

## **Didactic Approaches to Child-Managed Play: Analyses of Teacher's Interaction Styles in Kindergartens and After-school Programs in Norway**

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Didactic Approaches to Child-Managed Play: Analyses of Teacher's Interaction Styles in

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article explores the nature of teachers' involvement in child-managed play. We approached this didactic issue through analysis of interactional situations in a kindergarten and an after-school program and by drawing on relational theory and the concept of "pedagogical tact". Qualitative material was gathered from observations and video recordings of children and their teachers in the kindergarten and the after-school program and interactional situations were analysed. The findings show that in both institutions, teachers' involvement follows three main approaches: surveillance, an initiating and inspiring approach, and a participating and interactional approach. Whether surveillance is based on judgments about safety or about rules, it seems to hamper the children's play. Children in both institution types seem to like when teachers' involvement included the initiation of new activities. Such activities often transform into child-managed play. Teachers' inspiring communications and interactions were also characterised by recognition and acknowledgement and this approach appeared to promote child-managed play. It seems important that a surveillance approach does not overshadow an initiating and inspiring approach or a participating and interactional approach in interactional situations through which teachers act with pedagogical thoughtfulness and tact.

**KEYWORDS:** child-managed play, teacher involvement, teacher surveillance, pedagogical tact, kindergarten, after-school program

## **RÉSUMÉ**

Cet article explore la nature de l'implication des enseignants dans le jeu géré par les enfants. Nous avons abordé cette question didactique par l'analyse de situations interactionnelles dans une école maternelle et un programme de garde après l'école, en s'appuyant sur la théorie relationnelle et le concept de "tact pédagogique". Le matériel qualitatif a été recueilli à partir d'observations et d'enregistrements vidéo d'enfants et leurs enseignants dans la maternelle et la garderie et les situations interactionnelles y ont été analysées. Les résultats montrent que dans les deux institutions, l'implication des enseignants suit trois approches principales: une approche de surveillance, une approche d'initiation inspirante, et une approche participative et interactionnelle. Que la surveillance soit basée sur des jugements relatifs à la sécurité ou aux règles, elle semble entraver le jeu des enfants. Dans les deux types d'établissements, les enfants semblent aimer que l'implication des enseignants comprenne le lancement de nouvelles activités. De telles activités se transforment souvent en jeu géré par les enfants. La communication et les interactions inspirantes des enseignants se caractérisaient également par la reconnaissance et la prise en compte et cette approche s'est montrée propice à promouvoir le jeu géré par les enfants. Il semble important

qu'une approche de surveillance n'éclipse pas une approche initiatrice et inspirante ou une approche participative et interactionnelle dans des situations interactionnelles au cours desquelles les enseignants agissent avec prudence et tact pédagogiques.

## **RESUMEN**

Este artículo explora la naturaleza de la participación de los profesores en el juego libre del niño y la niña. Nos aproximamos a este tema didáctico a través del análisis de las situaciones de interacción en un jardín infantil y un programa después de clases y haciendo uso de la teoría relacional y el concepto del 'tacto pedagógico'. El material cualitativo se obtuvo de observaciones y grabaciones de videos de los niños y sus maestros en el jardín infantil y el programa después de clases y las situaciones interactivas fueron analizadas. Los resultados muestran que en ambas instituciones la participación de los profesores sigue tres enfoques principales: vigilancia, un enfoque iniciante e inspirador y un enfoque participante e interaccional. Si la vigilancia se basa en juicios sobre seguridad o sobre las reglas, esto pareciera obstaculizar el juego libre de los niños. A los niños en ambos tipos de instituciones parece que les gusta cuando la participación de los profesores incluye el inicio de nuevas actividades. Tales actividades a menudo se transforman en juego libre de niños y niñas. Las comunicaciones e interacciones inspiradas por los maestros también se caracterizaron por el reconocimiento y aceptación y este enfoque pareció promover el juego libre del niño y la niña. Parece importante que un enfoque de vigilancia no ensombrezca un enfoque iniciante e inspirador o un enfoque participante e interaccional en situaciones de interacción a través de la cual los maestros actúan con consideración y tacto.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The so-called "Nordic model" offers a holistic approach to education and care. The legal basis for kindergartens and after-school programs in the Nordic countries reflects a concept of humanism, which has been predominant in different eras in Nordic educational and social history (Andersen 2009). Within this model, it is widely held that children need time and space to play as part of their everyday lives. Play is provided and organised in many different forms in kindergartens and in after-school programs. In this article, we concentrate on child-managed play. The term "child-managed play" refers to play that is organised by children themselves. The teachers might initiate play by making time, locations, and equipment available, but the choice and management of activities are entrusted to the children. There are, however, great uncertainty about if and how teachers should be involved in children's play. Teacher's involvement in children's play in education - and care programs tend to be influenced by how the phenomenon of "play" and "learning," and the relationship between them, are manifested (Pramling

Samuelsson and Pramling 2013). The aim of this article is to investigate teachers'<sup>1</sup> didactic approaches to children's play in kindergartens and after-school programs in Norway, and to discuss how teachers' roles influence child-managed play. The article is based on analyses of qualitative data gathered in a kindergarten and an after-school program. The study will gain new knowledge of how teacher's involvement styles related to children's play in these two institution types may influence further play either in a restrictive or an enriching way.

