Communities in play:
Young preschool children’s perspectives on relationships, values and roles

Hrönn Pálmadóttir

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of a Ph.D.-degree
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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of a Ph.D.-degree

Faculty of Education Studies
School of Education, University of Iceland
October, 2015
Communities in play: Young preschool children’s perspectives on relationships, values and roles

A thesis for a Ph.D.-degree in Education Studies

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ISBN (apply on http://landsbokasafn.is)
Printed at: Háskólaprent ehf.
Reykjavík, Iceland, 2015
Abstract

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The overall aim of the thesis is to gain knowledge of young children’s perspectives on their communities in play in preschool. To accomplish this, four studies were conducted, each of them focusing on children’s perspectives on issues of importance for the creation of play communities with peers as well as their encounters with the educators and the researcher. The research was conducted with children aged one to three years, in two units in one preschool in Iceland. The first study focused on how the children communicated and expressed their desire to play with their peers. The second study centred upon children’s communication and expression of lived values, as well as their experiences according to their own and others’ behaviours, actions and meanings. The third study explored the meaning that children put into involving the educators into their play. The fourth study dealt with methodological challenges during the research process.

The study is placed within the discourse of childhood studies and early childhood education and care (ECEC), where children are considered as active and competent with the ability to express their views and meanings (Clark & Moss, 2005; United Nations Convention on Children’s Rights, 1989). The research is inspired by phenomenological theories with the notion that children communicate and express their meanings with bodily expressions, and through their interactions, they learn about themselves and others (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, 1962), and play is considered a complex phenomenon that has its origins in the movements of the body (Buitendijk, 1933; see Åm, 1989; Hangaard Rasmussen, 1996).

The phenomenological approach is grounded within the paradigm of qualitative research. Data were constructed with observations by video recordings and field notes written during the research process. The fieldwork stretched over five month’s period in the year 2009. Children’s play sessions in the morning were chosen for data construction. Hermeneutics was used as the main approach to interpretation in order to understand children’s experiences from their perspectives (Bengtson, 2013;
Gadamer, 2004). Additionally, the organisation and analysis of the data were inspired by thematic research analyses described by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The findings indicate that, in the eyes of the children, the communities in play were both desirable and challenging encounters. The centrality of the body was a predominant factor in children’s meaning-making. The communication and expression was built upon intersubjective processes including the peers and the adults in the play sessions. Three key themes where contrasting perspectives appeared were identified across the four studies. Children’s communities of play provided an arena for the following themes: (a) relationships versus rejection; (b) commitment versus unequal power relations; and (c) closeness versus distance. Creating relationships was highly valued among the children. This was a challenging task in which ambiguity in children’s interactions emerged. Children might appear as competent in creating relationships, yet at the same time vulnerable when their intentions were rejected or overlooked. Children’s communities were comprised of commitments regarding individual and collective values involving children’s rights and concern for others. Unequal power relations appeared as a part of children’s communities when rights and prioritised values were confronted. In the eyes of the children, the educators were part of their communities, and they appealed for their support in various play situations. The educators’ closeness or distance towards children’s subjective worlds in play influenced the children’s possibilities of having their voices heard. The phenomenological approach used in the study required the researcher to come close to the children’s experiences, perceptions and understandings of their own life-worlds. Thus, the centrality of my body as a researcher, and closeness, as well as the distance to the children’s life-worlds, became an important issue during the research process.

One of the conclusions drawn from the research is that it is not enough to explore curriculum documents, ambiguous policy papers on educational goals or the preschool educators’ views on children’s interaction in play. Children’s perspectives on their lived experiences in their communities in play in preschool have to emerge and be considered an important part of the discourse in ECEC.
Ágrip

Samfélag í leik: Sjónarhorn ungra leikskólabarna á tengsl, gildi og hlutverk

Meginmarkmið doktorsrannsóknarinnar er afla þekkingar á sjónarhorni leikskólabarna á samfélag sitt eins og það kemur fram í leik. Rannsóknin var í fjórum hlutum þar sem sjónum var beint að mikilvægum þáttum tengdum samfélagi barna í leik. Páttatakendur voru eins til þriggja ára börn á tveimur deildum í einum leikskóla. Í fyrsta hluta rannsóknarinnar var kannad hvernig börnin leituðu eftir samskiptum við félagu sín í leik. Annar hlutin fjallaði um túnungu barnanna á gildum og hvernig þau leystu átök sem áttu sér stað í leiknum. Þriðji hlutin beindist að því að skoða skilning barnanna á hlutverki starfsmanna í leik þeirra. Fjórði hlutin rannsóknarinnar snerist um aðferðafræðilegar áskoranir í rannsóknarferlinu.

Rannsóknin fellur undir hugmyndir innan menntunarfræði ungra barna þar sem virkni og hæfni barna til að tjá sjónarmið sín eru í brennidepli (Clark & Moss, 2005; Samningur Sameinuðu þjóðanna um réttindi barnsins, 1989). Byggt er kenningum innan fyrirbærafræði þar sem lögð er áhersla á að börn skapi merkingu með líkamlegri túnungu, og í samsetningu læra þau um sig sjálfi og aðra (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962). Leikur barna er flókið fyrirbæri sem rekja má til hreyfingar líkamans (Bujtendijk, 1933, sjá, Åm, 1989; Hanggard Rasmussen, 1996).

Fyrirbærafræðileg nálgun heyrir undir eigindlegar rannsóknarafærðir. Gagna var aflað árið 2009 í leikstundum barnanna inni í leikskólanum. Myndbandsuppókur voru megin rannsóknarafærðin en auk þess voru vettvangsnótur ritaðar í rannsóknarferlinu. Í rannsókninni var leiðast við að nálgest reynslu barnanna, skynjun og skilning á þeirra eigin lifheimi sem kallaði á að eða sem rannsandi væri nærri börnunum í leikstundunum. Þannig varð nánd sem og fjarlægð við lifheim barnanna mikilvægur þáttur rannsóknarferlisins. Við greiningu gagna var tulkunarfræði (e. hermeneutics) notuð til þess að skilja reynslu barnanna út frá sjónarhorni þeirra. Auk þess var þemagreiningu beitt í skipulagnings og greiningu gagna (Braun og Clarke, 2006).

Niðurstöður rannsóknarinnar benda til þess að í augum barnanna var þátttaka í leik mikilvæg en gat jafnframt verið erfið áskorun. Þegar börnin sköpuðu merkingu í leik var líkamleg tjáning þungamiðja samsetningu. Þrjú
lykilþemu, sem fólu í sér andstæð sjónarhorn, birtust í samskiptum barnanna. Samfélag barnanna í leik var vettvangur fyrir: (a) tengsl og höfnun, (b) skuldbindingu eða ójöfn valdatengsl, (c) nálægð og fjarlægð. Að skapa tengsl við aðra var mikils metið meðal barnanna en gat jafnframt verið erfið áskorun þar sem margræðni í samskiptum kom í ljós. Börnin sýndu hæfni í að tjá sjónarmið sín en samtímis birtist hjálparleysi þegar fyrirætlunum þeirra var hafnað. Samfélag barnanna byggðist á skuldbindingu varðandi einstaklingsbundin og sameiginleg gildi sem fólu í sér réttindi barna og að láta sig aðra varða. Einning birtust mismunandi valdatengsl í samskiptunum barnanna þegar réttur og viðurkennd gildi innan hópsins voru dregin í efa. Í augum barnanna voru hinir fullorðnu hluti af samfélagi þeirra sem þau leituðu til við mismunandi kringumstæður. Viðbrögð og þátttaka starfsmanna í leik barna sem byggðist annars vegar á tilfinningalegri nálægð eða tilfinningalegri fjarlægð gagnvart sjónarhorni barna hafði áhrif á möguleika barnanna til þátttöku í leik.

Pað eru margir þættir, félagslegir, uppeldislegir og menningarlegir sem hafa áhrif á líf ungra barna og fjölskyldur þeirra. Í umræðu um hlutverk og þróun leiðskóla í samfélaginu er ekki nægilegt að skoða metnaðarfull opinber gögn um menntunarleg markmið eða kanna viðhorf leiðskólakennara til samskipta barna í leik. Sjónarhorn barna á daglegt líf sitt í leiðskóla og reynsla þeirra er mikilvæg viðbót og framlag til umræðunnar.
Acknowledgements

Looking back on the time that has passed since I began doctoral studies, memories of good and exciting experiences as well as struggle come to mind. Many people have been involved in the project, influencing it in various ways, which I am deeply grateful for.

Being a spokesperson for young children has been a demanding task, but nonetheless the main motivation in the work. The children who participated in my research were my true mentors and from them I learned the most. I am grateful for the time they shared with me as well to the adults in the preschool that made the study possible.

I want to express gratitude to my doctoral committee. First, I want to thank my supervisor, Jóhanna Einarsdóttir, for her guidance and support as well as her positive attitude during the entire process. I am also thankful to her for providing me the opportunities to work with professionals on both Nordic and international projects connected to my studies. It has been a privilege to collaborate with outstanding colleagues focusing on various issues and challenges in regard to children’s everyday lives in preschools and schools. Thanks to my co-supervisor and leader of the Value-Ed project, Eva Marianne Johansson, for her high aspirations towards my achievements and her encouraging feedback. Additionally, Sue Dockett, a third member of my doctoral committee, always asks good questions and gives constructive responses which I am deeply grateful for. Sue and Jóhanna are among the leaders in the POET project. Thanks to all of you who have influenced my thinking and brought out new perspectives.

Collaboration in a Nordplus project was also an inspiring experience. Together with colleagues from Universities in Oslo and Akershus, University of Aarhus, and University of Gothenburg, we focused on the education of preschool teachers in regard to children under three years of age. Big thanks to all of you.

Many thanks to my colleagues and friends for their support. I especially want to thank Kristín Norðdahl, who was on the same path as me, working on her thesis. It has been valuable to share thoughts as well as sometimes frustrations, and receive constructive comments and advice.

