather difficult for Marie to find someone to play with. The conflict between Marie and Frida appears, then, to spread into a conflict between Marie and all the girls in the class, which makes it legitimate that Marie cannot be part of the other children's games and makes the sight of Marie stomping past with her nose in the air, mouth turned down and arms firmly crossed an increasingly familiar one.

Marie's mother makes several attempts to discuss both with the reception class and with the afterschool care the fact that Marie is unhappy to come to school, and Marie's difficulties are also discussed on a number of occasions both by the two heads of the reception class, in the afterschool care and at team meetings between the reception class and the afterschool care, but without any solutions being found.[ii]

The link between Marie's social difficulties and her learning difficulties can be found, in my analysis, at the point where Marie spends more time in lessons worrying about her potential opportunities for playing in the break than in following the class and where she uses lessons to negotiate her access to the games to be played in the coming break.

I observe a considerable amount of teaching, organised especially in 1st grade in relation to the children's opportunities to learn through what is often called 'active participation', which stand in contrast to traditional 'chalk and talk' teaching, where the pupils take part passively. One example is when teaching in the mathematics lesson is organised into various 'maths workshops', where the

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children move around in the classroom playing various mathematical games. The challenge for Marie's 'active participation' in this type of maths lesson is that the mathematical games have to be played *with* other children. In this type of lesson, Marie uses more or less the entire class trying to find someone she can *play with*. This means that she rarely manages to complete the individual maths tasks.[iii]

Three months into the first year it begins to be clear that Marie is disassociated from the academic development of the rest of her class, and it seems natural to consider extra teaching or special needs teaching to address what appears to be 'Marie's learning difficuties'.

The concept of participation

The above analysis helps to sharpen the meaning of participation as a suitable concept for focusing on the complexity of children's learning processes. As Dreier expresses it, from the very start of the attempt to understand children (people) the concept of participation directs attention at the ways an individual functions and develops on the basis of what s/he is a part of and according to the way s/he participates (Dreier, 1999a, p. 78). Using the concept of participation is an attempt to conceptualise the individual using his/her personal participation in a social practice. The concept of participation is, then, one that places focus on the context of learning, both on the individual's own active participation in relation to learning and on the context in which learning and participation takes place. In the concept of participation there is, therefore, a duality in that there is both a focus on the children's participation in respect of the school's agenda and on the context in which that participation takes place – the community of practice that the school's academic agenda forms part of. In the analyses of Marie's participation, it becomes clear that Marie's difficulties in participating in the community of children in breaks and in the afterschool care – difficulties that had already begun to show themselves in her kindergarten – take on considerable significance for her difficulties in participating in teaching practice at school, and that these end up being an important factor in her learning difficulties. In ordinary teaching practice it is taken for granted that children learn most when they themselves are active participants in relation to the class. But the duality of participation is often overlooked, meaning that we can overlook the significance of what children are participating in. There is a tendency that the more we are concerned about whether children are learning what we want them to learn, the less we look at the contexts in which they are trying to learn. In Marie's case this kind of focus would mean an increased awareness and presumably an increase in efforts to tackle her 'learning difficulties', possibly in the form of special or extra teaching outside normal classes.

The decentralised view

Where should we look if we want to understand the *different* difficulties that *different* children experience in participating in the teaching practice of school? What are these difficulties linked to? And how can we act in relation to these difficulties in the best possible way? In order to get to the point at which we can answer these questions we need to look at the ways in which children participate and engage with school from their first-person perspective. What are the *children's* reasons for taking part in the school's practice in the way they do? We need to adopt a decentralised view of the teaching practice that we occasionally find that children experience difficulties in participating in in a suitable way. We need to look beyond the teacher's role with the children and the academic aims of teaching and go looking for the children and their learning practice.

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The decentralised view is linked to the criticism made by Holzkamp, among others. He has called it psychological research's 'short-circuit between teaching and learning' (Lehr-Lern-Kurzschluss, K. Holzkamp, 1995, p. 395) or the teaching-learning equation (Osterkamp & Schraube, 2013). This is a criticism of a general tendency in research to study learning (and learning difficulties) as a direct consequence of teaching, whereby the solution to learning difficulties is constantly sought through new forms of (special needs) teaching. Generally, there is a failure to appreciate the complexity of learning processes and their association with the social practice in which learning takes place. The decentralised view makes it relevant to explore the social practice in which learning takes place in order thereby to find possible solutions for learning difficulties, unhelpful actions – for example in ways of participation in teaching practices.

As Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger pointed out in their theory of situated learning, learning has to be understood as an aspect of an individual's participation in social practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). If we take this theoretical view as our starting point, we cannot understand learning simply as an individual acquisition of skills. Instead, learning has to be seen as being situated in particular contexts and linked to the conditions, possibilities and limitations that exist there. In this theoretical framework, learning is perceived as the development of participation in particular communities (Dreier, 1999a; Højholt, 2008a; Morin, 2008b; Stanek, 2011). As a result, it becomes relevant to look more closely at children's communities and, by extension, at the dual meaning of the concept of participation – that children are themselves actively participant but at the same time are a *part* of *something*. Children need to be understood *in* the context in which they find themselves and against the history and the experience that they bring with them into that context. The task of professionals as regards working with children should not solely be about instructions relating to their academic standing. Children must be helped on their way into their new environment and not simply be given a tour of its physical framework. Frida needs to be guided into her new social challenges. She lacks experience in dealing with situations in which previously different contexts for action suddenly become one and the same context for action. Frida deals with the new situation by continuing to try to keep these contexts for action separate, by saying that Marie must not take part in games when she has to play with other girls she knows – the girls need to be guided to participate in the new context *together* (Rogoff, 2008). In the same way, Marie needs to be gently helped into other new constellations of community. It is neither helpful nor productive to think that Marie is innately socially incompetent because an institutional structural change has meant that she has ended up in a difficult relation to a friend, who suddenly and incomprehensibly rejects her. We have to ask why Marie should understand what is at stake and how she should be capable of acting sensibly and rationally in a situation in which not even the adults who are supposed to look after her understand what is going on. Thinking that Marie's difficulties are individual makes solutions into a treatment of symptoms. This is not to be seen as a lack of appreciation for the potential existence of learning difficulties but as an insistence upon people as being fundamentally social. This means that human learning difficulties need to be perceived in their social context.

I have now occupied a substantial amount of space demonstrating and promoting the idea that we need to understand children's communities if we are to understand their actions. In conclusion I will show that thinking in terms of the significance of children's communities presents a challenge to yet another version of the traditionally way of thinking about children.

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About ways of thinking and their significance

The theoretical view that I have presented throughout this article is a different way to look at and understand what happens to children than the framework of understanding that real-life children actually encounter. As I have already shown, Peter was perceived as a boy who probably needed a rather smaller and calmer forum if he was going to adhere to the school's agenda, while Patrick was perceived as rather immature and the adults conjectured that starting school may have been a bit too overwhelming an experience for him.

Throughout the presentation of the analyses in the present article, I have chosen a particular communicative strategy in order to maintain a focus on 'social aspects'. If I reveal that Peter would have been 'correctly' represented in the analytical example if I had called him 'Hassan', then explanatory models rise up that point in other directions than to the boy's social life. Once Peter's background becomes other than ethnic Danish, his difficulties in concentrating are explained as being due to language or cultural difficulties and not as being linked to difficulties relating to the communities he is placed among. What the speech therapist was trying to address was 'Hassan's' language difficulties, while the social problems being played out between Peter and Patrick are understood as difficulties that are concerned with cultural differences.

An important point in the analyses in this article has been to point out that we have to understand children through their history, their particularity and their situation rather than in the abstract and through categories established in advance.

It is extremely difficult to navigate in the world without having certain categories to base our thoughts on, but we have to beware of forcing children to conform to our rigid categorisations rather than allowing our categories to be open and fluid enough to encompass the particular child.

My suggestion is that we have to understand children on the basis of the life they live alongside other children and as children who bring with them their own history. We have to understand them on the basis of the life they live between categories – and regardless of their ethnic background, gender or social class. This does not mean that we have to ignore or play down the significance of language, gender or culture, but we do need to appreciate the broader social context that children's language, gender and differing cultural backgrounds contribute to, and to appreciate that there is much besides a child's language or cultural background that plays a significant part. My conclusion here is that children's historical institutional ways of participation seem to have greater significance than we have traditionally been aware of.

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[i] In Denmark we have two different education programs for professionals who contribute to young children's education - both pedagogues and teachers.
[ii] See also Hein's research on the difficuties experienced by parents in coming to their children's rescue in a school context in Hein, 2014)
[iii] For further analyses regarding Marie, see Stanek 2011 and 2013

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