In 2012, 90% of one- to five-year-old children in Norway attended kindergartens (Statistics Norway 2012). The preamble of The Norwegian Kindergarten Act (2005) state that children need play and that children should have the opportunity to play in kindergartens (Kindergarten act 2005). *The Framework plan for the content and tasks of kindergartens* (2011) states that play has intrinsic value, but it should also form the basis for language learning, cultural awareness, physical development, numeracy, and social skills. The Norwegian after-school program is a public program for children in the first four years of school (six- to ten-year-olds). It is a voluntary program outside normal school hours but organised by the schools. While the school's focus is learning, the after-school program is intended to be leisure time, characterised by child-managed play. In 2012, 63% of six- to ten-year-old children attended after-school programs (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training [NDET] 2013).

Below we offer a conceptualization of children's play, and we approach some didactical issues that might be useful in analysing teachers' involvement related to children's play. Thereafter, we formulate a research question, and we present our qualitative study about teachers' approach to children's play.

### **The Concept of "Play"**

It is difficult to give an exact definition of the concept of "play," although many scientists in different disciplines – from philosophy to pedagogy, sociology, psychology, drama, sociolinguistics, and literature – have tried throughout history (Lillemyr 2009; Pellegrini 2009; Sutton-Smith 2001). Various theories agree on some characteristics of play, while there is disagreement about others. One approach regards play as a means of learning; another approach looks upon play as a value in itself. Still another view of play, argued by educational conservatives, is that it is a "waste of time." Further, play researchers have tended to try to divide play into different categories like *function play*, *parallel play*, *role-play*, etc. Other scientists (e.g., Bae 1996) claim that this divide may be restrictive and reductionist in relation to how children themselves explain the concept. It is,

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, we use the term "teacher" for all participating employees in the kindergartens and after-school programs studied, regardless of formal training and professional titles such as schoolteacher, preschool teacher, or assistant.

however, of great importance which approach the professionals within kindergartens and after-school programs use and how they understand play as a phenomenon. This will have influence on how they deal with children's play in their everyday lives. Although almost all theories of play emphasise the importance of play as a value in itself (Sutton-Smith 2001), there seems to be a strong conviction that the most important aspect of play is that the activity is useful in some respect: children acquire various skills through play (Sutton-Smith 2001; Øksnes 2011). Furthering this line of thought, one might claim that many scientists have an idealistic or esthetical view of play. However, this might be a veiling of the concept of play; it is important to bear in mind that play also may be rude, violent, and anarchic (Smith 1995; Øksnes 2011).

There seems to be widespread agreement that play is a typical way of being and an important cultural and social phenomenon among children (Lillemyr 2009). We find it necessary to further clarify what is meant by the concept of "play" in this article before going into an analysis of the phenomenon. Our approach takes in a wide definition of play; according to Hans Georg Gadamer (2004), we look at play more as a state of being than restricted activities. Gadamer (2004, p. 102-110) provides a precise phenomenological analysis of the phenomenon of play and emphasises its self-driven character:

*"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)*

Play is considered neither an objective nor a subjective action; the play itself is the subject. When Gadamer (2004, p. 103) writes about the "mode of being of play," he acknowledges that the player takes up a particular attitude when playing. We find it fruitful to combine this understanding with the Csikszentmihalyian (1990, p. 67) term "autotelic activity," which "refers to a self-contained activity, one that is done not with the expectation of some future benefit, but simply because the doing itself is the reward."

### **Teacher-Child Interactions in Play**

The above described understanding of children's play supports the widely held view of children's need for undirected time and space in their lives. Following Gadamer (2004), if the mode of being of play is to be maintained, play cannot be interpreted as having a targeted purpose or being a path toward formal pedagogical aims. Children experience play without comprising it as a thought-out object. Children want to play, and they create meaning through play (Gadamer 2004). Taking this starting point, we will investigate the teachers' involvements in children's play in institutions where play is particularly emphasised: kindergartens and after-school programs. Teachers' roles in this context are different from the preconditions in a formal school setting. In school settings teachers' roles are linked to structured activities, characterised by planning and goal-oriented

activities that are chosen to achieve specific learning objectives. Stig Broström (2010) follows this line of thought and argues that after-school programs, and we will add kindergartens as well, are arenas for learning based on a sociocultural understanding and that the didactic approach in these settings implies facilitating children's choices and their free expression in play.