My family deserves a big thank you for encouragement and support: my parents, Sigríður Anna and Pálmi, Sævar my husband, our children, Órn
Úlfar, Kári Jóhann, Arna Ýr, and Ívar. An increasing number of grandchildren makes sure that preschool will still be an important part of our lives in the future.

I dedicate the doctoral thesis to my father, Pámi Rögnvaldsson, who passed away in the beginning of 2014. He had a great faith in education and the rights of all to have their voices heard.
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1 Introduction

This research is a phenomenological childhood study where the aim is to deepen the understanding of young children’s perspectives of their communities in play in the preschool. The specific focus is on issues of importance for the children in creating play communities, that is, the communication and relationships with peers, the educators and the researcher. The thesis consists of four studies (articles I-IV), a comprehensive summary and reflections. The studies were conducted with children aged one to three years, in two units in one preschool in Iceland.

In the last decade, preschools in Iceland have faced various challenges that correspond with changes in Western societies, where childrearing and education have gradually moved from homes to institutions. Children attend preschool at a younger age than ever before, and the Nordic countries have been at the forefront of this development (Eydal & Rostagaard, 2010; Kampmann, 2004). A review of the OECD countries on transitions and access to education shows that, on average, 25% of children under three years of age spend time in supported and regulated child care services (UNICEF, 2008). In Iceland, children from two to five years of age typically spend seven to eight hours a day in preschools, and 35% of children under two years of age are already in preschools (Statistics Iceland, 2014). As a consequence, young children participate and learn in bigger groups of peers than in earlier decades.

Internationally, interpretive research with the youngest children in preschool is a rather new research field, although interest has been growing extensively in recent years. Research with children under three years of age has most often been conducted within the field of psychology (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000) and centred upon universal factors in children’s development and behaviour (Berthelsen, 2010; Elkind, 1997). Much of the research with young children within early childhood education and care (ECEC) has focused on the relationships between young children and adults in order to enhance practice (Berthelsen, 2010; Rayna & Laevers, 2011). Albon (2011) argues that children’s vulnerability in postmodern writings with very young children has not been emphasised enough, and there is little published research regarding young children’s perspectives on curriculum and pedagogy (Bitou & Waller, 2011). Furthermore, reviews of educational research on children under three years of age in four of the
Nordic countries—Denmark, Norway, Finland and Sweden—indicate that knowledge in this research area is increasing, but still, there is need for further knowledge concerning interaction and relationships among the youngest preschool children (Broström & Hansen, 2010; Greve & Solheim, 2010; Hännikänen, 2010; Johansson & Emilson, 2010). Nationally, there are no studies that focus on the youngest children’s views of their communities in play in Icelandic preschools. Hence, more knowledge is needed regarding how young children communicate and express their perspectives and about the complexity of their communities in play in preschool.

The study is placed within the discourse of childhood studies, where children are considered as active and competent with the ability and rights to express their views and meanings (Clark & Moss, 2005; United Nations Convention on Children’s Rights, 1989). The foundation of the study is the notion that children communicate and express their meanings with bodily expressions, and through their interactions, they learn about themselves and others (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Children’s play is considered a complex phenomenon that has its origins in the movements of the body (Åm, 1989; Bujtendijk, 1933; Hanggaard Rasmussen, 1996).

The phenomenological approach used in the study required the researcher to come close to children’s experiences, perceptions and understandings of their own life-worlds (Johansson, 2011b), and the participation in children’s everyday activities demands listening attentively to children’s voices (Clark, 2005). The focus in the study is on the child as a subject in his or her own world; in other words, the children’s phenomenology. Through the researcher’s own “child perspective”, the attempt is to understand and interpret children’s experiences and intentional acts and statements (Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson & Hundeide, 2010, p. 22-23). The fact that I am a former preschool teacher, and currently a preschool teacher educator as well as a researcher in the field of ECEC, shapes my understanding of children’s perspectives. Hence, my view of children influences what and how children’s experiences are presented in the research. Despite variations in theoretical definitions, functions, approaches and roles, play has been an inseparable part of ECEC for a long time (Dockett, Lillemyr & Perry, 2013), and considered to be inspired both by children’s own intentions and motivations in the surrounding environment (Clark, 2010). Thus, play is believed to be as part of being a child and influences the image of the child (Sandberg & Vuorinen, 2010). The child is attracted by the environment, and though active engagement with it he/she creates meaning and context. Through complex communications using the body, children express their own perspectives.
and intentions and respond to others’ perspectives. Children’s relationships with peers and the environment are formed through their play. Thus, children’s actions in play are considered to be acts of meaning which can provide important information about children’s perspectives, offering adults the possibility to acquire insights and understand children’s experiences, as they appear for the children.

In this research, I investigate young children’s experiences within play sessions in the preschool from the children’s own perspectives. I explore children’s perspectives in acting towards each other as well as their encounters with educators and the researcher during their play. I discuss how the children communicate and express their meaning and the influences of their actions for their interaction in play. Furthermore, I discuss the methodology used in the study with a special emphasis on the relationships between the researcher and the children.

The research participants are children and their educators in two units in one preschool. The children in one of the units were 14 months to two-and-a-half years of age, and in the other unit, children were from two-and-a-four-months-old to three-years and nine-months old. In the thesis I will use the term young children instead of the word toddler, which is often used and refers to children aged one to three years.

Data were constructed with observations by video recordings. Additionally, field notes were written during the research process. In the study, the children were in the forefront and the educators were in the background of the observations.

1.1 Structure and research question

The thesis consist of seven chapters. In Chapter 2, Icelandic Context, I outline the background of preschool in Iceland, its place in the educational system, the ideological roots, and address shortly the complex discourse regarding the preschool role in society. In Chapter 3, Theoretical Framework, I discuss the main concepts of the theories that were applied during the research process and in the interpretation of the data. In Chapter 4, Previous Research, I give an overview of studies in preschool that are connected to my study. Chapter 5, Methodology, discusses the research components, the research design, perspectives and ethical considerations. Chapter 6, Overview of Findings, summarizes the main findings of my research, which consists of four research articles presented at the end of the synopsis (see p. 119). The integrated findings of all the studies are also discussed. In Chapter 7, Discussion, I engage with the overall research
question: In order to create communities during play sessions, what do young children in one Icelandic preschool find important, and how do they communicate and express their perspectives? This question guided my research project as well as the questions that were put forward in the four articles, which were used with the intention of exploring the issue from different angles.

1.2 Description of the four studies

In the first study, The Youngest Preschool Children: Communities in Play, the aim is to shed light on young children’s perspectives on their social interactions in play sessions in preschool. The data were constructed with the youngest children in one of the units (one and two years old). Young children’s play and playful actions have traditionally been connected to stages in children’s motor development, rather than as meaningful interaction and play (Hanggaard Rasmussen, 1996; Løkken, 2009). This notion is problematized in this study. This study can be considered as a basis for the whole research project, as the insights gained regarding children’s relationships and positions in the group encouraged me to evolve the research project further. Thus, I wanted to explore children’s communication and expression in two different age combinations—one hand, children from one to two years of age, and on the other hand, two to three years of age. The focus in this study is on children’s perspectives on their communities in play and how they communicate and express their desire to play with their peers.

In the second study, young children’s communication and expression of values during play sessions in preschool are inspired by the findings of the first study, which showed that children’s play were complex phenomena where their competence and vulnerability appeared. The focus in this study is on the values that the children prioritise in order to create and be a part of a community during the play sessions. In this study, the data were constructed with the children in both of the units. In spite of increased international interest, there is still a lack of studies with the endeavour to capture children’s communication of lived values (Einarsdóttir, Purola, Johansson, Broström & Emilson, 2014). This study’s focus is on children’s communication of lived values and their experiences according to their own and others’ behaviours, actions and meanings. What values do the children prioritise in their interactions? What value conflicts occur, and how do the children resolve these conflicts?
In the third study, *Young Children’s Views of the Role of Preschool Educators*, the data are constructed with the children in both of the units (one to two years old and two to three years old). Internationally, few studies have examined children’s perspectives on the role that educators occupy in children’s play. Nordic studies reveal a common pedagogical approach in which educators remain in the background observing the children, ‘waiting to see’ if assistance is needed and keeping the children occupied (Einarsdottir, 2014a; Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen & Määttä, 2011; Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009). Listening and responding to children’s perspectives is therefore an important dimension and contribution in childhood research. Furthermore, the Icelandic national curriculum guidelines emphasise the educator’s role in offering space and support for children’s actions and interests, as well as interacting with children through play (Ministry of Culture and Education, 2011). The intention of the study is to explore the meaning that children put into involving educators in their play and to determine whether or not the children experience the educators’ actions as a resource for their play.

The fourth study is titled *Video Observations of Children’s Perspectives of Their Lived Experiences: Challenges in the Relationship between the Researcher and the Children*. In this study, the data construction is from both of the units. The focus is on encounters between the researcher and the children during the research process. The intention is to explore the challenges that occur in their interaction. Video recordings are increasingly used to create knowledge in studies with children, but limited studies have been conducted with a focus on the relationship between the children and the researcher. In research, the construction of the child is influenced by the theoretical perspective, including the methodology, methods and philosophy underpinning the study (Dockett, Einarsdottir & Perry, 2011; Løkken, 2009; Rhedding-Jones, 2005; Veresov, 2014). Thus, the methodological approach in the study requires critical reflections on how the video representations give insight into the relationships between the researcher and the children and how the children’s perspectives are presented in the study.
2 The Icelandic context

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the background of preschools in Iceland, their place in the educational system and their ideological roots. I will also give a brief account of Icelandic studies connected to children’s experiences of preschool. I consider these important in the context of my research, where the endeavour is to capture young children’s perspectives on issues that influence their communities in preschool. Equality, social justice and politics are inseparable from the history and discourse of preschool; they are connected to providing children with a place outside the home to ensure their welfare, the rights of both parents to participate in the labour market, or celebrating children’s rights and the inclusion of all children in preschool.

