



You and me and all of us: The significance of belonging in a continual community of children in long-term care in Norway

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Long-term care
Social life
Children's communities
Belonging
Relationships
Stories

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the significance of children's social lives and communities with other children, particularly for one group of children growing up in a care arrangement combining residential and foster care in Norway. Eight children (aged 11–17) living in care arrangements and three former residents (aged 18–27) participated in individual, paired, or group interviews. In addition, participatory observation at a social gathering of former residents was conducted. Sociocultural perspectives informed the analysis. Three overall stories were categorized: “*we do*” stories; *stories of available communities*; and *stories of me, you, and us: a storytelling community*. These stories highlight particular interconnected aspects of the children's social lives and communities within their care arrangements, across contexts, and through time. The findings emphasize the significance of consistently belonging to a community of children in care as a source of vital social participation, learning, and development and supportive and lasting relationships among children. The findings also stress the necessity of professional facilitation to enable relationships among children. These findings have implications for the conceptions of children's needs and developmental well-being while growing up in care and, accordingly, implications for the management of long-term care in terms of providing adequate developmental support and care for children dependent on the state as their overarching carer.

1. Introduction

Children growing up in long-term care are like most other children in our society; from an early age, they participate in institutionalized children's practices with children their own age, such as school, after-school arrangements, and leisure-time activities. These places of daily practices constitute important, interconnected social and developmental arenas in children's lives. Participating and navigating within and across these places of daily practices are important developmental tasks for children (Gulbrandsen, 2014; Schwartz, 2017). Children must make themselves attractive participants among other children to develop and to belong (Gulbrandsen, 2014). When children socialize within and across these daily places, they learn local codes, collaboration, planning, how to handle disagreements, activity skills, and strategies to participate with other children (Frønes, 2006). These are skills and competencies that all children need to learn in order to gain access to and succeed in children's communities. This experience-based knowledge cannot be found to the same extent in vertical child–adult relationships, which are subject to other relational conditions than child–child relationships (Frønes, 2006, p. 177). However, not all

children have equal access to the resources within children's communities or sufficient training or experience to participate. Children in care arrangements are one group of children exposed to more complex social conditions than their peers (Schwartz, 2007, 2017). In most cases, they have experienced neglect and lack proper support in daily life. They grow up outside the hegemonic family model and are supported by professional carers at residential care facilities or by foster carers, subject to other conditions than those within “ordinary” family lives (Schwartz, 2007, 2017; Ulvik, 2007). In several studies, children in care are shown to have a higher prevalence of mental health problems and difficulties at school compared to their peers (Jacobsen, Bergsund, Wentzel-Larsen, Smith, & Moe, 2020; Lehmann & Kaye, 2018), which makes conditions for their social lives with peers more precarious. However, the social landscapes where the children should assert themselves, develop, and belong are the same, which makes children in care more exposed to complexities and inequalities in everyday life compared to their peers. Indeed, several studies emphasize the importance of child–child relationships for the well-being of children in care. Yet, difficulties in this regard seem to be a recurring challenge (Emond, 2014; Rogers, 2017; Schwartz, 2007, 2017; Ulset, 2016), for

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example, to create supportive and lasting peer relationships (DeLuca, Claxton, & Dulmen, 2019), which are well documented to be a source of inclusion in a child's life (Frønes, 2006; Healy, 2011).

Based on this background, one might assume that the social lives of children in care are given particular professional and political attention. However, in the Norwegian child welfare context and in several similar societies, developmental psychologies that focus on children's emotional needs and attachments to their adult carers are highly prevalent in regard to understanding the children, the reasoning of professional practices, and the design of public care (Holmes, Connolly, Mortimer, & Hevesi, 2018; NOU, 2012; Schwartz, 2007, 2014; Ulvik, 2007). These perspectives direct the attention primarily toward the individual child and the vertical relationships between the children and their adult carers and give less attention to the horizontal relationships between children. Such theoretical conceptions are strongly emphasized in Norwegian policy documents. For instance, the latest public inquiries regarding foster care services give children's social lives little attention (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2016; NOU, 2018).

The value of children's emotional well-being and adults responding appropriately to children's dependence on care is significant. Yet, developing knowledge and theories that include the significance of children's social lives and communities with peers as an integral part of their developmental well-being appears to be a theoretical and professional challenge within the field of child welfare (Højholt, 2012, 2016; Schwartz, 2007, 2017). The current study aims to address these challenges by shifting the focus to horizontal child-child relationships and children's communities and by offering an alternative theoretical approach. By doing so, this article will contribute significant empirical and theoretical insights to the professional understanding within placements. The study draws on sociocultural perspectives that elucidate children's participation in sociocultural practices and children's perspectives as central to the study of children's lives and developmental conditions (Hedegaard, Aronsson, Højholt, & Ulvik, 2018; Rogoff, Dahl, & Callanan, 2018).

The conceptual categories *all children*, *most children*, and *some children* (Gulbrandsen, Østensjø, & Seim, 2014), which challenge frequently used labels and categories for children in care associated with marginalization and stigma, are also used to reflect and limit the reach of the category *children in care*. Children in care can be seen as "some children" in regard to their care situation. However, in other regards, they may be seen as belonging to the category "all children", as pupils, as boys and girls of different ages, and as able-bodied, like any other child in our society. The concepts are useful for reminding us of the limited reach a category should have and for considering the implications of the categories used.