Below we will approach these didactic issues by drawing on relational theories and the concept of "pedagogical tact." Max van Manen (1991) refers to Gadamer's concept of *tact* as a special awareness of how to behave in different pedagogical situations. Van Manen discusses how pedagogical tact may be of importance in teachers' relations to children. Pedagogical tact implies awareness to the child's experiences and involvement in the subjectivity of the other: "*To exercise tact means to see a situation calling for sensitivity, to understand the meaning of what is seen, to sense the significance of this situation, to know how and what to do, and to actually do something right" (underlining in original) (van Manen 1991, p. 146). Hence, pedagogical tact is a question of attitude more than a prescription; tact is a form of practical and professional wisdom (Gadamer 2004). An important dimension of pedagogical tact is the ability to improvise. Pedagogical tact depends on the teacher's judgment in the practical situation here and now (van Manen 1991). Some researchers combine care and love as fundamental elements in kindergartens and after-school programs (see e.g., Hughes 2010). In our opinion, these elements apply to pedagogical tact as well.*

In the same vein, Berit Bae (2004) describes two main interaction patterns in the relations between teachers and children: "narrow patterns" that are typical for a controlling teacher and "spacious patterns" that imply that children and teachers are active partners. Both narrow and spacious patterns may occur in many different situations, as for example in imposing limits for undesirable behaviour. Within a spacious pattern, the teacher may communicate the limits in a clear way, with a focus on "here-and-now," often with use of humoristic comments at the end. Further, the teacher may appeal to the child's understanding of the other's situation and to the child's self-control. This depends on a view of the child as a fellow human being, where the teacher takes into account the children's experiences, respects children's wills, lets the children be themselves, and gives children control (Johansson 2004). Within a narrow pattern, the teacher is likely to talk with a sudden and unexpected strength, without understanding the child's intentions. A narrow pattern may also involve defining accusations and refer to rules without understanding. In a narrow pattern, the teacher may be distant, and unilaterally concerned with her own intentions. The teacher may have a view of the child as irrational and that the adult knows what is best (Johansson 2004). We consider that pedagogical tact is possible only within relations of spacious patterns as described above.

During the last decades, researchers in the Nordic countries have carried out a considerable amount of research on children's lives in kindergartens and after-school programs. A significant part of the research has a pronounced child perspective and puts special emphasis on the children's own experiences of their dealings in the institutions. There has also been some research conducted that focuses on teachers' roles related to children's learning in kindergartens and after-school programs, including how play and learning might be combined in the children's activities (e.g. Ankerstjerne 2010; Lillemyr, Dockett and Perry 2013; Pihlgren 2013). Some groundbreaking studies that highlighted the teachers' roles in children's own play in kindergarten were carried out in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g., Olofsson 1996; Åm 1984), but in recent years, little research has focused on how teachers might support and strengthen the children's play itself. Despite the amount of studies regarding play in kindergartens and after-school programs, there is a lack of knowledge about how teachers' involvement influences child-managed play in different age groups. In this article, we offer a relational perspective on the teachers' role, and combine data from kindergartens and after-school programs. In this way, we hope to contribute to fill this knowledge gap.

### **The Present Study**

The research question that has guided the work for this study is: What involvement approaches to children's play do the teachers in a kindergarten and an after-school program express, and how do these approaches influence the play? Our analyses are based on descriptions and categorisations of recurrent themes from observation of teacher's involvement in children's play as they emerged in the field, and on van Manen's (1991) concept of *pedagogical tact* and Bae's (2004) concepts of *narrow and spacious interaction patterns*.

### **METHOD**

The empirical foundation of this article is material collected in the authors' respective Ph.D. projects. In addition, we use material collected by Anne Greve in a later project. Our material was originally collected for investigating children's bodily movements in after-school programs and for friendship among small children in kindergartens. Since our previous results show that play permeates bodily movements and friendship in the two institutions, we consider it possible to reanalyse the existing material with respect to play. In this way, we can make the most of material already collected without exposing children and teachers in kindergartens and after-school programs with new observations. Our opinion is that this is good utilisation of existing material.

### **Sampling and Consent**

The sample in the kindergarten consisted of two groups of children, each with 10 children under age of three years (four girls and six boys in one group, three girls and seven boys in one group), and four teachers in each



group (one male and three females in one group, four females in one group). Two of the teachers (both females) had formal pedagogical education at bachelor level. The other teachers did not have formal pedagogical education. The after-school program study is based on information collected among 36 eight- and nine-year-old children (22 girls and 14 boys) in an after-school program group and six teachers (five females and one male). Four of the teachers, three females and one male, had many years of experience working in the after-school program, but they did not have formal pedagogical education. The other two were apprentices in their education to become formal qualified child care and youth workers. Before the investigations started, we sent notifications to the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD), and we received consent from the children's parents and from the teachers who were affected by the studies. The new focus of the analysis utilised in this article is well within the informed consent that was obtained prior to the data collections. The names of the institutions do not appear in the article, and the names of participating children and teachers are changed in order to protect privacy and confidentiality. Since the studies involved small children, emphasis was placed on building confidence between the researcher and each child and the researcher withdraw from the situation if a child indicated that he/she did not want to be observed.