2.1 The background of preschool

In 1924, the Women’s Alliance in Iceland (is. Bandalag kvenna) established a child care organisation (is. Barnavinafélagið Sumargjöf) aimed at promoting public debate and work in order to nurture children’s welfare. During the following decades, the organisation took the initiative of establishing full-time child daycare programs for priority groups, such as children from poor or single-parent homes. In 1940, they established a new part-time program called playschool that all children could attend. In 1973, the state undertook financial responsibility for the playschools, and both programs were integrated under the Ministry of Education. Thus, the care and education of children prior to compulsory school was no longer considered a social policy and resource for priority groups. As a consequence, early-childhood programs, whether they were full or part time, became a part of the nation’s educational policy (Einarsdottir, 2006a, 2010).

In an historical and curricular context, the child at the centre have characterised arguments for preschools in Iceland, as in the other Nordic countries, and an emphasis has been placed on meeting the individual needs of each child. The concept of a “good childhood” is considered to reflect a mutual perspective of official policy and daily practice for all children outside the home, including ideas about democracy, equality, freedom, independence and solidarity (Einarsdottir, 2006a; Eydal & Rostgaard, 2010; Wagner & Einarsdottir, 2006). According to Einarsdottir
(2006a), this ideology is based upon a “romantic view” of children’s freedom and a perspective that children should learn through their experiences in play without much interference by adults.

The first pedagogical plan (is. Uppeldisáætlun fyrir dagvistarheimili) for the development of daycare centres was presented in 1985, where professional responsibility and the role of the institutions was formulated. The plan was revised, and a second edition was published in 1993. The name “playschool” (is. leikskóli) was utilized for both programs, and described a child-centred program where children were supposed to learn through play with peers (Jónasson, 2006). The label playschool is still in use, but I choose to use the word “preschool”, as the meaning of its function is more in harmony than “playschool” with the English-speaking world. Although preschool in Iceland was originally an institution established as a resource to ensure children’s welfare, the educational value of preschools for all children emerged early. This is evident, for example, in the placement of preschools under the Ministry of Education from the beginning and in the part-time programs for all children, which later became full-time preschool programs.

In 1994, preschool was officially defined as the first level of education, and thus, integrated into the Icelandic educational system (Lög um leikskóla nr. 78/1994). The New Curriculum Guidelines for Preschool were published in 1999 (Ministry of Education, 1999). The curriculum was based on an earlier pedagogical plan and emphasised children’s experiences and learning through play. However, there were several notable changes. For instance, the concept of ‘curriculum’ was a new concept in the preschool context, and there was less discussion about the youngest children and the concept of care than in the earlier pedagogical plan. The word “learning” occurred more frequently, and now—for the first time—an emphasis was placed on continuity in the children’s transition between preschool and primary school. Evaluation of preschool work was also stressed. One can ask whether the changes in the curriculum reflect, to some degree, the academic push, or “schoolification”, into the preschool level, as have been internationally pointed out (Einarsdóttir, 2004; Haug, 2013; Kaga, Bennett & Moss, 2010).

The New National Curriculum Guidelines for all three levels of education – preschool, compulsory school and upper secondary school – were published in 2011. At all three levels, the emphasis is on flexibility and continuity in the educational system in regard to both content and working methods. Six fundamental pillars were put forward for all school levels: literacy, sustainability, health and welfare, democracy and human rights,
equality, and creativity. Competence is defined as more than knowledge and skills; it includes moral values according to children’s ages and maturity. The subject areas of the preschool program are to be integrated into play and everyday activities. Through active participation in play, children are expected to learn to be democratic citizens (Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture, 2011). However, the tendency of considering children’s play as taken for granted as a pleasurable activity is now questioned in the curriculum, and it is pointed out that play is a complex phenomenon involving pleasure and happiness in addition to being a power struggle. In the new curriculum, there is an increased emphasis on the preschool as a learning community that involves children, educators and parents. Consequently, the curriculum reflects the commitment of the United Nations on Children’s Rights (1989) as well as contemporary ideas within early childhood education, childhood sociology and psychology, where the child is considered an active participant with the right to make decisions that influence his or her life within school and society (Dalberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999; Gulløv, 1999; Qvortrup, 2004; Walsh, 2005).

Children’s perspectives regarding preschool experiences have not been considered in many Icelandic studies. In a study by Hreinsdóttir (2012) with four- and five-year-old children in two preschools, the children were asked about their influences on the pedagogical work. Some of the children experienced little influence and were not allowed to decide much about their lives. In studies by Einarsdottir (2006b, 2011b), five- and six-year-old children reflected on their experiences in preschool and their transitions to primary school. The participating children expressed different perspectives, and the findings demonstrated the importance of listening to children’s perspectives on their preschool experiences. In a study by Pálmadóttir and Bjarnadóttir (2012) conducted with one- and two-year-old children in two preschools in Iceland, the aim was to understand their interaction in play from children’s perspectives. The findings reveal that children’s movement and the use of toys, as well as an educator’s closeness to children’s perspectives, were important requisites for their social interaction and creation of meaning.

Despite changes in the curriculum and an increased emphasis on children’s rights to influence their lives, children seem to lack opportunities to position themselves in the preschool. Thus, it is important to utilize appropriate research methods to approach children’s perspectives and gather further knowledge of how young children experience the possibilities of creating their communities in play with their peers.
2.1.1 Current challenges

Changes in Icelandic society—which include an increasing number of families of foreign origin, younger children attending preschool, and the ideology of inclusion celebrating the diversity in the group of children—are challenging. These changes call for reflections regarding pedagogical practice in order to encourage the participation of all children and their families.

In a rather brief time in Iceland, the number of children attending preschools has increased significantly, and the combinations of the groups have also changed. At the end of 2013, more than 83% of children aged one to five years’ old attended preschools, a percentage that has never been higher. Children with foreign nationalities now account for 5.8% of all children attending preschools. In addition, the majority of children spend seven hours or more each day in preschool, which is longer than ever before (Statistics Iceland, 2014b).

The preschool law (Lög um leikskóla nr. 90/2008) does not stipulate a specific age for children’s transition to preschool. In Reykjavík and the capital region, where over 64% of Iceland’s population lives, the official policy is that the transition to preschool occurs when children are 18 to 24 months old. If children have been diagnosed with disabilities or severe developmental disorders, their parents can apply for an earlier preschool start (Reykjavíkurborg, Skóla- & frísthundasvið, 2015). It is obvious that there is a gap between parental leave, which is nine months, and preschool transition. However, most parents return to work after the parental leave period, and therefore use the official family daycare system for their children.

Recently, politicians have been focusing on the possibility of providing preschool places following parental leave. A proposal was presented in parliament in 2013 to change the law on rights to parental leave. The changes aim to extend the leave in stages from 9 to 12 months by the year 2016 (Lög um breytingu á lögum nr. 95/2000, um fæðingar- & foreldraorlof, með síðari breytingum). Subsequently, the Minister of Education, Science and Culture assigned a consultative group to evaluate the benefits of offering places for children to attend preschool following parental leave and stressed the participation of representatives from the municipalities. The group was expected to analyse professional demands and perspectives, finances connected to staff, and the physical environment in relation to an increased number of children from ages one to three years old in preschools (Nefndarálit með breytingatillögu um tillögu til þingsályktunar,
In a report from the group that was published in August 2015 it was suggested that the local authorities should aim for all children being offered preschool at the age of 12 months. If this is to happen, it was pointed out that an effort is needed to increase the number of preschool teachers. Furthermore, the substantial cost for the municipalities was discussed in the report and it was suggested that it would be feasible that the changes occurred in stages, starting with offering children preschool at the age of 18 months (Mennta- og menningamálaráðuneyti, 2015). However, the gap between parental leave which is nine months and the start of preschool would still be a reality which would require either lengthening the parental leave or “filling the gap” by family day care. Hence, there are important and challenging tasks that still needs to be addressed both on the political as well as the pedagogical level.

The education and training of educators in preschool closely coincides with the history of ECEC. Since 1973, the required education was a three-year college program of theoretical and practical studies. In 1997, the college merged with the Iceland University of Education, leading to a bachelor’s degree. Then in 2008, the University of Education and the University of Iceland were merged; now, the School of Education is part of the university, with a five-year teacher education programme leading to a master’s degree (Einarsdottir, 2011a). Throughout the years, there has been a constant need for more preschool educators, and this remains a serious challenge, especially in connection with the increasing number of children and the length of their preschool days. According to Icelandic law (Lög um leikskóla nr. 90/2008), at least two-thirds of the positions in each preschool must be filled by preschool educators. However, the reality is that at the end of 2013, approximately 37% of preschools had preschool educators (Statistics Iceland, 2014c). The Icelandic context of preschools provides a unique example for its placement from the start within the educational system as well as an official pedagogical plan that was already presented in the mid-80s. However, there are also some issues that are part of an international trend, such as the emergence of care and education, which results in concern regarding the academic push into preschool education.

2.2 Summary

The discourse on preschool and preschool education is various where complex interests crystallise. The emphases and concepts in the official
curriculum guidelines are influenced by the ethos of the current time. Currently, there seems to be an interest in Icelandic society to open up, to a greater extent, preschool to children under two years of age. The arguments in the parliamentary resolution are that these changes are important in order to achieve the welfare and educational goals of the society (Tillaga til þingsályktunar nr. 142, 2013). Furthermore, in the National Curriculum Guidelines (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011), the role of the preschool as a foundational and sustainable part of a democratic society is emphasised. It is obvious that there are controversial and complex issues involved in the transition of young children from home to preschool or family day-care, which is, nowadays, the reality for most children and their families. The studies that have been implemented to capture preschool children’s perspectives in Iceland point to the importance of focusing on issues that create premises for children’s experiences and rights to influence their everyday lives in preschool.
3 Theoretical framework

In this chapter I will introduce basic concepts of the theories that lay the foundation for the research project. My stance and beliefs towards the reality that I intend to investigate and how it is understood are influenced by theories which shape the perspective, research questions, approach and interpretation of the data; therefore, the research is not value-free.