The children's perspectives are examined. Their stories can shed light on areas of importance not easily accessible otherwise to help us understand and identify ways to adjust, facilitate, or develop public care in the best interest and support of the children (Gulbrandsen, 2014; Holland, 2009). The research question is as follows: *What significance do social life and communities with other children have in the stories of children growing up in long-term public care?*

1.1. Public care in a Norwegian child welfare context

In Norway, the *Child Welfare Act (1992)* regulates public care for children (aged 0–17) and aftercare for young adults (aged 18–22). The Child Welfare Act aims to secure a good and safe upbringing for children in care that is adjusted to each child's uniqueness and needs in a stable environment. Foster care is the preferred and most used alternative care arrangement, whereas residential care is regarded as a last resort (Backe-Hansen, 2011). In 2018, approximately 15,000 children and adolescents (aged 0–22) lived in public placements in Norway, whereas 77% lived in foster homes, 8% in residential facilities, and 15% in apartments with professional support (SSB, 2020). The preference for foster care was strengthened by Norwegian child welfare reform in

2004. Since then, nearly all residential homes for children under 13 have been closed. Specialized foster homes substitute for residential care (Backe-Hansen, 2011). That implies that one of the parents is a full-time carer, participates in training and receive temporary planned relief (also called respite care) that can be organized within the child or foster family's network, engaged respite families, or groups for children to attend. The Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth, and Family Affairs has decided to withdraw from respite care in the form of groups of children in care. Consequently, such group arrangements are under pressure to close down. This study explores one such respite group arrangement that is part of a long-term care arrangement combining residential care and foster care, which is quite rare in Norway.

2. Children's social lives and communities in care

Mainstream research of children's social lives and communities in public care is divided into that dealing with children who live in foster care and that dealing with children who live in residential care. This study draws on both and prioritizes studies proposing contextualized approaches to children's social lives and communities, corresponding with the outline of this study. "All children" studies form a knowledge horizon.

In past decades, research on residential care, generally concerning young people, has indicated that the use of residential facilities can involve risks because the children learn negative behavior from each other and reinforce negative behavioral patterns (Andreassen, 2003; Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999; Huefner & Ringle, 2012). The focus on peer "contagion" and descriptions of children aggravating each other's living conditions have contributed to concern within child welfare regarding whether residential care is suitable to meet children's needs (Backe-Hansen, 2011). Focusing on negative peer influence draws attention to an individual child's behavioral impact on other children and, to a lesser extent, the contextual conditions and the professional support offered to help children socialize with one another. Taking into account that children, adults, and the care systems constitute vital participatory conditions for the individual child and the children as a community (Højholt, 2016; Kousholt, 2011, 2016), it is reasonable to argue that these knowledge contributions have limitations in terms of understanding children's actions and social interplay and the broader meaning of their common living conditions.

Individualized frameworks of understanding children's social difficulties have been prominent within foster care research in the past decades, as in child care practices in general (Schwartz, 2014). These often conceptualize difficulties as individual deficiencies due to neglect, abuse, and several moves (DeLuca et al., 2019; Price & Brew, 1998). The individual consequences of neglect and lack of care should not be undermined, but rather not be made an explanatory model in itself, causing to displace contextual unequal participatory conditions into abstract conceptualization about psychological deficiencies (Højholt, 2016).

The current study responds to these conceptual limitations by shifting the focus of analysis from individual behavioral analyses to participatory and contextual analyses. This gives two distinctly different sets of lenses to understand children and what they are trying to achieve or cope with (Højholt, 2012; Kousholt, 2016). Consequently, this study will contribute with different knowledge about children's social life based on the premise that children can be seen as neither detached nor separate from their social context and participatory conditions, the matrix in which children create meaning, grow, learn, and develop (Ulvik & Gulbrandsen, 2015).

Over the past two decades, several residential care and foster care studies have, in line with interdisciplinary childhood studies in general, focused on children's agency, experiences, and participatory conditions from different angles and contexts (Egelund, Christensen, Jakobsen, Jensen, & Olsen, 2009; Holland, 2009). Theoretical concepts such as social capital, stigma, networks, friendship, everyday life, and

children's communities (Emond, 2004, 2014; Mc Mahon & Curtin, 2013; Rogers, 2017, 2018; Schwartz, 2007, 2014, 2017; Stokholm, 2009; Törrönen, 2006; Ulset, 2016) help broaden the understanding of the significance of children's social lives, children's communities, participatory efforts, and the support provided. Yet, the developmental implications of children's social lives seems to be frequently absent in the discussions or just implicitly addressed in previous studies.

Some residential studies emphasize how children in care constitute each other's close relations. Children use communities to orient themselves in life and create continuity and meaning in complicated and changing life situations (Emond, 2004; Schwartz, 2007; Törrönen, 2006; Ulset, 2016). Children in care tend to use family terms to describe their relationships with one another, which reflects their belongingness to one another (Emond, 2004; Kendrick, 2013; Törrönen, 2006). They tend to want to be a part of a community and put a lot of effort into creating relationships and friendships with one another (Emond, 2004; Schwartz, 2007; Stokholm, 2009; Ulset, 2016), which Stokholm (2009) explains in terms of children's social roots and former belonging having been cut off. By doing so, she gives the category "some children" broad explanatory significance in this particular context. In line with Schwartz (2007), who describes how the children's (aged 3–18) community created opportunities for them to learn from social participation and how the children enjoyed sibling-like relationships that at times could be caring, comforting, and contradictory, our aim is to moderate the reach of the category "some children".

Overall, valued interpersonal competencies, talents, and activity skills constituted status markers within children's residential communities, like in most children's groups. Yet, negotiating social understandings and positions could be demanding. Difficulties within children's groups could also cause children additional stress (Emond, 2004; Schwartz, 2007; Stokholm, 2009; Ulset, 2016). In contrast to previous studies, the studies presented her discuss such dilemmas as dynamics of children's groups and the support provided and not just the individual child's problem. Overall, to recognize the significance of children's relationships and to make use of the many opportunities children's communities entail emerged as a challenge to professionals, which Schwartz (2007) found to be related to the mainstream developmental psychology that informed the professionals' practice.