### **Gathering Qualitative Material**

We wanted to gain access to information from the children's life-world in the kindergarten and the after-school program, respectively, including their interactions with teachers. Therefore, observations were conducted during daily activities in the institutions. Observations in the kindergarten include 38 hours of video recordings focusing on two-year-olds and 25 hours focusing on one-year-olds. The recordings were made with a handheld camera focusing on one child at a time, but at the same time, emphasis was placed on including this child's relationships with other children and teachers during the observation period. Each observation lasted between 30 minutes and two hours. The observations included spontaneous, child-managed play and teacher-led activities such as meals, care, hand washing and dressing. They were filmed in both indoor and outdoor situations. The observations of the eight- and nine-year-old children were conducted at six locations in the after-school program area, five places outdoors and one place indoors. Each observation day, the focus was on one of the selected locations, and recordings were made when one or more of the 36 participating children were present at the place. Two cameras with attached microphones were used during the observations. The observer had the opportunity to vary focus and zoom on the main camera and was, therefore, able to record specific situations at the place. A supplementary camera, which remained untouched during the observation, was used to record the general situation of the place under observation. Up to one hour was recorded each day. Parallel to the recording, field notes were taken. The

gathered material related to the after-school program observations comprised a total of 22 hours of video recordings and 156 handwritten pages of field notes.

### **Transcription and Analysis**

Our new common research focus necessitated a new, thorough scrutiny of the collected material from the kindergarten and the after-school program. This process started with a systematic reading of all field notes and new transcriptions from the video recordings. Situations where teachers' were involved in children's play were identified in the data. Indirectly, a large part of the time in both the kindergarten and the after-school program was influenced by teachers. Even when the teachers were not directly involved in the play, the children were aware of their presence, and this seemed to regulate the activity to some extent. However, we have only transcribed episodes that we perceived as direct involvement of teachers, beyond just being present. From our observations well over 100 situations from the kindergarten and the after-school program were transcribed. Such situations can be considered as narratives with relevant points related to the phenomena studied (van Manen 1990). Thereafter, we used a stepwise analysing approach that Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) call meaning condensation. Firstly, we expressed recurrent themes related to the research question as they emerged in the field, and in terms of ordinary language. Afterwards we incorporated these meaning units into our theoretical perspective with relevant professional terminology, and tied them together to descriptive categories where the phenomena studied emerged.

### **Trustworthiness**

During the research process, steps were taken to ensure that the findings in the study reflected the children's experiences, including their interactions with teachers. We gained access to the children's and the teacher's life-worlds through participation over extended periods, and we gathered qualitative material of several types and in different ways. Due to the children's young ages, they have not commented on the transcriptions and analysis. However, we critically discussed our findings in order to find other possible interpretations of the material. We tried to bracket our own beliefs and understandings and focus on also finding cases that did not conform to our preconceptions.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

We will now introduce the results of the study as selected situations from observations and video recordings from the kindergarten and the after-school program. As a result of the analysis of the material and based on their significance for the entirety in the material, we introduce specific situations that show the characteristics and significance of the teachers' involvement in the children's play. Examples introduced in the following pages

include boys and girls in both institution types in situations where the teachers' behaviour affect the children's play. The children and the teachers mentioned in the examples are anonymized.

After repeatedly scrutinizing the qualitative material, and as a result of the analysis, three main categories of teacher approaches related to involvement in the children's play emerged: 1) surveillance, 2) an initiating and inspiring approach, and 3) a participating and interactional approach. By "surveillance" we mean situations where the teachers do not participate in the play, but keep a distance and observe for a shorter or longer time what the children do. The surveillance is either based on an apparently felt need for control in specific situations or to enforce predetermined rules. "An initiating and inspiring approach" refers to a situation where the teacher initiates and/or inspires the children's play without direct participation in the activity. When taking "a participating and interactional approach" the teacher participates and interacts in the play in a direct and interactional manner. All three approaches occur in both institutions in our material, but the initiating and inspiring approach and the participating and interactional approach are more prevailing in the kindergarten, while surveillance as well as initiating and inspiring approaches are more common, and observed approximately equally often, in the after-school program. In the after-school program we observed only a few examples of the participating and interactional approach.

Below we introduce the different categories separately in order to get a clear view. As a result of the analysis of the qualitative material, and based on the significance in relation to the entirety of the material, specific situations that show the characteristics of teacher's involvement in children's play are introduced. Importance is attached to presenting examples that show how teacher's involvement in children's play arise from a variety of everyday situations in kindergartens and after-school programs. It is important to note that all teachers did act with different approaches depending on situations. Every example described below is situation-specific, and is not considered as an expression for a general interaction style for the described teacher.

### **Surveillance**

The following example shows an approach of control-based surveillance.