This chapter is divided into eight sections to demonstrate how I use different theories and concepts in relation to the children’s perspectives. Fundamental concepts in the theory of the life-world developed by the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) will be addressed and discussed in relation to the Dutch phenomenologist Frederik J. J. Buytendijk’s (1933) definition of the concept of play (see; Åm, 1989; Hangaard Rasmussen; 1996).

3.1 Introduction

The study is ontologically inspired by theories developed by two phenomenologists that emphasise the human bodily existence in the world. The focus is on how human beings experience and understand various phenomena and create meaning through the moving body. Ontology is an assumption about the nature of social entities and phenomena, concerning what are seen as meaningful components of the social world (Hammersley, 2014; Lichtman, 2013; Mason, 2002). Consequently, it involves how I view children and guides my understanding of children’s perspectives. Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) has often been portrayed as the philosopher of the body. In his life-world theory the intertwined relationship between human being and the world is described, where the body is considered as a base for thoughts and words.

The theory of Buytendijk (1933, see, Åm, 1989; Hangaard Rasmussen) about the nature and meaning of play has a close connection to Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) ideas of the importance of the body in encountering in the world. Both theories position the child as an active body subject who uses the body to experience the world and make meaning in light of the experiences (Åm, 1989; Johansson, 2011b). Young children’s play and playful actions are characterised by a centrality of the body, where children communicate and express their intentions and perspectives regarding their own and others’ actions (Åm, 1989; Løkken, 2009). These theories harmonise well with my intention of focusing on young children’s
communication and expression of their perspectives in play sessions in preschool. Children’s play can provide important information about children’s perspectives, leading to the possibility to acquire insights and understand children’s making of meaning during their interactions.

3.2 Theory of the life-world

The _life-world_ concept has developed from the phenomenological tradition, in which the interest is to describe human experiences. According to Merleau-Ponty (1962) the theory of the life-world describes the intertwined but ambiguous relationship between the human being and the environment. The life-world is ambiguous, and the traditional division of conceptual duos like subject-object, inside-outside, and soul-body are broken up (Hangaard Rasmussen, 1996). The life-world is lived and experienced by human beings and at the same time it exists without us. We are born into a world and the world is there when we leave. The life-world is the world we direct ourselves towards, and at the same time it is inside us. The child is viewed as a perceiving subject from the beginning and is directed to creating relationships with the world (Johansson, 1999; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). According to the theory, we as human beings are born into a social world that we share with others. It is through the perception of the lived body that children show their intentions and the most direct experiences occur (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Løkken, 2009). The life-world is a world where nature, community, culture and the child comes together and symbolises the meaningful context, which helps people to understand and interpret the world around (Johansson, 1999). Hence, communication is more than one of the operations of the human beings: it is a basis for the existence and development of a person.

The life-world theory of Merleau-Ponty (1962) focuses on the lived experiences of the individual in the encounters with the environment, and it offers a holistic view on children’s communication and expression. Thus, it provides me with opportunities to understand children’s lived experiences and perspectives as well as the complexity of their life-worlds. In the context of my research, the concept of relationship involves the connection between the child and other people; between the child as a body subject and the life-world. Children’s actions in play include the meaningful contexts that children create together. Thus, children’s relationships with peers and the environment are formed through their play. Knowing this helps me to better understand children’s experiences, as they appear for the children. However, Merleau-Ponty (1962) also points to the difficulties of understanding others, and there are always things that we can never understand.
Some concepts from the two phenomenological theories, Merleau-Ponty (1962), and Buytendijk (1933), are important in the study. The concepts that will be outlined here are; lived body, lived experiences, intersubjectivity, ambiguity, movement and play. I regard these concepts as a basis for my understanding of children’s actions and as such guiding my perspective in the study rather than being an analytical tools.

3.2.1 Lived body-lived experiences

In Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) theory, the concept lived body describes the foundation for the existence of the child. The body is experienced as a whole, both as an object and as a subject at the same time. The lived body is described as one’s own body as experienced by oneself as oneself (Merlau-Ponty, 1962). According to the theory the body is central for children’s communication, and children’s lived experiences appear bodily in all situations. Through bodily expression the child’s intentions and perspectives become visible. The movements of the body provide the child with new perspectives and therefore new experiences and meaning.

In preschool the child is engaged with his or her physical and social environment and in the process of understanding the lived experiences (Johansson, 1999; Løkken, 2009). Thus, preschool is a part of children’s life-worlds, interwoven with their actions and provides children with dynamic interaction. The concept of the lived body has been beneficial in the study in focusing on children’s communication. It is a key concept when focusing on children’s expression of their intentions towards the peers. Communication is about expressing and experiencing meaning and appears in both verbal and non-verbal forms. Communication is intersubjective, and is always directed to the other. The context of the communication creates conditions for responses of others’, and as such influences children’s interactions. Children’s communication can be understood and experienced differently by others, and thus interpreted and responded to in multiple ways. My bodily presence as a researcher, attempting to gain knowledge, is also central, and hence a part of children’s life-worlds.

3.2.2 Intersubjectivity

In the theory of Merleau-Ponty (1962) the concept intersubjectivity is used to describe the fundamental capacity of the human being to participate in the world of others. From the beginning of life people experience and give meaning to the world around them. Intersubjectivity has also been highlighted in other theories as a foundation for understanding others’ intentions (Bruner, 1990; Stern, 2003). According to Merleau-Ponty (1962)
the human life is intersubjective, and the creation of meaning is considered a consequence of where individuals suggest their own interpretation of the world. As Bengtson stated (2013a, p. 50), “Intersubjectivity lives in the tension between the otherness and the sameness of individual human beings.”

Children encounter each other’s worlds where mutual recognition can take place or be rejected. In the process of intersubjectivity the actions are based on values and conventions which become visible in the interaction between the children (Johansson, 1999, 2011b). Thus, communication is a precondition for participating in each other’s worlds and to creating communities. Although children’s actions are considered meaningful, and directed towards a goal, it does not mean that children actions are necessarily planned. According to Merleau-Ponty (1962), new meanings develop in the interactions as children create meaning in light of the former experiences. This can lead to new ways of acting, and the actions might become practice, as knowledge is internalised through the body.

Løkken (2000a, 2009, p. 35) refers to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (1962), and discusses how the child can be viewed and understood within several levels of appearance. One of the levels is transcendental subjectivity, which in this context is intersubjectivity. A child’s intersubjectivity involves the body subject that is in the process of encountering the world, and the responses towards encountering others, which also appear as body subjects. Intersubjectivity is therefore an important part of the process that occurs in interaction between body subjects when creating their communities in the play sessions in preschool. Hence, the concept of intersubjectivity is one of the fundamental concepts that directs my understanding of children’s communication and expression in the context of play.

### 3.2.3 Ambiguity of meaning

According to Merleau-Ponty (1962), the life-world is characterised by ambiguity and appears simultaneously as objective and subjective. The ambiguity involves the existence of more than one possible meaning in a child’s encounter with the social and physical world. The world does not appear for the child as only an object, but rather it appears as emotional expression, or a human being that is either attractive or repulsive (Heinämaa, 1999). Consequently, children’s reactions towards the world demand emotional responses and evaluations of some kind. The ambiguity of the body appears to the child as experience of oneself; as me/myself and I as experienced of others (Hangaard Rasmussen, 1996; Heinämaa, 1999). In other words, children’s actions involve emotional responses regarding whether the world appears for them as attractive or repulsive. In
interaction between people, values are always a part of the communication. Children’s play demands that children create meaning in which they present and express their own perspectives and intentions through complex communication of the body and respond to others perspectives (Johansson, 1999; Løkken, 2000b, 2009; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Young children’s communication in play is therefore not easy for children to resolve, and ambiguity is always included as well as interpretation of perspectives of others. Thus, the researcher’s interpretations of children’s actions during play, are also dependent on previous understandings, experiences, and views.

The use of the concept of ambiguity is supportive in the study, especially when attempting to describe and understand children’s intentions involving how their competence and vulnerability appear as they experience the responses of others. The concept of ambiguity also demands awareness regarding my own position, bodily and ideologically, as a researcher involved in children’s life-worlds, and thus influences the construction of how children’s perspectives are interpreted and presented.

### 3.3 Theory of nature and meaning of play

The phenomenology of the body is also central in Buytendijk’s (1933) theory of the nature and meaning of play (see; Åm, 1989; Hangaard Rasmussen; 1996). The theory describes how children create themselves and their understanding of the world around them by communicating with the environment. Through bodily encounters in preschool the children are in the process of creating meaning. Children’s relationship to the environment is dominated by emotional orientation, and two opposite concepts are used to explain this. One is the concept of *pathos* (Greek), which means emotion and characterises children’s orientations in childhood, and the other is the concept of *gnosis* (Greek), which means recognition or understanding and is presented as the opposite of emotion (pathos). According to Buytendijk’s (1933) theory, children easily get emotionally inspired and respond accordingly to their emotional inspirations. Children do not get to know the environment by looking at things, but by touching and being touched back by the things. The world attracts the child who uses the body to create meaning and relationships, and thus the child relates to the world in a different way than adults. In children’s encountering through the actions of the body, their perspectives become visible. In Buytendijk’s (1933) theory, play is described as childlike actions (d. jungendlich) and has it origin in movements of the body. The
child is full of vitality, moves around, and gradually the movements bring the child into the stage of the play. As a consequence, when children participate in play and playful actions, they create meaning (Åm, 1989).