Some residential studies also bring to light how the children's well-being intertwines with their social lives across contexts (Emond, 2014; Schwartz, 2017; Ulset, 2016). The children's efforts in managing and connecting their social lives at school and in leisure time are also prominent in foster care studies (Madigan, Quayle, Cossar, & Paton, 2013; Rogers, 2017, 2018). Friendship relationships are emphasized as a source of support ensuring quality of life (Emond, 2014; Rogers, 2017, 2018; Ulset, 2016). Yet, children in care can struggle to build friendship relationships (Ulset, 2016), feel alone managing peer relationships cross contextually (Emond, 2014; Rogers, 2018), and strive to navigate social life within firm residential structures (Schwartz, 2017). Stigma associated with living conditions "in care" are emphasized as a concern, regardless of whether the children live in foster care or residential care (Emond, 2014; Rogers, 2017). Shared experiences of being "in care" with children in similar situations are highlighted as a source of social support that can reveal some of the pressure of being different (Emond, 2014;), help manage stigmatized identities (Rogers, 2017), and underpin a sense of belonging (Emond, 2014; Rogers, 2017; Schwartz, 2007; Ulset, 2016). Rogers (2017) found that to children in foster care, the benefits of meeting other children in care were random—a by-product of gathering children in foster care for other purposes and dependent on whether foster families were friends.

The lack of perspectives recognizing the importance of child–child relationships appears to be a recurring challenge in public child care, leaving vital developmental resources in children's lives unused in a professional manner. The lack of perspectives and its consequences for children is also highlighted in studies of other child welfare practices (Omland & Andenas, 2018) and within institutional settings for "all

children", such as school (Højholt, 2012). These challenges speak to a wider academic and professional discourse, namely how children, learning and child development are understood (Hedegaard et al., 2018; Rogoff et al., 2018; Schwartz, 2007, 2014).

In summary, the need to advance our understanding of children's social life and endeavors beyond individualized concepts and toward participatory and contextualized analyses is crucial in order to improve the participatory conditions of children in care and to provide proper support. Theoretical concepts are required to analyze children's developmental possibilities and well-being, which includes the ways in which children, adults, institutions, and formal and informal structures are constituent parts (Kousholt, 2011, 2016; Schwartz, 2007). The current study will provide theoretical perspectives that are useful for exploring and analyzing the meaning of children's social life and communities and that meet the theoretical needs identified. Empirically, this study will provide knowledge of how children's social lives and communities with peers constitute significant conditions for children to learn, develop, and belong and how professional arrangements can be a support to children in care in this regard. The care arrangement explored in the current study offers other living and structural conditions than those previously researched. This can help shed light on the significance of social life and communities in new ways, both in daily life *and* across a lifespan.

2.1. The research setting

The care arrangement "Bluehill" offers a combination of residential care *and* foster care to children aged 2–18. Bluehill consists of two residential homes for children aged 2–12, individual residential facilities for children aged 2–18, specialized foster homes, a foster care consultants unit, and various group arrangements. The vast majority of children at Bluehill have moved several times while in care and are considered to be in need of specialized residential care before they can move on to a carefully selected Bluehill foster home. The foster carers have respite care every third weekend and for two weeks in the summer. Because they had difficulty finding respite families for all the children, Bluehill started organizing groups of children and staff who spent the weekends in rented cabins and did various activities together. As the children appreciated these group arrangements, Bluehill made them permanent. Today, groups are organized by age, with up to six children in each group. The staff plan and organize the weekends, which have activity-oriented approaches, and engage children in various sociocultural practices—such as leisure time activities, excursions and overnight trips to cabins. This is balanced with time to rest, joint meals, and routine daily activities. The aim is for the children to have a nice time together and to have opportunities to share experiences associated with growing up in care. The summer holidays are arranged as a summer camp for all the children at Bluehill, with some individual adjustments. There are also trips abroad for children aged over 13. Local child welfare services usually prefer to provide aftercare themselves. Bluehill arranges several social gatherings a year on a voluntary basis, where former residents can meet together with staff. These group arrangements, which are part of the combined care arrangement, are explored in this paper.

3. Theoretical framework

Sociocultural perspectives assume that humans are cultural and social beings and that interactions and participation in culturally meaningful activities and communities are fundamental for human life and development (Rogoff, 2003, pp. 3, 51). This leads the analytical focus toward children's participation in sociocultural practices, what activities and communities they have access to, the quality of the communities, and how children are positioned and supported to explore the developmental trajectories of a given society (Rogoff, 2003).

Children's social life unfolds in everyday life and can be explored

from children's perspectives and analyzed using the concept *community of practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). The implicit assumption is that learning is situated in actional contexts of co-participation in daily life and involves an interplay between experiences and competencies—a kind of knowing in practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The form of learning that is most personally transformative is learning that involves membership in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998, p. 6). The concept community of practice is applied in the analyses of the children's stories in this study.

Combining the terms *practice* and *community* underlines the sociality of practice, of people who mutually engage in a practice and constitute a unit. When mutual engagement in a practice is maintained over time, a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavors evolves and creates bonds among the participants, constituting the community. Membership in a community of practice is thus a matter of mutual engagement (Wenger, 1998, p. 73). The ongoing interactions and negotiations around the mutual engagement produce resources that affect their practice and the community, forming shared repertoires of stories, routines, gestures, symbols, terms, actions, and the like through which experiences can be expressed. This phenomenon is called *reflexification*—where a certain understanding is given form—and in combination with participation constitutes common resources for the negotiation of meaning and further engagement in practice. This process includes negotiating what is considered desirable, less good, and appropriate behavior and discourses in which the members create meaningful statements about the world that express their membership and their identities as members (Wenger, 1998). It creates shared sociocultural practices—a shared reality.

A person has membership in different communities of practice of various interrelations and importance. Although community is often associated with positive connotations (Kousholt, 2011), a community of practice does not imply consensus, harmony, or unity (Wenger, 1998). Members can contribute both to expanding and limiting each other's participatory possibilities. Opportunities to improve one's position and explore different participation trajectories constitute a person's possibilities to learn and to experience the community and one's self in relation to it (Wenger, 1998). Communities of practice develop in larger sociocultural contexts and in relation to each other. They constitute part of a child's developmental and societal conditions (Rogoff, 2003) and cannot be reduced to a matter of the individual child's preconditions.