*Ola (31 months) hammers with a wooden hammer, saying "Au, au, it hurts in my teeth." This is a theme from a story from a well-known Norwegian children's book. Mona, the teacher, is sitting on the floor; there are eight children in the room in many types of free play. When another teacher, Elisabeth, enters the room, Ola approaches her, looks at her, and says, "Au, it hurts my tooth." Elisabeth does not notice him; instead, she is talking to the other teacher and soon leaves the room. On some occasions the teacher tries to take the hammer from Ola, apparently because she is afraid he could hurt other children. Nevertheless, Ola clings to the hammer and refuses to give it away.*

There are many children in the room, and it seems difficult for Mona to engage in interactional play with one child at a time. Hence, she does not manage to interact properly with Ola and give appropriate responses to his approaches and initiatives. On the one hand, one might claim that Mona has little awareness toward Ola and thus shows little pedagogical tact (van Manen 1991). Yet, it seems like the situation, with responsibility for care and safety for many children, forces her to reduce her pedagogical role to the role of surveillance. According to Leach et al. (2008), teachers are less positive, more punitive, and more detached when child-teacher ratio is high. It is nevertheless interesting to observe that Mona, despite the pressed situation, does take time to talk with her colleague when she enters the room, paying even less attention to the children and their activities. Nevertheless, Ola goes on with his drama play, with no support from the teachers. He is playing all alone and is not encouraged to involve other children in his play. There seems to be a tendency for teachers to pay more attention to other adults at the expense of attention to the children. Ole Henrik Hansen (2013) finds the same tendencies in his research. There seems to be more interactions between children and teacher when there is only one teacher together with a small group of children. However, he problematizes the assumption that quality in kindergartens is only a question of child-adult-ratio. Hansen (2013) finds that the teachers' attitude toward the children is just as important as the number of children per adult. He uses the term *pedagogical love* and connects this term to care, the child's perspective, and joint attention. Pedagogical love implies closeness, involvement, and commitment. Also Eva Johansson (2004) emphasises the teachers' attitude as an important issue regarding the children's learning environment in kindergartens. One might question if Mona's approach is a result of didactical considerations or if the surveillance in this example is likely to be the result of a less thought-out approach.

The next example, observed in an outdoor area in the after-school program (see. Fig. 1), shows another typical surveillance role in institutions for children, rule-based surveillance. In this example, the nine year olds are playing in a lively manner in an area with a small playhouse surrounded by three trees. Apparently, the position of the playhouse between the trees creates possibilities for exciting climbing activities, and the children were often seen climbing there. According to the after-school program rules, it is forbidden to climb on the roof. This is justified by the responsibility for the children's safety. On the described occasion Norman chooses to enforce this rule. His response to the children's activity – emphasising the following of rules - kills the children's spontaneous play activity: "*Listen, not on the roof. How many times do I have to say it? I told you yesterday, too, right?*" Norman's intervention in this situation can be related to Bae's (2004) concept of a "narrow interaction pattern." He is moralizing and referring to the rules without taking the children's intentions and experiences into consideration. Norman seems to be more concerned about his own intentions, making the children follow the

predetermined rules, than what the children experience as a meaningful and exciting activity. In this way, the children's right to participation is ignored.

### The Climbing Area



**Fig. 1.**

The place in the after-school program's outdoor area that the children call "The Climbing Area" consists of a small playhouse surrounded by three trees.

*Ellen (9 years) wants to learn how to jump from the tree over to the roof (see Fig. 1). Karen (9 years), who is standing on the roof, instructs her. Several times Ellen is on the verge to dare. Toni (9 years) encourages her: "You know, I thought carefully – you can do this, I said to myself." Ellen tries again, but withdraws. Again, Karen instructs her: "But Ellen, you are holding on incorrectly. Do not grab that branch." Then she demonstrates how to do it by grabbing the "right" branch. Ellen tries, but withdraws again. Karen makes an elegant, airy jump from the roof to the tree and back again. At this time, Norman (teacher) arrives, saying, "Listen, not on the roof. How many times do I have to say it? I told you yesterday, too, right?" Norman's intervention kills the climbing activity, and the girls run over to the lawn and start doing gymnastics instead.*

Other times during the observation period, the "not-on-the-roof-rule" was ignored by the children and the teachers. They seemed to consider the activity to be within an acceptable level of risk and decided to follow a more spacious interaction pattern (Bae 2004). Teachers have to make such judgments many times during a day, according to rules or not. We think the rule in this particular example matches poorly to the children's and the teachers' experiences in everyday life. According to Ellen Beate H. Sandseter (2013), a certain amount of risk and unpredictability is important to encourage children to play. Rules introduced to protect the children, and teachers who enforce these rules, may lead to unnecessary restrictions on the children's play. Teachers should not be placed in unnecessary conflicts of loyalties between predetermined rules and the children's understanding and choice. We believe it would be better if the teachers had the opportunity to consider each situation individually, based on an adapted pedagogical thoughtfulness where the children's safety and their own experiences and understanding are taken into account (van Manen 1991). Since pedagogical tact and understanding are connected to a particular practical situation, it is impossible to establish an exact set of rules or skills for the teacher. To act tactfully the teacher must have integrated a form of practical and professional pedagogical wisdom (Gadamer 2004). On the one hand, teachers are responsible for the children's lives, health, and well-being. On the other hand, they must take into account the children's integrity and right to participation.