3.3.1 Movement and play

In Bujtedijk’s (1933) theory, the vital notion is that children’s play should be understood as a bodily expression within a certain context which appears in childhood in particular (Åm, 1989; Hangaard Rasmussen; 1996). The child’s spontaneous movements are a foundation for the play. In theory, a distinction between child’s movement and play is that the play always includes communication when the child is either in interaction with an object or another person. The play comes to an end when the child does not get responses from the “player” (Åm, 1989; Hangaard Rasmussen, 1996, 2001; Röthle, 2005). When young children play, they do not start by thinking or imagining, rather, it all occurs simultaneously. The play demands a fast shift between bodily experiences and expressions, like thinking, imagination, emotions, sounds and words, and all those factors are important and intertwined. Through actions in play children’s self-construction occurs, which means that the child presents himself or herself to others, and through the responses of the world the child learns about himself or herself and the world (Hangaard Rasmussen, 1996; Johansson, 2011b). The interactions are therefore simultaneously individual and collective. The play develops where increasing excitement, enthusiasm, and form become prominent factors (Åm, 1989; Hangaard Rasmussen, 2001; Løkken, 2000b; Röthle, 2005). Through play, children create relationships and hence a shared foundation for their ongoing activities in play.

According to the theory of Merleau-Ponty (1962) intersubjectivity is a prerequisite for the process when children establish relationships to the world around. Children must adjust their actions, both to appease their own desires, as well as the wishes of others. The development of the play hinges on the fruitful interweaving of these elements. Thus, children’s play is dependent on intersubjective processes of reciprocal communication between children and the peers in the preschool. It is possible to identify connections between Merleau-Ponty’s theory of the life-world and Buuytendijk’s definition of the meaning of play as well as with studies revealing that the play includes ambiguity and more obscure elements than previous developmental psychology theories have indicated (Steinsholt, 1998; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Øksnes, 2010).
Buytendijk’s (1933) definition of play is utilized as a foundation in my study as it suits well and adds to the theory of Merleau-Ponty (1962), as the latter does not focus especially on the concept of play. Furthermore, I use the concept intersubjectivity together with the term play as both are connected to the meeting between body subjects and the understanding of others. The encounters between children in play involves a process of intersubjectivity by which the children are presenting their own intentions and responding to others’ life-worlds. Children’s actions that are directed towards others in the preschool include the meaningful context where they indicate their desires and perspectives. Thus, play demands that children establish relationships and create a mutual ground for their playful actions. In the study, the children’s bodily communication and expression is considered as representing their intentions, and thus giving insights into the meaning they give to their interaction with the peers.

3.4 Summary

In this chapter I have discussed the fundamental concepts in two phenomenological theories which form the main theoretical framework of my research project. The phenomenological approach aims to understand how various phenomena in the world are experienced by human beings. In the research the phenomenology is an ontological inspiration illustrating how I understand the way children experience the encounter of others during the play sessions in preschool. Thus, it influences my analyses and interpretation of children’s actions in creating their communities of play. The concepts from the two theories are resourceful as they describe the intertwined relationship between the human being and the world. The lived body is considered to be a foundation for the existence of the human being where children, through the body, communicate their perspectives towards the world. In their encounters, the children are in the process of understanding their experiences and creating relationships with others. The phenomenological approach allows me to explore and describe what appears for the children and how they express their intentions and respond to others. However, this can also be a dilemma as the life-world is ambiguous and I can never be certain of what appears for the children. Additionally, I am part of children’s life-worlds during the study, and influence the data construction. Consequently, the body is at the centre in the study, including both the children and the researcher. In this encounter, critical aspects appear regarding whether or if it is possible for adults to approach and present children’s perspectives. Nevertheless it is a great responsibility and can never be considered anything else than an honest attempt.
In figure 1, I give an overview of how the theories and the key concepts are used to conceptualise children’s perspectives in the research project. The phenomenology is utilized in the study, on the one hand as an ontological ground related to how I understand children’s perspectives. On the other hand the phenomenological theories are used as a methodological approach to come close to children’s perspectives in order to interpret their actions and generate knowledge regarding their creation of their communities in play. Thus, the concepts; lived body, lived experiences, intersubjectivity, ambiguity, and movements and play, create a holistic view of children’s perspectives in their encounters during the play sessions. In the figure the concepts are visualised as reciprocal relations influencing each other. Hans-Georg Gadamer’s (2004) concept of horizon is also presented in figure 1, as it conceptualises the interpretive process in the research, but it will be discussed further in the methodological chapter of the thesis.

Figure 1. Conceptualizing children’s perspectives
4 Previous research

Research endeavouring to capture young children’s perspectives by focusing on their bodily communication to understand their meaning-making within their communities in play is rather a novel arena in the field of early childhood education and care. Most studies of children’s views of their everyday lives in preschools have been conducted among older children. Furthermore, studies focusing on the youngest children in ECEC have rather focused on the relations between the adults and the children in order to improve practice, as young children are increasingly attending preschool (Rayna & Laevers, 2011).

This chapter is divided into eight sections that give an overview of ECEC studies connected to my study. In section 4.2 I summarize the main findings of the previous studies and point at gaps in the literature. In section 4.2.1 I discuss intended contributions of the study. Finally in section 4.2.2 I present the overall question as well as the sub-questions which are answered in the four articles.

4.1 Children’s communities of play

Children use various approaches when creating a shared world in play. The physical and social environment influences children’s actions. Similarly, by their everyday activities and play children share experiences, emotions and things. Thus children create their communities together using special forms of communication and approaches. Children are a diverse group of people with different abilities to interact and relate to others. Children also bring their earlier experiences with them into preschool. In the encounter children present themselves and create their ideas about the peers and social relationships develop.

4.1.1 The child and the others

Stambak and Verba (1986) described young children’s communication and expression towards one another as a process used to negotiate meaning in play. A child puts forward an idea to which the play partner interprets and responds. The responding calls upon other actions directed to the child who started the process and the interaction goes on. Thus, the interaction includes shared mutual interpretation and adjustment of actions according
to the peer’s actions and interpretation. Løkken’s (2000b, p. 172, 2000a, p. 539) studies with one- and two-year-old children in preschools revealed that they created mutual meaning with playful expression of their bodies. Each child’s social style was characterised by physicality and routines. The children experienced themselves as “I” or “me” and “thou” at the same time as they participated and strengthened the basis for play with other children. The children’s actions were connected to the intersubjectivity and experience of being “us” together. Furthermore, Løkken (2004a, 2004b) showed in her studies that young children in preschool create their own approaches in greeting each other when entering the preschool in the morning. Their actions indicated that the children who met on a regular basis in the preschool created a child-initiated culture.

It is important for children to be a part of and influence a community of peers in preschool. Corsaro’s (2003, 2005, 2009) studies with children between one and six years reveals that within the peer culture, important themes occurred involving children’s attempts to obtain control of their lives and to share this control with others. Furthermore, Corsaro points out that children develop mutual approaches to challenge adult control. Rutanen’s (2007) study of one- and two-year old children showed that they actively created mutual culture with gestures and movements of the body. The children created original movements and meaning with toys that they were offered to play with, but their actions were not always in accordance with the educators’ intentions for use of the toys. Similar findings were apparent in the Pálmadóttir and Bjarnadóttir (2012) study of two-year-old children in an Icelandic preschool, where the children showed mutual pleasure and used things in the environment in a playful way, which sometimes was in opposition with the educator’s intentions.

Relationships between peers is an important issue in preschool and play situations provide an arena for creating relationships. Strandell (1999) points out that children’s approaches to indicate who is a desirable play-partner and where to play is part of each child’s social participation in the preschool. When asked about what was important to children in preschool, meeting and playing with peers was the most significant for the children (Einarsdóttir, 2012, 2014b; Kernan, 2011). In a study by Dunphy and Farell (2011) that explored children’s perspectives on play, the children described the play as an arena for social interactions and maintaining friendships. Friendship, with its own characteristics, has been identified at an early age among children in preschool (Dunn, 2004; Engdahl, 2011; Greve, 2009). In Greve’s (2009) study, different types of friendship were recognised which involved rules and regulations, humour and danger, bodily togetherness,
and negotiation. Thus, children’s different kinds of relations and friendships contribute to their interactions and learning in various ways. However, Skånfors, Löfdahl and Hägglund (2009) show in an overview of studies of children’s interaction with peers that most of the research describes children’s interaction more in the light of the concepts of inclusion and exclusion, and less in how children create relationships with their peers.

4.1.1.1 Power relations

Although children find playing with peers important and desirable, various factors influence children’s participation and relationships in play. Thus, children’s play can also be an arena for struggle and difficult experiences (Ailwood, 2003; Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2006; Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010), and children have stated that the worst experience in preschool is not having friends to play with, or being excluded from a peer group (Kragh-Müller & Isbell, 2011). Johansson’s study (1999; 2011a) of young children’s morality showed that the children used the value of power to influence the participation of other children in play. The children used both positive and negative approaches to influence who was included and who was excluded. Furthermore, the children seemed to indicate that playing with peers that were a similar age was more desirable than playing with younger children. The study by Shin, Recchia, Lee, Lee & Mullarkey (2004), investigated leadership behaviour among preschool children (22 months to 4-and-a-half-years). The findings revealed that the approaches used were more connected to children’s relationships rather than their personal characteristics. The children seemed to use their social power to develop their relationships with peers and adults, and at the same time used their social power to include and excluded others, peers as well as adults. Power was also visible as a value in studies of older children’s play in preschool, showing how they make use of the content in play to gain useful positions in their peer culture. Age seemed to be an influential factor, and older children had power to make decisions which seemed to retreat from the common rules and marginalise certain children (Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2006; Löfdahl, 2006, Löfdahl, 2010). Thus, the children contributed to values of both justice and injustice in their communities in play. Similar findings appeared in a study by Einardóttir (2012), where young primary school children discussed their memories from preschool. The most important was their peers themselves, and to be recognised within the group of peers. However, the children also claimed that interactions between peers could be difficult, and a source of conflicts. Some of the children had experienced
injustice when peers in stronger positions used their power to exclude them from play.