4. Methodology

To answer the research question and in accordance with the theoretical premises and concepts guiding the study, we employed various methods to ascertain children's experiences. Interviews were chosen as the main methodological approach and participatory observation supplementary, as it was only possible to conduct participatory observation of groups of children aged 18 or older for legal reasons.

A researcher never has direct access to the experiences of children or adults. Experiences involve interpretation and creation of meaning and come into being as part of social processes, just as empirical material produced in qualitative research does (Atkinson & Coffey, 2003). Both observations of how children participate and engage in social practices and their own stories of how they participate and engage in social practices across contexts can help in acquiring knowledge about children's experiences (James & Prout, 1997; Ulvik, 2014). In this study, the researcher had the opportunity to observe several of the Bluehill environments researched and some foster homes. These observations were used in the interviews as common references and to help contextualize situations and experiences. For the larger study of which this article is part, various methodological approaches were used, including fieldwork, interviews, and readings of the institution's enterprise documents. This empirical material constitutes the context for how the care arrangements were organized.

4.1. Field anchoring, selection, and recruitment

The study was conducted from 2017 to 2018 by the first author. The Bluehill care arrangement was chosen because it is one of the few remaining care arrangements offering residential care to children under 13 and in combination with foster care. Children, young people, and former residents were selected to provide a breadth of descriptions of experiences growing up in care.

A subsidiary goal of the fieldwork was to support the recruitment process, which proved complicated for legal and practical reasons and in terms of the time available. Staff were crucial in this process. They helped determine which children, youth, and former residents to invite. They obtained parental consent to interview children under 16 and provided participants with initial information about the project and the researcher, which helped build trust between the researcher and the participants and carers. Children whose parents were not available to consent on their behalf could not participate, which reduced the number of children invited. Eight children aged 11–17 and three former residents participated in interviews. Six former residents and five staff members participated in the social gathering where participatory observation was conducted.

4.2. Interviews and fieldwork

Inspired by the life-mode interview approach (Gulbrandsen, 2014; Haavind, 1987, 2020) and the life-story approach (Atkinson, 1998), the interviews explore the children's and young people's perspectives of everyday lives across contexts and through times of changing age and care conditions. The interviews were adjusted to each participant's age and life situation. For example, with the young people the interviews had more of a retrospective focus than with the younger participants. Time, places, and the cyclic nature of daily life formed the structuring and contextualizing principles (Haavind, 1987, 2020). The participants were invited to talk about their daily life endeavors and experiences within and beyond the immediate time. To support the talk of the past and not just turning points only (Narayan & Georg, 2003, p. 125), contextualizing questions were asked—for instance, what their room looked like and what they used to do during the breaks at school. Eight participants were interviewed individually, two with their carers present, and four in group or paired interviews. Some were interviewed twice, individually, or in pairs to broaden the exploration of the group arrangements that emerged as important to all the participants. Paired interviews unfolded as an interaction between the participants (Wilson, Onwuegbuzie, & Manning, 2016), which created a space of joint reflections, reminiscing, and negotiations between the participants, reflecting the significance of the relationships between them. The relational aspects of group arrangements emerged at the social gathering too. The focus of the participatory observation was to learn more about the relationships and interactions between the participants, which topics they were concerned with, and the organizing and conduct of the social gathering.

To ensure the participants were comfortable while participating, they had a say in the facilitation of the interviews. The youngest participants were interviewed at their homes, while one child preferred to go for a walk. The interviews with the young adults were conducted at the local library, at the interviewer's workplace, in localities of the care arrangement, or in a café. The interviews lasted between one and two and a half hours, except for two interviews with the youngest participants that lasted less than one hour. The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and anonymized. The social gathering lasted approximately four hours, and field notes were written afterward.

4.3. Research ethics

Ethical approval to conduct the study was granted by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (project ID: 54684, 55645). Formal conditions

regarding voluntariness, the right to withdraw, and confidentiality were communicated on several occasions and in cooperation with staff and foster carers. If there was an impression of resistance to participate, attempts to make appointments ended. Despite some reported stress prior to the interview, the participants mainly described the interviews as positive experiences. We ensured everyone had someone to talk to after the interviews, and all were contacted the next day. The participants have been given pseudonyms for anonymization.

4.4. Analyses

Forming analyses was an ongoing process (Fangen, 2010; Kousholt, 2018) that began with the anchoring of this project in the field of practice. Insights that arose during the interviews drew attention to Bluehill's group arrangements. During the analytical reading of interview transcripts and field notes, we used a wide-angle "lens" to allow a broad search for themes concerning the children's social lives and communities. Analyses were first performed on the individual interviews and then across all interviews. Differing or similar descriptions of topics, dilemmas, and nuances were searched for, which produced new questions that led to new readings. To grasp the compound meanings the group arrangements seemed to generate in the informants' lives, we looked at how they talked about their participation in these social practices and narrated central themes, focusing on narration as construction of meaning (Bruner, 1990; Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). Three types of stories were identified, leading to the question: *How do the children's stories reflect the meaning that the community of children constitutes in the children's lives?* The analyses evolved in dialogue, with the sociocultural concept as a dialectic process (Kousholt, 2018). Analytical drafts were regularly discussed among the co-authors.

5. Children's stories of social life and communities with other children

Emerging strongly from the interviews with the children and young people was their appreciation of the weekend and summer arrangements at Bluehill, which appeared to be important regardless of the differences in their frequency of participation and different ways in which they involved themselves. We wondered how these Bluehill arrangements came to be of value to them. The three overall categories of stories identified were named "*we do*" stories, *stories of available communities*, and *stories of you, me, and us: a storytelling community*. The story categories are presented separately but are deeply interconnected and hold manifold and complex meanings. The ways they interlace are subsequently commented on.