It is important to have an awareness of how a teacher intervenes in the children's play. The teacher's didactical approach in such settings implies facilitating the children's choices and their expression in play. This requires a professional teacher's considerations about what happens in the play situation, including the risks (Broström 2010; Orwehag 2013).

### **An Initiating and Inspiring Approach**

We consider the next example, from a play apparatus that the children call "The Wheel" (see Fig. 2), as more risky than climbing on a playhouse roof. On this occasion the teacher utilises a spacious interaction pattern characterised by recognition and acknowledgement (Bae 2004).

#### **The Wheel**



**Fig. 2.**  
The play apparatus that the children call "The Wheel" is a sling suspended from a pulley (the wheel) on a wire line between two poles.

*Sophie (8 years) is preparing to take a trip on "The Wheel" (see Fig. 2). When she is ready, she sees Linda (teacher) passing by on a nearby path. Sophie shouts loudly: "Hey, Linda. Look at me!" She then undertakes an advanced ride on The Wheel. "Åh - I am surprised that you dare," Linda responds. "Me too, Linda," Rebecca (8 years) calls. Linda stops and watches. Rebecca then makes a breath-taking ride. Linda smiles in acknowledgement. When this exercise is finished, she waves and goes on her way. The girls continue with their testing and barrier-breaking play.*

The children in the after-school program studied evince a strong desire to show their movements for the teachers and to get feedback on their performances. In the described situation, Sophie and Rebecca facilitate interaction with Linda, and her acknowledging response seems to be important for further activity. She takes time to respond to the children's intuitive contact; she looks at their performances and comments in a way that shows recognition for the children's choices, including their willingness to take risks. After she has left the place, the children continue their barrier-breaking activities. Linda's interaction with the children seems to encourage further play even though she does not engage directly in the activity. With a passionate awareness, she manages to adapt didactical considerations about what happens in the situation, and she acts like a professional teacher (Broström 2010; Orwehag 2013). Her *acknowledging* attitude toward the children when they demonstrate their

advances and daring movements appear to be important. In her account of dialectic relational understanding, Anne-Lise Løvlie Schibbye (1993) takes the concept of “recognition” as the point of departure. According to this standpoint, the children must be considered as authorities in respect of their own experiences and actions (Bae 2004). Linda clearly exhibits the will to grant them such authority. Her attachment to daring as something positive appears to increase their desire to conduct more experiments and helps to promote child-managed play (Sandseter 2013).

Bae (2004) finds that adults’ interactions with regard to children’s coping often are short. When children want to share their experiences of coping, *conversation action*, the part of the conversation that is nonverbal, must be emphasised. Linda expresses recognition verbally, with both her tone of voice and her attitude, and this recognition seems to play an initiating and inspiring role in the children’s activity. She does not, however, participate in the movements of the play.

The next example is suitable to focus on what is happening to the teacher’s inspiring role and the adult-child interaction when the number of children and teachers increases:

*Five children (aged 1 to 3) and one teacher are at the playground. Dorothy, the teacher, suggests that they should go to the sandpit. “Look here,” she says. “Wow, wow.” All the children are heading for the sandpit. Eskild, 17 months old, arrives as the last child. He hesitates to climb over the timber log framing the sandpit. Dorothy encourages him, saying: “Come on, you can manage. Hold on like that.” She shows him how to put his hands on the timber log and helps him to climb into the sandpit. She gives him a pail and a shovel, talks with all the children, commenting on what they are doing, encouraging them. When more children arrive, it seems like the teacher withdraws from the interaction and more and more takes a surveilling role. Moreover, when another teacher arrives, Dorothy starts talking to her and loses some of her attention toward the children.*

Dorothy directly initiates the activity, unlike Linda in the former example. She inspires the children to come to the sandpit by shouting out loud: “Wow” and “Look.” She creates excitement and spacious interaction in the way that she does not command the children to come. Dorothy sees the young boy Eskild and recognizes his efforts to climb into the sandpit. When guiding him, instead of just lifting him up into the sandpit, she approves his efforts and shows that she believes he is capable of managing on his own. This is an example of spacious interaction (Bae 2004). She takes the time to look at Eskild in his exploring of a sand mill without interfering directly. Dorothy sees the other children in the group as long as there are not too many children. She comments about what they are doing, although many of the children do not communicate verbally. When more children arrive, the involvement of the teacher seems to change – assumedly because of a felt need of control. There is a transmission toward a surveilling role. Bae (2004), van Manen (1991) and Hansen (2013) emphasise the

importance of teachers' engagement in the children's activities and lived experiences. Teachers must show real interest in children's lives in order to participate and communicate in a way that will allow further interaction. In the example above, it is interesting to notice that in the moment another teacher arrives, Dorothy seems to lose her close attention toward the children for the benefit of the other adult. This is a tendency we have seen in several examples in our observations, for example in the above described situation where Ola was playing with a hammer. When more than one adult is present, the attention is more likely to be directed toward the other adults than toward the children.