Most of the studies that have focused on children’s experiences of their social worlds in preschool have been conducted with older children. The findings reveal that children use various approaches involving different possibilities for children to be a part of and belong to the shared world in play. In spite of increased international interest, there is still a lack of research which endeavours to capture the subjective experiences of the youngest children in play in preschool, and how they manage their interactional practices, communicate and express their desire to play and create their communities with their peers.

4.1.2 Important values in play

Studies that explore young children’s perspectives on how to treat their peers and how to deal with value conflicts are scarce. In play children have to position themselves and respond to others’ perspectives, and thus it is an important arena for the negotiation of values (Johansson, 2011b). Studies on values in an educational context have focused more often on older children, especially in regard to learning outcomes and values in curricula, the ethos of the school, and practical approaches to values education (Halstead & Taylor, 2000). Studies conducted in preschool with older children reveal that children’s communication of values can be on the one hand, connected to democratic values and on the other hand, aimed to enhance their own position within the group while excluding other children from participation in play (Emilson & Johansson, 2009; Karlson, 2014). Johansson’s (1999, 2011b). Studies in Swedish and Australian preschools explored young children’s communication of moral values in play. Values regarding rights and care for the well-being of others were important for children in both contexts. However, values referring to conventions appeared to be of higher interest for children in Australian preschools compared with those in Swedish preschools. Rights seemed to have a higher priority for the Swedish children. It appeared that children prioritise values according to what is relevant in their respective life-world and preschool settings.

In studies of young children in preschool settings, children’s possibilities of participation among peers and the creation of their communities in play were explored. Even though values were not the focus of these studies, the children demonstrated that rights, friendships, age, initiated play, and number of years in the actual preschool were important prerequisites for
children’s participation in play and becoming a part of the children’s communities (Grindheim, 2011). The communities in play involve important aspects that influence children’s experiences, knowledge of how to participate in the other’s world, and how to treat other people.

4.1.2.1 Value-conflicts

Although certain values may be prioritised in a group of children, other children might challenge them, leading to value conflicts. Value conflicts in children’s interactions have been of little interest as a topic for research (Einarsdottir, Purole, Johansson, Broström & Emilson, 2014). However, children’s resistance, strategies in conflict management, and the role of disputes in early childhood settings have been studied (Danby & Theobald; 2012; Haan & Singer, 2010; Singer, Hoogdalem, Haan & Bekkema, 2012; Tobin, 2005), though these studies do not focus on values.

Studies among young children show that toys are often involved in children’s conflicts. Children often try to resolve the conflicts, as Engdahl’s (2011) study showed, in instances where non-verbal expression such as movements, gestures and strength of the voice served an important role when children (17-24 months) expressed their intentions of exchanging the toys. Alvestad’s (2010) study explored young children’s negotiation strategies during play. The children communicated different negotiation strategies in order to unite their perspectives. The main focus of the study was on peer relations, toys, and the content of the children’s play. The approaches were either emotionally oriented or centred on problem solving. Additionally, humour was used as an approach in the negotiation process. Children who frequently played with other children were the most successful in their negotiations. Humour appeared also as a part of children’s approaches in Loizou’s (2007) study, which revealed that young preschool children used humour in order to control and present themselves in social context.

4.1.3 Children’s perspectives on educator’s role

Despite increased international interest in research with young children in preschool settings, few studies focus on the youngest children’s perspectives of the role of the educators in their play. Most studies with children under the age of three have focused on the interactions between educators and children in order to improve educational practice (Musatti & Mayer, 2011; Kalliala, 2011; Roberts, 2011), as well as an exploration of the values and democracy communicated between the youngest children and their educators in preschools (Emilson & Johansson, 2009; Fugelsnes,
These studies reveal important conditions for children’s well-being in preschool as well as highlighting children’s perspectives.

Nordic studies which explored older preschool children’s perspectives on the educators role revealed a pedagogical approach in which educators remain in the background observing the children, “waiting to see” if assistance is needed and keeping the children occupied (Einarsdóttir, 2005, Einarsdottir, 2014a; Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen & Määttä, 2011; Pramling-Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009). However, children seem to consider that the educators should be available while they are playing to support different levels of their play. One study explored one- to eight-year-old children’s reasons for involving educators in their play situations. The children invited the educators into their play for various reasons: to get help from the educator; to be acknowledged as a competent person; to make the teachers aware of other children breaking the rules; to get information about, and confirmation of, how things work; and to involve educators in play. All of these categories also appeared among the youngest children, except making the educator aware that other children were breaking the rules (Pramling-Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009). Children’s experiences of educators’ multiple roles are also evident in an Icelandic study (Einarsdottir, 2014a) that explored five-year-old children’s views of educator’s roles. On the one hand, children’s perspectives of the role of educators involved interactions such as care-giving, observing the children, assisting, making rules and decisions, offering support, and teaching. On the other hand, the educators’ roles were associated with organizational issues in the preschool.

Different perspectives and understanding of play between the children and the educators were evident in some studies. The children, ages of five and nine years in Sandberg’s (2002) study, considered the educators too controlling and unable to play, but at the same time children needed their help to solve conflicts and find peers to play with. Kragh-Müllers’ (2006) study showed similar results, where some of the children wanted assistance in order to engage in play with their peers or to achieve position within the group. In a study with children 3-5 years in Denmark and United States the focus was to explore through drawings and interviews their perspectives on their relationships with the educators. The children found it important that the educators played with the children, showed humorous attitude, and helped the children if they were not able to receive a position among the peers (Kragh-Müller & Isbell, 2011). Furthermore, studies show how children valuate the involvement of the educators in the play sessions. The
findings of Hjorth’s (1996) study reveal that the children stressed that educators understood the content of the play before they interfered, and the children in Kragh-Müller & Isbell (2011) study pointed out the importance that the educators knew what happened when conflicts occurred during play. This might indicate the importance of being close and sensitive to children’s perspectives in order to support their interactions in play.

4.1.4 Children’s and researcher encounter

The importance of children’s participation in research has been stressed in recent years, as has the focus on children’s perspectives on various issues in their everyday lives (Clark, McQuial & Moss, 2003; Einarsdottir & Harcourt, 2011; Lansdown, 2005). Children’s participation in research is generally connected to the discourse of how children and childhood are viewed as well as children’s rights to be encouraged to express themselves and influence the social context. Emphasis is placed on doing research with children instead of on children as was commonly described before (Einarsdóttir, 2012; James, 2009; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2000). The emphasis on children’s perspectives has encouraged scholars from diverse disciplines to develop theories and methods with the goal of understanding children from their point of view (Dalberg, Moss & Pence, 1999; Clark, 2014; James, 2009; White, 2011a).

Studies where young children participate with and encounter the researcher are scare. However, studies with the youngest preschool children reveal that researchers uses various approaches to capture their perspectives. The role of the researcher in children’s life-worlds has increasingly been of interest in the discussion. In the encounter, children, unlike adults, usually become quickly accustomed to the researcher and the camera (Greve, 2007). However, Johansson (2011b) points out that young children try to understand the research situation. This attempt to understand the situation influences the relationship created between the researcher and the children (Fleer, 2014; Johansson, 2011b; Sørensen, 2014), and thus the children influence and co-construct the role of the researcher. A study of Degotardi (2011) with infants intended to explore how children created relationships when starting preschool. She reflects on the experiences and effect of her presence where the children began to approach and initiate interactions, despite the beforehand decisions of being distant when observing children’s actions. In her study Stephenson (2011) used different methods to capture young children’s perspectives on the curriculum in a preschool setting. She describes her way to come close
to children’s experiences as a “generous” approach, meaning she made herself available to the children, allowing them to decide when and how they interacted. Thus, the researcher provided the children with the experience of leading the interactions. Hence, it enabled the researcher to listen to the youngest children’s voices in an open approach. White (2011b, p. 188) pointed out the conflicting perspectives regarding whether or not the researcher ought to be familiar with the children’s culture or not. However, White emphasises the importance of the researcher’s awareness to the differences and diversity. Thus, the researcher’s position is always to a certain extent a position of “outsideness,” although in an everyday context. The attempt to understand children’s communication comprises various challenges regarding whether and how children’s bodily expression is interpreted. Thus the researcher’s participation in the children’s life-worlds includes various relationships and ethical dimensions involving children’s assent and dissent. After all, it is the ontological position of the researcher that decides the focus and influences the construction of the children, and whether and how the children’s perspectives appear in studies.

4.2 Summary and gaps

The findings of previous research reveal that young children communicate their perspectives and intentions, and create their communities including special forms of interaction and approaches. Playing with peers and creating relationships are two of the most important things for children in preschool. In children’s eyes play is an arena where they communicate various values regarding their own behaviour and that of others. These values are connected to democratic values, comprising the well-being of others and care. On the other hand the children used power and confronted these values to enhance their own positions and exclude some of their peers. The studies indicate that age and relationships within the group seemed to be an influential factor regarding children’s experiences of belonging. Thus, children experience different possibilities of having their voices heard in the play sessions. There is still gap in the literature regarding the subjective experiences of the youngest children, and how they create meaning in their peer interaction in play sessions. Additionally, there is a lack of knowledge regarding the youngest children’s perspectives of what they consider as important values in their communities of play. Furthermore, the value conflicts that occur in children’s interaction and how they resolve the conflicts is an unexplored field.
Although the findings of the previous studies reveal that children find peers and play most important in preschool, the findings show that children also want the educator’s support and involvement in their life-worlds in play for various reasons. The children wanted educators to be humorous and understand their play. The children highlighted the educator’s involvement regarding conflicts and support of relationships between the peers. The findings indicate that children found it important that the educators focus on children’s perspectives and understand the play before they interfered. Most of the studies were conducted with older children in preschool, and therefore, there is a gap in the literature regarding young children’s perspectives on the meaning the children assign to the involvement and the role of the educators. Various approaches have been used in order to capture young children’s perspectives. But there is still a lack of studies that focus on a holistic approach including the relationships between the participating children and the researcher.