5.1. "We do" stories

When the children talked about the Bluehill arrangements, most described them as fun, nice, the best, cozy, and similar, with references to the many different activities, such as downhill skiing, going to amusement parks, going swimming, and going to cafés. At the summer camp, they could do various water-related activities. The trips abroad and trips to cottages were also highlighted as favorable by most children. However, in a specific contextual setting, the activities emerged as significant. Faro, a 14-year-old boy living in a foster home, told us the following:

Interviewer: *What is it like to take part in those weekends?*

Faro: *It's fun; we often go swimming and to the cinema, and my friend is also there [in] the same group as me then.*

Interviewer: *Do you tend to do things together, the two of you, or ... ?*

Faro: *Yes, we and the other two, three others.*

Interviewer: *Yes, so you usually do activities together, like all together?*

Faro: *Yes.*

Faro makes a connection between "we" and the activities when describing what he considers fun about the Bluehill weekends. A "we" in the sense of a group of children who do activities together becomes apparent when asked what "we" means to him in this context. The connection between children and activities—told in terms of "we" who "do" something together—as a kind of unit is prominent in all the children's stories of what they appreciate about the Bluehill arrangements. The "we do" stories underpin the sociality of the activities. The activities are not merely meaningful *doings* per se, but they become meaningful when performed together by the children who mutually engage in the activities. Mutuality in this context does not imply homogeneity, agreement, or equality, and nor does it imply that all the children were together at all times. There could be dissimilar interests, age differences, and various relationships among the children leading to various "we do" constellations. The mutuality points toward the way the children's engagement seemed to contribute to one another's sense of meaning and appreciation of what they shared as common "we do's" within the framework of a broader "we," meaning the community. Mutual engagement is what defines a community and is essential to any practice (Wenger, 1998, p. 73). The children's "we do" stories may well reflect experiences of membership in a community.

"We do" emerged as the overall way the children talked about their *doings* within the community, which formed a mutual point of reference in their stories, although each in their own unique way. Everybody had an affiliation with the Friday taco meal during the Bluehill weekends. Some loved it, and some were bored with it. Whether it was the sharing of a room with a friend and whispering late at night or joining the summer camp sports tournament for the second or fifth time, their *doings* together seemed to blend into a continuous production of "we do" moments, seemingly as a matter of course and embedded in a sense of inclusion in what matters. According to Wenger (1998), involvement in what matters is a requirement for mutual engagement to evolve and be sustained, which the community arrangements seemed to underpin. The following quote from Filippa, an 11-year-old girl living in a foster home, elucidates how the community arrangements became significant, providing spaces where the children could engage and learn through social participation. It also exhibits how many layers of meaning the "we do" stories hold.

Filippa: *We usually fish crabs and cook [them] ourselves, such crab sauce that we make, eh. (...) We have a dock, so we used to swim from the dock, and we have a motorboat. Then we have a boathouse with plastic windows and lots of beds that stand on the wall in a way, with lots of mattresses over there, and a fire ladder on top, so we usually go up the fire ladder and jump down there.*

Interviewer: *On the mattresses (both laugh).*

Filippa: *Mm, and we usually sail.*

Interviewer: *So do you learn new things, or did you know how to sail from before?*

Filippa: *The first time I learned it, but now I manage quite well myself. We do many different things then, like the dodgeball tournament; eh last time I got a little angry, or all, because we lost—it wasn't that strange, though. Last time we played against everybody, like the little ones and the big ones, but this time we had to play against the big ones several times in a row—that was a bit unfair.*

Similar to the other children, Filippa talks as an active participant in the activities within the community, whether it is making food or other activities, constituting a common resource around which the children's engagement and negotiations of meaning could be structured. The previous summer's dodgeball tournament, for instance, obviously disrupted Filippa's and the other children's shared understanding of how to conduct the game and the meaning of fairness. New meaning had to be negotiated, as the doing of the activity together every summer created new situations, impressions, and experiences, contributing to the children's mutual engagement and histories of meaning, of which the

activities and the other children were a part (Wenger, 1998). These participatory conditions—which involved personal and social experiences, a complex combination of actions, interactions, expectations, thoughts, and feelings situated within the “single” activity and the “chains” of activities (Lave & Wenger, 1991)—created opportunities for the children to learn interpersonal and activity skills. The time-transient structure allowed various participation trajectories, shifts in positions, and predictability for the children. The relations among children of all ages helped the children emphasize their own developmental moves when they were suddenly in a position to support others. They could develop into such positions, given that changing participation in activities within a community allows children to develop (Rogoff, 2003, p. 52). These manifold participatory experiences appeared to be constituent parts of the children’s selves, a participatory sense of themselves as actively engaged in the valued practices of a community—vital to feel valued, to develop, and to belong (Rogoff, 2003; Wenger, 1998). These participatory experiences also involved the places where the experiences happened, provoking a sense of belonging to somewhere (Törrönen, 2006). Like Filippa, all the children portrayed a nearness to objects and places—told in terms such as *our dock*, *our boat*, and *our places*—which adds further understanding of what may be implied when some worry about the day they turn 18.

The overall appreciation of the Bluehill arrangements does not imply that everything was harmonious or favorable to all at all times. Like any other social life, these communities were complex and conflictual (Kousholt, 2011; Wenger, 1998). Although the children’s stories describe little trouble, a few described challenging interactions that caused worry. Their attempts to signal that something was wrong were not perceived by the carers. For example, Carmen said, “I don’t see why the adults couldn’t catch it, when the other kids managed to catch it.” Unfortunate interactions and behaviors are part of the vast majority of children’s communities (Højholt, 2016; Stokholm, 2009). Carmen expressed a distinct expectation that adults have a co-responsibility for children’s well-being when they are together. She also conveys that children and adults constitute important participatory conditions for each other, affecting the children’s interactions and experience of the community. Despite challenges, a genuine desire to be part of the Bluehill arrangements prevailed, going beyond personal presence and places. This brings us to the next category of stories.