### **A Participating and Interactional Approach**

Management documents for both kindergarten and after-school programs highlight the importance of children being active in the choice and management of their activities (Education act 2013; Kindergarten act 2005). Our previous studies show that much of the play in the two types of institutions are child-managed (Greve 2007; Løndal 2010; Greve and Løndal 2012). Teachers have important roles related to the children's play. How these roles are played, however, may be very different. Our qualitative material also shows that how the teacher's roles are played in concrete situations may have different consequences. Below we introduce two descriptions of situations that may be suitable to focus on different ways for teachers to approach children playing and some dilemmas that may arise. In the first example, showing a situation where a teacher interacts with small children, the teacher participates in the play in a direct and interactional manner.

*Mona (teacher) has taken down a box of Duplo blocks. Lisa (23 months) and Nora (21 months) are playing with the blocks with Mona. Lisa takes out some blocks. "I make house. I make house," she says. She looks up at Mona and repeats. "Yes," says Mona, with an encouraging voice. "We can do that, you know." Nora comes over to the box and begins to take out bricks as well. Mona sits down with the kids. She talks a bit about the different blocks, what colour they are and what they represent. Lisa starts putting blocks on the substrate. "I make house," she says. Nora also puts a block on the ground. "Making house, yes," says Nora. "I make house," says Lisa emphasising "I." "Yes, you too," says Mona.*

The play situation described continues and develops further. The situation lasts for more than ten minutes, and the interaction between the involved children seems to be well functioning. The play also contains several elements of learning, such as skills in building with toy bricks and in the understanding of colours. The play seems, however, to depend on Mona's supportive comments, questions, encouragement, and her prevention of conflicts. She varies between being rather controlling, for example, in matters of colours, and to be more withdrawn and follow the children's initiative. This seems to be a fine balancing act; if she becomes too controlling and learning focused, the self-driven and absorbing character of play may disappear (Gadamer 2004).



It seems, however, as if she manages to balance things. Since only Mona and two children are present in the room, she manages to interact on the premises of the play; she is able to act with an adapted pedagogical thoughtfulness where the children's own understandings are taken into account (van Manen 1991). She thus shows an attitude toward the children of them as fellow human beings (Johansson 2004) with a right to have their own experiences. This attitude might be regarded as a purely personal capacity in the teacher, but in order to make professional decisions, we are persuaded that these decisions must be based on didactical considerations made possible only with a profound knowledge of the field.

The next example shows a situation from the after-school program where some girls are playing at "The Wheel" (see Fig. 2), and that points to a dilemma regarding a teacher's intervention in child-managed play.

*Mari-Ann (9 years) is tough; she plunges from the upper level of the start ramp, and gets a venturesome ride on the Wheel. Hannah (9 years) claims that she will too. She enters the top level of the start ramp, but hesitates to start. Hannah shows with all her way of being that she really wants to take a ride, and that she is on the verge of daring to run. Mari-Ann tells her exactly what to do in the start; she has to push herself backwards and outwards. Mari-Ann is "pushing" gently. Just as this situation unfolds, Elsa (teacher) passes and intervenes. Elsa states strongly that Hannah does not have to do this if she does not dare. Mari-Ann is arguing loudly and emphasises that Hannah really wants to run from the top level. Elsa's intervention is nonetheless essential for Hannah. She exclaims to Elsa: "ÅÅÅH ..., did you really have to say that, Elsa; you ruined it!" Then she goes down to the first level. From there, she takes a controlled and calm ride.*

The described situation is about an activity that commences high up, with considerable speed and that demands precise physical action. The children consider it as an act of daring, and a ride from the top level of the start ramp seems to be significant in gaining recognition. When Hannah is on the verge of daring, Elsa's sudden intervention causes her to lose courage in carrying out the action. Based on many other situation where Elsa interacts with children in play, we have no doubt that she has good knowledge about the children and that she has an acknowledging attitude toward their play. When considering the entirety of the particular situation described, however, we believe she misunderstands the meaning of the situation on this occasion. Without having a comprehensive overview of the situation, based on participation, she highlights the risk in the situation and that Mari-Ann puts pressure on Hannah. She chooses to focus on Hannah's right *not* to carry out the activity. It is a risky and daring action, and in another situation, such an intervention could well be a tactful approach. As we analyse the entirety of the described situation, however, the consequence of Elsa's intervention is that Hannah withdraws from an action that she really wants to fulfil. Hannah's reaction to Elsa shows that she does not want such an outcome.

As mentioned, Schibbye (1993) has used the concept of “recognition” in her account of mutual relationship and understanding. She anchors the concept in the principle of mutual equality between people. When taking this perspective, it is important to see the child as an authority over her own experiences (Bae 2004). The concept of recognition seems to be highly relevant concerning the teacher’s attitude toward the playing children in the after-school program. Such a recognizing attitude toward the children’s experiences seems to be particularly important in situations where children challenge themselves to learn skills that they consider important for further play (Greve and Løndal 2012). Despite Elsa’s good intention of recognition, our interpretation is that she did not appear sufficiently to grasp the meaning of the situation. We cannot say exactly what would be right to do in this situation, of course, but it definitely shows a dilemma. We deem, however, that the teacher’s judgment should rest upon a more holistic overview, based on participation and interaction, than Elsa had opportunity to do in the described situation (Broström 2010; Orwehag 2013).