4.2.1 Intended contribution

The contribution of this study is threefold: Firstly, the study is intended to contribute to theoretical knowledge regarding bodily communication of young children and the complexity of their communities in play, an issue that has not been in the forefront in childhood studies. Children’s experiences and creation of meaning in the peer group, what the children consider as important as well as their experiences of other’s behaviour and actions provides important knowledge in regard to the complexity of children’s communities in play sessions in preschool. The recent decade’s postmodern ideas positioning the child as strong and competent in contrast to traditional developmental theories where the focus was on lack of competence and presenting the child as a vulnerable and dependent person might run the risk that children’s vulnerability is neglected, and a holistic view of the child is not recognised. Albon (2011) argues that vulnerability in postmodern writings with very young children have not been in the focus. Similarly Johansson, (2011a) claims that children’s vulnerability is missing in Swedish studies with young preschool children.

Secondly, as the context of the study is Iceland it contributes to the Icelandic and international discourse on preschool pedagogy and policy. The discussion frequently centres upon whether or not preschool is an appropriate place for young children, often related to family policy (Alvestad, et al. 2013; Eydal & Gíslason, 2014). The importance of a secure relationship between the child and parents has been stressed (Belsky, 2009;
Kjartansdóttir, 2009), as have quality issues in early childhood education and care where the emphasis is placed on the young child as an active learner (Dalli, et al. 2011; David, Goouch, Powell & Abott, 2003; Hayes 2007; OECD, 2006).

Furthermore, concerns about quality related to big groups of children, high stress levels, lack of educated personnel, frequent staff turnover, and the unsuitability of preschool buildings for young children have been raised (Bjørnestad & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2012; Jónasson, 2006). A current policy issue in Iceland is investigating the possibilities of extending parental leave, and whether or not the municipalities can provide all parents of young children with preschool after finishing the leave. While much of this discussion is focused on policy and the practicalities of preschool for families, less attention has been paid to the experiences of children and what they consider as important in their communities in preschool. In this context the youngest children’s voices are missing.

Thirdly, the intention of the study is to contribute to childhood studies. The phenomenological approach used in the study requires the researcher to come close to children’s experiences, perceptions, and understandings of their own life-worlds. Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) theory of the life-world underpins my study and influences the beliefs I have about and how I interpret the world. Thus, the theory is important as a perspective in a reciprocal process where the children and I, as the researcher, contribute to the process and the construction of knowledge.

4.2.2 Research questions

The aim of this study is to deepen the understanding of young children’s perspectives of their communities in play in preschool. The specific focus is on issues of importance for the children in creating play-communities with peers, as well as children’s encountering with the educators and the researcher. This was observed through children’s bodily communication, inspired by Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) theory of the life-world as well as Bujtendijk’s (1933) definition of movement and play. The theories highlight the bodily communication of the human being, a relatively novel approach in ECEC. Exploring children’s perspectives comprises the view that the young children possesses important information regarding what they consider important in their own communities.
The main research question is: In order to create communities during play sessions, what do young children in one Icelandic preschool find important, and how do they communicate and express their perspectives? The sub-questions are as followed:

- How do the children communicate and express their desire to play with the peers?
- What values are important for children in play?
- What does children’s communication imply about their views of the role of the educators?
- In what ways do video representations give insight into the relations between the researcher and the children?
5 Methodology

The study is ontologically inspired by the phenomenology of the life-world developed by Merleau-Ponty (1962), which guides my understanding and interpretation of children’s perspectives. Phenomenology is grounded within the paradigm of qualitative research, where subjectivity and the importance of personal perspective are emphasised. The term *qualitative research* refers, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), to a multiplicity of methods involving an interpretive and naturalistic approach. The endeavour is to explore lived experiences and understand the meaning of human interactions or views. In a phenomenological approach, the information is filtered through the researcher’s own perspective, where there is no one correct interpretation (Lester, 1999; Lichtman, 2013).

According to the theory of Merleau-Ponty (1962), in which the body is considered as a basis for all human experiences, the researcher through the bodily being exists in children’s life-worlds. Therefore, the attempt is to create bridges between the life-worlds of the participants and the researcher (Bengtsson, 2013b). The study is intended to identify children’s lived experiences as they are understood by the children themselves. The phenomenological approach, and especially life-world theory, is well suited to this study, as it emphasises the intertwined relationship between human beings and the world. In the research encounter, the attempt is to understand and interpret children’s experiences and meaning making. This also creates important conditions for the research process, demanding reflectivity and awareness of the researcher being part of children’s life-worlds and thus impacting both the children and the construction of knowledge.

5.1 Children’s perspectives

The understanding of *children’s perspectives* is a complex concept in the discourse of childhood and education for young children. For the past two decades, scholars from different disciplines have developed theories and methods in order to understand children on their own premises. The concept of *children’s perspectives* have been applied both as an ideological and as a methodological concept in scientific context. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), states that all children have
the human right to have their voices heard. This means that those who work with children must be committed to listening to their opinions on matters that concern them. The difference between the concepts of child’s perspective and child perspective have been discussed. Halldén (2003) argues that a child’s perspective relates to the importance of the child’s own perspective and culture, in which the child him- or herself contributes information, while the concept a child perspective involves children’s situations and interests as well as what adults consider what is best for children. Hence, the understanding of the concepts ‘child perspective’ and ‘child’s perspective’ influences the focus of the study and how children are presented in a research.

In this study the concept children’s perspectives is defined in line with Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson and Hundeide (2010) description of children’s perspectives:

Represent children’s experiences, perceptions, and understanding in their life world....., the focus is on the child as subject in his or her own world, the child’s own phenomenology. This is what adults attempt to understand through their child perspective, for example at child-focused interpretations of children’s intentional acts and statements (p. 22–23).

Approaching children’s perspectives requires coming close to children’s experiences, perceptions, and understandings of their own life-worlds. The methods I use in the study to acquire the knowledge are connected to the methodology and theories about knowledge and how it is obtained. Thus, ontology and epistemology are connected and together build the philosophical ground of empirical research (Bengtson, 2013b). Participant observations where the concern is to represent the data from the perspective of the research participants are frequently used. The data and data construction are described as accurately as possible, with an endeavour to draw a picture of an event, describe a process of events, and shed light on situations, people, incidence, or how things are related (Crotty, 2006; Hangaard Rasmussen; 1996; Montgomery, 2014). Emphasis is given to understanding a phenomenon in a particular context, including time, place, and society. The concept context is related to a cultural and historical time, a certain here-and-now situation, involving both the past and the future (Graue & Walsh, 1998; Løkken, 2012). When encountering young children’s life-worlds, it is important to be aware of the context in which their action occurs, acknowledging that views and experiences are
different among the children (Dockett, Einarsdóttir & Perry, 2009; White, 2011a). It is a challenging and complicated task to approach young children’s perspectives and to talk on their behalf.

The phenomenological approach in the study provides insights where concepts from the theories are used to conceptualize children’s perspectives in order to describe, understand and explore the data. However, the endeavour to interpret children’s communication through their bodily expression requires a critical discussion, as for instance Johansson and Emilson (2010) have pointed out. This critical aspect attunes well to Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) theory of the life-world, where the ambiguity of the human life-world is emphasised. Thus, it is important to be critical regarding my own ability to understand what appears for the child, and how and whose perspectives come through in the research, as well as my own influences on the construction of the data. In practice, this requires the researcher to be open and reflective regarding the subjective aspect of the research including being aware of children appeared differently.

5.2 Ambiguity of horizon

The metaphor of the horizon was put forward by Gadamer (2004) to describe the perceptions that result from the body being in the world, which is interconnected with the perspective from where we look. The horizon involves everything that can be seen from a particular point. We can talk about various dimensions of horizon, such as narrowness of horizon and broaden out the horizon. The horizon is defined as the knowledge and notions that individuals have obtained and take for granted (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Johansson, 2011b). The horizon is not static, but rather constantly changing in the processes of intersubjective human experiences, knowledge, and interpretations. Our experiences of the world always have an implicit horizon, which can change allowing for a new horizon to appear. Children’s and adults’ interactions always involve a degree of ambiguity with regard to the horizons embodied in the actions. Thus, the horizon helps researchers to become conscious regarding possibilities and limitations when exploring what appears for children (Johansson, 2011b). The experience and interpretation of others and others’ perception of us will therefore entail differences in horizons, and therefore people can never fully understand the worlds of one another. Consequently, my interpretations of children’s actions, as well as children’s communication and the responses to others, are dependent on the horizon, including their understandings, previous experiences and views.
In my research, I use the concept of horizon as a way to think about how to gain knowledge about children’s perspectives. The horizon creates a connection between the descriptions of actions and the creative aspect of interpretation (Johansson, 2011b). Thus, the horizon is employed in the descriptions of children’s actions, in the analyses, as well as in the interpretation process. I suggest that these concepts of ambiguity and horizon together create a holistic approach and support each other, particularly when the aim is to analyse and explain the complexity of children’s communication and the researcher’s involvement in children’s life-worlds. The researcher’s and children’s interaction during the research process involves a degree of ambiguity with regard to the horizons that are embodied in the actions (Johansson, 2011b; Johansson & Løkken, 2013). Consequently, the experience and interpretation of others’ perceptions of us is always ambiguous.

5.3 Research design

I define the study as a phenomenological childhood study. The construction of the data was based on observations from video recordings and from field notes written during the research process. The study was conducted with children in two units in one preschool in Reykjavík. In one of the units the children were from 14 months to two-and-a-half years of age, and in the other unit, children were from two-and-a-half years to three years and nine months old.

5.3.1 Phenomenological childhood study

The phenomenological approach of my study is connected to childhood studies. Childhood studies are characterised by concern about the wholeness of the life situation of young children. Childhood studies focus on the subjective experiences of children and the need to listen and respond to the voices of children, thus connecting the knowledge to children’s positions in society (Kellett, 2014). Relatively few studies include voices of children under three in preschool. Consequently, their voices might be marginalised in the construction of knowledge around children’s perspectives of their everyday lives in preschool.