5.2. Stories of available communities

Communities of practice develop in large sociocultural contexts and in relation to each other and cannot be considered independent of other communities of practice (Wenger, 1998, pp. 79, 103). We pursued the children’s “we do” stories across contexts to comprehend how the Bluehill arrangements became significant in accordance with the children’s broader social lives. This cross-contextual gaze helped us understand the complexity and changeability of the children’s social lives and the significance of the Bluehill arrangements. The children’s narratives about other daily places and communities they participated in made visible varying, limited, and, for some, troublesome social lives. Accordingly, “we do” stories were not as prominent cross-contextually, and nor were they as favorable as they seemed to be at Bluehill. To grasp the interconnections between the children’s daily communities elsewhere and the manifold meanings the Bluehill arrangements constituted in their lives, we can look to this story from Leon, a 14-year-old boy:

Interviewer: *Going to Bluehill weekends—is it something you usually want to do, or do you want to be here [where he lives] and do other things?*

Leon: *No, no. It’s kind of good to get a break and go there. Because you always do something in a way then. At home, it is very much to relax and such, but when you get there, it is like going to the movie, swimming, and like that. You get some options that you can do then.*

Interviewer: *Yes, so you can choose.*

Leon: *Yes ... and Mum works pretty much, and Dad, I don’t bother to go out with.*

In this quote, the meaning of doings appears again, now situated in a cross-contextual site between two daily places in Leon’s life, home and the Bluehill community. He associates home with relaxation as opposed to the activities at Bluehill, which give him a sense of doing something. The different opportunities of doings constitute what he describes as a break, with obviously limited opportunities to do activities he considers meaningful when at home. The break implies additional meanings, in terms of with whom he can do activities. At home, he refers to his foster parents as the conceivable activity partners, although they are not his preference. It seems that Leon, similar to “most children” his age, favors doing certain activities with peers (Frønes, 2006), which brings to light how activities are socially and culturally embedded as child–child practices, also related to age, and become meaningful to the children. When the possibilities to engage in meaningful child–child activities at home are limited, Bluehill emerges significant as an available children’s community. Some described it like feeling “free from home” because they did not have to be at home all the time, where they would long to be with peers. It could even provide a break from foster families, as being at home to such an extent could lead to tension and misunderstandings. Children’s participation experiences and conditions in different communities interconnect and constitute meaning in relation to each other (Wenger, 1998).

The children’s social lives outside Bluehill varied. Some described considerable social struggles, such as being at the periphery of children’s communities; some dealt with this for years and others for shorter periods. A few seemed to navigate easily within and across daily places with peers and had access to the resources of several children’s communities. Although periphery can be a rewarding position, with the potential of advanced participatory positions as the participants learn valued skills and competencies of a community (Lave & Wenger, 1991), always being at the periphery or at the border of extreme periphery provides limited participatory options and learning conditions. Mutual engagement becomes progressively looser at the periphery (Wenger, 1998, p. 118), which several of the children’s stories portrayed. It created stories of “we” who “do” something together sometimes. The children’s different schemes of participation during the Bluehill weekends seemed to reflect these diverse and changeable social conditions locally and their social needs accordingly. In some periods, some children spent part of the weekends at other respite arrangements locally or with family, so they could be with friends too. If the weekends collided with activities locally, adjustments were made. Efforts were also made to enable all the children, regardless of challenges, to participate in the valued Bluehill traditions. The children seemed involved in the adjustments made and appreciated this flexibility that acknowledged their belonging in different communities and that the Bluehill community could be compensatory at times.

The children’s social challenges and difficulties to move from a peripheral position appeared complex. Some related it to individual properties, such as being “a little bit different” or getting easily upset or angry. Others found it difficult to determine why it was so hard to make and maintain friends or become a member of the girls’ clique. To some of the boys, in particular, their sports teams provided enhanced participation conditions. Then again, not participating in popular organized activities among peers could create difficulties gaining access and making friends across contexts. To be surrounded by adult assistants at school when trying to socialize with peers was described as difficult by some. Obstacles to participation could materialize in subtle ways, too, such as, for instance, not having the “right” appearance or artifacts. Faro explained, “I have lived in Norway my whole life, but I get easily tan, and then I am called negro, like you damn negro.” Discrimination and unmarked borders of participation can be perceived as harsh realities to those involved (Wenger, 1998), as they were to Faro. Although

the children's daily care situations were not in the forefront of their narratives, recurring questions from peers regarding their parents' misdeeds and what a foster home or orphanage was like led to negotiations being "some children." The children expressed discomfort talking about these aspects of life with peers, though they were open about being in care. Such negotiations could be a lonely experience. The children's social efforts and challenges seemed to intensify in transitions between schools and changes in care conditions, yet some described a new start as a relief. Overall, relationships with peers appeared crucial to their experiences of well-being, as expressed by Evy when moving to her new foster home: "It went well; I got a friend." This illustrates the support child-child relationships constitute in the children's lives.

The Bluehill arrangements did not appear to be problem-oriented, focusing on the children's struggles, but the children took advantage of the opportunities to share experiences not easily shared with peers locally. Amanda said, "You talk a lot when you are on such weekends; you always talk about the foster parents." These conversations seemed to take place on the children's own premises, when they were by themselves and could talk confidentially as trusted friends and peers. This possibility, to have an available community with which to share experiences of growing up "in care" and other aspects of life and to feel a sense of mutuality and identification with another person, seemed valuable to all and seemed to prevent a sense of loneliness. It allowed the children to take insider positions as friends, unlike what several experienced otherwise. At the same time, they could leave the category "some children" behind and feel like "all children" when entering another sphere of possibilities together, as illustrated by the quote from Karen and Tonje.