### **Analysis Summary**

The examples from the after-school program that are described in this article show examples of child-managed play that are typical of this type of institution; the children are largely autonomous when activities are initiated and maintained. If play shall last over time and proceed without major conflicts, children in kindergarten seem to be more dependent on teacher’s participation and facilitation. When it comes to the possibility of grasping the meaning of situations, close participation and involvement seem to be important for teachers both in after-school programs and kindergartens. Participation involves spending time with the children; it involves taking part in the play in close interaction with the other players. Looking back at the example where Elsa stops Hannah’s barrier-breaking activity, it is such close participation in the play from the teacher’s side that is missing. She is passing by, and she seems to grasp a wrong meaning of the situation.

It is a challenging task for teachers in kindergartens and after-school programs to consider when and how to intervene in the children’s play. Our data do not include information about how the teachers perceived the situations that we have observed and analysed. Therefore, we have not been able to consider whether their interactional interventions were directly influenced for example by resent events with negative social interaction between the children, or by dangerous incidents that had led to accidents. Such information could contribute to further depth to our analysis. We argue, however, that didactical work in institutions that emphasise children’s play requires knowledge and sufficient presence to grasp the interactions that occur between children in the play situations. Otherwise, it is not possible for the teachers to act with an attuned didactical thoughtfulness (van Manen 1991). If the play is to be maintained, the educational work cannot be controlled by a strict goal-oriented

approach (Gadamer 2004), but rather by the form of professional judgment that van Manen (1991) has described as pedagogical tact. It requires a sensitive practice where the teacher is willing to find the rhythm of the playing children, pay attention to it, and improvise together with the children. Teacher participation in children's play in the kindergarten and the after-school program is a balance between being present for the children and invading their lives. It is a matter of a sensitive interaction between the teacher and the children. This means, of course, that there are many dilemmas that the teachers have to consider, as in the example where Elsa emphasises Hannah's right to opt out of risk instead of breaking barriers. It requires both knowledge and sufficient participation to make tactful, pedagogical judgments.

## CONCLUSIONS

In our qualitative material from play among preschool and primary-school children, we have seen examples of how teachers in the kindergarten and in the after-school program can inhibit or promote play through their approaches toward the children and the situation. We see great potential in raising awareness about this. Based on our investigation, we have found that the teacher's involvement follows three main approaches: surveillance, an initiating and inspiring approach, and a participating and interactional approach. Where *surveillance* is based on judgments about safety or about rules, it seems to have a negative impact on the children's play. It is of course important that the teachers provide for the safety of the children, but it is also important that this role does not overshadow the role as an inspiring, participating, and interactional teacher who acts with pedagogical thoughtfulness and tact. The number of teachers should be adapted to the size of the group of children, and current rules should be revised in order to be meaningful for both the children and the teachers. The children in our samples, particularly the small children, seem to like that the teachers initiate new activities. Such activities often transform into child-managed play. Inspiring communication and interaction, characterised by recognition and acknowledgement, is what Bae (2004) has highlighted as a spacious interaction pattern.

In the after-school program, we have not seen many examples of teachers who participate directly in the children's play; they seem to be content to initiate play and to inspire the children verbally. It seems, however, that active participation and recognition from the teachers' side are important in this regard. We have seen that teachers "passing by" may have difficulties grasping the meaning of children's ongoing play and might intervene on wrong assumptions. In the kindergarten, the teachers' participation level is more prominent, and this involvement seems to have a positive impact on the children's play. From the example that describes how the teacher Dorothy is playing in the sandpit with a small group of children, we have seen how minor adjustments might include an individual child in the common play activity and promote the interactional process between the

children. If the interaction between teachers and children should continue to be playful, however, it is presupposed that the teacher interacts with relatively few children at a time.

The choice of approach toward children's play presupposes professional, didactical judgment by the teachers in kindergartens and after-school programs. This requires comprehensive and practical knowledge of children in the respective age groups, coupled with a sound ability to make appropriate adaptations for all children in the group. This is a profound, pedagogical competence that van Manen (1991) has described as pedagogical tact, a group of skills that characterises wise and mature teachers.

During our fieldwork, we have seen much child-managed play, and we have seen interested, inspiring, participating, and interactional teachers. In relation to the aspects we have pointed out, however, there are some challenges related to kindergartens and after-school programs in Norway. The institutions often have large child groups and low staffing levels, which tends to increase the need for surveillance. Because many employees in kindergartens and after-school programs lack formal teacher education, there might also be a lack of competence. Our study reveals the complexity of work in kindergartens and after-school programs. The teachers face many different challenges every day, for example, if a teacher should intervene or participate in the play, or if she should keep a distance and let the children play for themselves. These many considerations require teachers with knowledge and experience. In order to guarantee good quality in kindergartens and after-school programs, it is necessary that the teachers' approaches and involvements in children's play are based on practical and professional pedagogical wisdom.

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