Tonje: *I don't have that person away from you—that I can trust. It is a bit difficult at the moment, you see.*

Karen: *Ooh, for me too—I think it's hard at school, actually ... there are not so many I can make friends with.*

Interviewer: *Do you feel so too, Tonje, that it is a bit hard to make friends?*

Tonje: *Mm.*

Interviewer: *So when you meet, can you talk about these things or ... ?*

Tonje: *Or here we'll just put everything behind us and start doing everything else, as usual, to just forget about everything that's happening in everyday life, really.*

Karen: *That's true.*

Bluehill seemed to be an explicit source of social capital cross-contextually to a few, who told how their local friends envied their weekend trips to Bluehill. According to staff, children sometimes asked to bring friends to the weekends. To others, Bluehill appeared to be an encouragement to "hang in there" and keep up the social efforts locally, knowing they had something else to look forward to, which the following quote from Stine and Evy distinctly illustrate.

Interviewer: *If you hadn't had Bluehill weekends, what would it be like, being you, then?*

Stine: *Like hell.*

Evy: *Yes.*

Stine: *I don't think it would be very good.*

Evy: *Then I would be even lonelier than I am, really.*

The available community of children at Bluehill—a place to feel at home and normal in the world where they can be together, in line with what "most children" in our society do—appeared significant to all and brings us to the next category of stories.

5.3. Stories of you, me, and us: A storytelling community

Most of the children in this study had moved several times before

entering the Bluehill care arrangement. When changing carers, homes, friends, and schools over and over, the witnesses and co-constructors in life will be many, and there will likely be gaps in the children's stories of "me." Kaia, now aged 11 and living at a Bluehill residential home, lost count when she reached the seventh home she had lived in since she was two years old. To some, the Bluehill foster home ended too. Living a childhood in public care—keeping track of and braiding together all the bits and pieces, places, people, moments, achievements, and memories that make up who you are—can be an arduous task. Bluehill's significance in the process of creating braids and a sense of consistency and permanency in life emerged in their narratives. The use of the personal pronoun *we* appeared in several ways—in the sense of *me and you*, *the two of us*, *some of us*, and *all of us* in the present, past, and future. For instance, stories such as *we who used to play together*, *we who were dependent on each other*, *we who quarreled over the finest toys*, *the two of us who rode a taxi together to school with "Claire with the gray hair" when little* and *we who laughed late at night so we were "shot up" by the staff*. These various *we* stories made visible a broader significance of the children's relationships and the ways the Bluehill arrangements supported a collective memory through time and places. The following discourse among Carmen and Trine, who are in their twenties, and Nora, an employee, illustrates its significance:

Trine: *I remember another thing. Every summer we went to N.*

Carmen: *And Y.*

Trine: *Yes, then we enjoyed ourselves.*

Carmen: *So we did.*

Nora: *Yes.*

Carmen: *Don't you remember I had my big eye on my seventh birthday?*

Trine: *Yes, yes. [They laugh.]*

Carmen: *I was so allergic to mosquito bites.*

Nora: *Yes, I remember.*

Carmen: *I woke up on my seventh birthday and had that eye, like this, because I had been stung by a mosquito.*

This short passage gives a little glimpse into how these girls recount shared moments from 16 years ago when they were 7-year-old girls together during their summer holiday. It is a little "me and you" moment that could have been part of any girl's story—celebrating a birthday during a summer holiday with a friend. However, it is a unique "me and you" moment. It is Carmen's seventh birthday with the mosquito-bite incident shared with a friend, Trine, who happened to have been in a similar situation, that is, in need of public care. Their shared story could have ended there and been carried by themselves on their journeys as girls in long-term public care. As these girls continued to meet throughout childhood, shared life experiences became significant in a wider contextual and time-transient frame. It is one moment in a stream of shared moments, where the girls, like the other children in this study, became one another's life witnesses and co-constructors of the stories of "me and you." The possibility to retell, confirm, and reconstruct their shared stories seemed important, enabling relational bonds to develop and be maintained, which Carmen illustrated when she continued, "We have spent so much time together in our youth, and we have somehow created so many memories together that made us bond."

The time spent with one another as participants of the Bluehill community connected the children in ways that went beyond a common category like "children in care." The children became a knot of interpersonal relationships (Wenger, 1998) and a source of permanency in one another's lives in times of changing care conditions. To some, the other children in Bluehill constituted the most stable group of people in their lives, not only for a limited period of time while living at a residential facility, as shown in previous studies (Schwartz, 2007), but all through childhood and, for some, into adulthood. The following quote from Bilal, a boy in his teens who lived in a residential care facility after several foster home terminations, gives us a glimpse of how the children

interweave in each other's life trajectories and become "we's" in the sense of "us," underpinning an experience of belonging.

Bilal: *Then we have the oldest group that I usually join because they are quite chill.*

It's Anna, one of my girlfriends; then we have Daniel, Stine, and Evy.

Interviewer: *So you still meet the boys and girls you lived together with at the Bluehill home.*

Bilal: *Yes, they come here every weekend. Then we have another group I like to be with. That's Faro—he's pretty cool—and Haroon; he is awesome.*

The significance of the interpersonal relationships emerged at the social gathering for the former residents. They seemed to connect easily through their shared experiences. The gathering became somewhat of an embodiment of how their life stories intertwined and continued to do so, constituting a kind of "living life story book," as they could tell, retell, confirm, and reconstruct one another's life stories and recall a collective memory of a shared reality. The staff played a vital part in this collective memory and storytelling work. The value of time-transient interpersonal relationships became apparent when they shared recent experiences too. They could easily emphasize the implications of various life experiences—for instance, when some talked about difficulties focusing on school when worrying about their parents' well-being or the sorrow of losing someone close, which could also involve compound emotions. Their comments seemed informed and heartfelt.

The ways in which the children's and young adults' lives inter-related seemed to materialize in a greater sense of "we," which appears in the following quote from Daniel: "It's like that at Bluehill, you meet again. It's like a family, in a way, that gets bigger and bigger ... a great community, in a way."

The other children also used family terms to describe their relationships and the community. Some related family terms to the amount of time they had spent together throughout the years, the ways they had interacted, and the ways they had become close, such as Stine: "We were a bit like sisters when we lived at Bluehill. We've always been, really." It seemed to be an overall shared notion that their sibling-like relationships were subject to interactional elasticity different from their "ordinary" peer interactions elsewhere, including arguing at times. The use of family terms might well reflect their experiences and understandings that situations involving persistent interpersonal engagement also create a fair amount of tension and conflict, similar to most family lives (Frønes, 2006; Wenger, 1998). Nonetheless, they stayed together as individuals, pairs, and a community that appeared to remain significant to the children as a social continuity-preserving community.

6. Discussion

In order to support the developmental well-being of children growing up in long-term care, understanding how they experience and take part in social life and communities with peers is crucial. In this study, we have seen how a continual and professional arranged community of children in care emerged as significant in the everyday life and across the lifespan of children growing up in long-term care. Throughout childhood, these professional community arrangements were for some the only place they participated in leisure-time activities with peers and could take an insider position. The adjustments made in accordance to the children's changing social conditions locally demonstrated a flexible professional practice that the children could lean on in times of changing social needs.

The study exhibits the importance for children to do things together with peers, the importance of children's agency and influence on shared practices, the importance for children to co-produce experiences and stories over time, and the importance for them to do so within a professional setting without a pathologizing glance. The study brings to

light the learning, developmental, and belonging implications these opportunities constitute in children's lives and on the contrary how being in the periphery and hardly ever feeling completely "right" in daily life with peers can deprive children in care of life-sustaining learning and developmental conditions, with implications that go beyond losing or lacking a friend. Engaging in child-child practices and communities with peers and being genuinely engaged and enjoying one's company improves children's sense of self, sense of belonging, and quality of life, which vertical relationships or a new family cannot replace. It involves existential aspects of life, of feeling valued and normal in the world, and, in a broader sense, of identifying oneself as a boy or girl of a certain age in a certain society. The children's longing to be together at Bluehill can be understood as their desire to live culturally meaningful and unremarkable lives, like "most children" do, which gives another point of departure for arranging professional support, as opposed to explaining their longing in terms of the children's roots and previous belonging having been cut off (Stokholm, 2009). A community of children in care can create a space to share common cultural developmental issues related to being children of different ages and to explore the many "doings," curves, and peaks that are part of "all children's" lives. At the same time, it can be a safe place to process, negotiate meaning, and find ways to cope with life experiences being "some children." Not being alone during such lonely experiences seemed significant to all.

We do not intend to romanticize children's communities or the professional arrangement studied. Although the children did not explicitly speak of the Bluehill arrangements as an adult-supported community, discrete professional support made it a safe place. If conflictuality is considered an inevitable part of social life (Højholt, 2016), including "children in care," difficulties and dilemmas can be viewed as resources to learn interpersonal competencies, to dissolve disagreements, and to cooperate (Kousholt, 2011). Dilemmas can also bring to light how children, adults, and the care system can affect children's social interplay. We argue that interpreting children's efforts in navigating social life as individualities or that children by virtue of being "children in care" supposedly pull each other down narrows the scope of professional support the children could be offered. As highlighted in previous studies, this study shows that children in care can be a mutual source of support (Emond, 2014; Rogers, 2017; Schwartz, 2007, 2017; Stokholm, 2009; Törrönen, 2006). Additionally, this study shows how a time-transient structure can strengthen the bonds among children and help build and maintain supportive peer and friendship relationships and underpin a sense of continuity and permanence in life—which are overall challenges in public care—regardless of the form of care.

In order to support the developmental well-being of children growing up in long-term care, it is important to consider how concepts guiding the design and conduct of public care affect children's lives. Relying entirely on concepts underpinning the value of vertical relationships, and nuclear families in public care can cause other vital areas in a child's life not to be properly investigated or to be overlooked. This study exhibits how contextual perspectives that give emphasis to child-child relationships and children's participation in social practices, contribute important insights to the learning and psychological understanding within placement. The study underpins that children in care may be in need of professional support to gain access to children's communities and their recourses. From a professional perspective, communities of children in care similar to the ones studied can be viewed as social learning arenas contributing to the social and developmental well-being of children in care, where the responsibility for safeguarding children's development is being shared between several carers. Children in care talk about their relationships with one another in family terms (Emond, 2004; Kendrick, 2013; Schwartz, 2007; Törrönen, 2006). Perhaps that can be considered an invitation, from the perspective of children in care, to reconsider predominant ideas of family-based and institutional-based care and the idea that a "child in care" should always be considered as belonging to the category of

“some children” and be situated in a nuclear family setting.

Social and political authorities’ decisions and concepts impact children’s daily lives and developmental well-being. Based on knowledge from this study, we recommend that children’s social lives and communities with peers be considered an integral part of their developmental well-being and part of the understanding and decisions pertaining to the design and conduct of public care, as it would be for any other child in our society. If not, children in care will be deprived of life-sustaining learning, support, and opportunities. The learning provided by children’s communities helps to reduce marginalization and to facilitate inclusion in a life course perspective. Consequently, a life course perspective of children in care should not only be perceived as a developmental trajectory towards increased independence from their primary caregivers but a joint developmental journey of interdependent equals who are in need of support from adult carers.

This study’s knowledge contribution is both theoretical and empirical. In fact, the theoretical perspectives employed enabled the production of the empirical material of this study and thus the analyses providing the insights. This study is one example of how professional arrangement can provide children with support. We do not believe that this is or should be the only way to arrange support but a source of inspiration and of transferring value to similar practices or in the development of professional practices with other structural conditions. We intended to conduct participatory observation, which provides a broader context and allows nearness to children’s experiences. For the sake of further research, we would recommend enabling participatory research and exploring children’s conditions of social life from a life course perspective to develop flexible and supportive professional arrangements. This would also be important knowledge for decision makers, to combine knowledge of the importance of both vertical and horizontal relationships for children’s development and well-being.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgement

VID Specialized University are the primary funders. The grant number of the project is 134207.

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