Some key methodological and ethical issues are highlighted within the field of childhood studies. Children’s lives are considered interesting and worthy of study on their own ground. Rather than focusing on children’s lack of competence or knowledge, children are considered capable of providing adults with important insights into their lives, experiences, and
knowledge about the world. Furthermore, the emphasis is placed on ethical principles about the rights of children being respected within the research process, as active participants with the opportunity to express their perspectives of being studied and how their childhood is presented (Einarsdóttir, 2007; James, 2009; Kellett, 2014). Childhood is usually viewed as a social construction reliant upon culture, time and context (Einarsdottir, 2014b; James, 2009; Qvortrup, 1994). The children’s rights movement and childhood studies have interconnecting interests and visions. As children’s rights have become a major issue within childhood studies since the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, the need to address self-critical reflection regarding what children’s rights focus on and the meaning of children’s rights in research have been pointed out and debated (Reynaert, Bouverne-De Bie, Vandevelde, 2009). Given the complexities of this issue, Quennerstedt (2013) argues that there are three main areas of challenges in term of moving into the future: advancing critique, increasing theorization, and contextualising research.

The main principles of childhood studies suit well to the aspiration of my research of focusing on young children’s lived experiences in order to understand their perspectives regarding important issues in their play communities.

5.3.2 Field of study

When choosing a field for the study, the main requirements were that children between one and three years old attended preschool. I started the search by looking at preschools’ websites and selected one that, in my opinion, was well suited to the criteria. The chosen preschool is in an established area in Reykjavik (the capital), is over thirty years old, and is typical for preschools from this period of time, with three units. As in many others preschools, young children’s attendance has increased lately, resulting in two units with children aged one to three years, while the third unit is for children from four to six years of age. I contacted the preschool principal, who was positive regarding my request for doing research in the preschool. Then I started to obtain the necessary permission from the municipal authorities, preschool principal, preschool educators, parents, and children.

The studies were carried out in the two units for the younger children. Four to five educators worked in each of the units. Two of those were educated preschool teachers, one designated as unit leader, worked in each
unit. In studies with young children, it is especially important to consider ways of protecting their anonymity (Grey & Winter, 2011). In order to contribute to the confidentiality and privacy of the children, the units received the code names Shore and Mountain, and each child received a pseudonym. In addition video recording was used for analysis, and only written descriptions of children’s actions are presented in presentations and publications.

The preschool curriculum states that children’s play is emphasised in the pedagogical work, which accords with the Icelandic National Curriculum Guidelines (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011). The daily schedule provides time for children’s free play inside in the morning and the afternoon. In the preschool context the free play sessions are, to a certain extent, directed by the children. Therefore, I decided that the play sessions in the morning were well suited for research, as the group of children were more stable in the morning than in the afternoon, when some of the children might have left the preschool. The play sessions lasted about one hour, after the children’s breakfast.

The Shore unit consisted of 20 children, 14 months to two-and-a-half-years old. Seven of the children had one or both parents of foreign origin. Most of the children attended the preschool for three to five months, although a few of them had recently started.

The Mountain unit consisted of 26 children, two–years-and-four-months old to three-years-and-nine-months old. Four of the children had one or both parents of foreign origin. Many of the children had been in the preschool for over a year. The children usually start in the Shore unit and their transition to the Mountain unit occurred when they were around two-and-a-half-years old.

In the play sessions two or three educators normally worked with each of the groups, while the others took their coffee breaks. Both units had four similar playrooms: two bigger and two smaller rooms. In the larger playrooms there was a home corner where the children had access to diverse play materials, such as household equipment and child-height furniture. Toys and books were stored at children’s height, while some other materials were stored on high shelves. There were adult-height tables and high chairs for the children in the Shore unit. Some of the toys, such as puzzles and blocks, were kept out of reach of the younger children in the Shore unit, and the educators placed these on big tables for the children. During the play sessions the children were usually divided between the big playrooms, with an educator.
Table 1 gives an overview of how the children are divided between the two units as well as the number and age of boys and girls in each of the units.

**Table 1. The two groups of children**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The units</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Ages</th>
<th>Altogether</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shore</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.2-2.6 year</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mountain</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2.4-3.9 year</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the beginning of the research project I had a meeting with the unit’s leaders to introduce myself and get acquainted with the daily schedule in the preschool. I emphasised that the children’s actions would be in the forefront of the observations and the educators were in the background and expected to interact with the children as usual. I also stressed that I would start by visiting the units and collaborate with the educators regarding when to start the video recordings. I considered it important that both the children and the educators would get used to my presence before I started the video recordings. The unit leaders were positive, interested, and willing to contact the parents and deliver a letter in which the research was introduced and the parents’ consent on behalf of their children was requested. I started the field work after receiving consent from all the parents (see appendix).

In research how much time is used to create relationships in the field is controversial. However, Harcourt and Conroy (2011) point out the importance of establishing trust and security when the intention is to share lived experiences with others. In studies within ECEC, the researcher’s role is usually explained differently from the pedagogical work of the educator’s. Abrahamsen (2004) describes it as staying in the background, while Johansson (2011b p. 45) defines the role as one of an “interested observer” in children’s play—friendly but different from the other adults. I visited the preschool in different activities in the morning, such as breakfast, circle time, lunch and play sessions. The purpose was to get an overview of the work and that the children and the educators would get used to me and my role. I placed myself near the children and responded to their initiatives without taking a direct part in the pedagogical work. Thus, my appearance was different from the educators in the unit, but emphasised being close to the children.
Data were constructed using observations, video recordings, and field notes. The observations started in February and continued until June, 2009. In February and March I only conducted field work in the Shore unit. In April and May observations were conducted in both of the units and were completed in June in the Mountain unit.

As already mentioned, most of the children in the study were under three years of age, and therefore it can be complicated to achieve their informed consent. Each day, before I started the video recordings I tried to be aware of the children’s bodily expressions as to whether or not they wanted me near. I also attempted to be aware of my own bodily appearance, such as being friendly and at children’s height while video recording, either sitting on the floor or a chair. I also sometimes asked the children if they would allow me to video record their play. If I interpreted their expression to mean that they did not like my presence, I turned another way or stopped the video recording. Usually, the youngest children communicated in that manner, especially at the beginning of the study. Some of the children were interested in looking at the video camera, and were allowed to look through the lens at their peers, but usually they quickly grew disinterested and continued their play. Some of the children did not show any obvious interest.

Altogether, 32 hours of video observations were collected during the research project. Out of the 32 hours of video recordings, 45 excerpts from 2 to 25 minutes long were transcribed. There were 27 excerpts from the Shore unit and 20 from the Mountain unit. The criterion for selecting the video excerpts where that they showed a process of a child’s or children’s communication in play including interaction with an object or another participant.

Table 2 gives an overview of the total hours of video recordings and the number of excerpts with each group of children in the two units that were used to transcribe and analyse.

**Table 2. Video recordings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Video recordings</th>
<th>Shore</th>
<th>Mountain</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hours</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excerpts</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.3.3 Video observations

Observations using video recordings provide opportunities to observe people’s actions, where the making of meaning takes place and allows for a new understanding of interaction between people (Heath, Hindmarsh & Luff, 2010; Fleer, 2014). Video recordings, more than other observation methods, enable the possibility to uncover and observe actions and interactions that occur in real time. Video technology offers the ability to observe and re-observe the film, to control the speed of the equipment, and acquire still picture—all making it possible to examine details in the data and analyse bodily expression and language with a higher level of scrutiny than before (Flewitt, 2006; Heath, Hindmarsh & Luff, 2010; Walsh, et al., 2007).

Video recordings have been utilized within various disciplines and as such have contributed to the paradigm shift in early childhood education and care, psychology, and sociology of childhood, in which the child is now, to a greater extent than before, viewed as a competent and actively social human being (James, 2009; Rayna & Laevers, 2011). Subsequently, nonverbal communication and subjective experiences of the child are considered important in the child’s socialisation processes (Sommer, 2012; Stern, 2003; Trewarthen & Aitken, 2001). Video recordings have various advantages and limitations which I will address later in this section. In research where the attempt is to capture young children’s perspectives on their life-world in preschool, Robson (2011) claims that the main advantage of video data is that it allows the participants to reflect on their informed consent, meaning that children can give feedback concerning their participation in the study. This is a challenging and a debateable issue, especially in studies with young children. However, this demands sensitivity on behalf of the researcher regarding children’s communication and expression.

I used video recordings because the technology enables me to acquire insights and better understand the complexity in children’s communication. Based on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, Løkken (2012, p. 77) emphasises the “lived attention” of the researcher using observations where the embodied researcher participates in children’s life-worlds. Hence, my lived body as a researcher is interconnected with the life-worlds of the children. Pink (2009, p. 105) argues that the camera is not only directed on the “images” in front of the camera but also is connected to the person behind it and his or her relations to the world. Thus, the video camera and the researcher are interwoven. Built on Pinks’s (2009; 2012)
ideas, Johansson and Løkken (2013) claim that important relations between
the onlooker and the person that is looked on appear, where the
researcher must be sensitive to children’s lived experiences and create
proximity as well as analytic distance.

In the study I used a small handheld digital video camera to follow
children’s actions. At the beginning the attempt was to capture the ongoing
actions in different areas in the playrooms. The purpose was to get an
overview of children’s actions during play and to better understand the
complexity of the sessions. During a play session some children might be
sitting at a table playing with toys or puzzles, while other children are
playing in the home corner or in the small rooms; some of the youngest
children moved around in the playrooms, stopping for a while in various
play areas. Sometimes I followed one or two children into different areas in
the playrooms during the play session. After a while I focused for a longer
period of time on children’s actions in the home corner or in the small
rooms where the children played with diverse toys, such as animals,
houses, and cars. I considered it to provide me with a deeper insight into
children’s actions in different play areas. When the children were playing,
one educator was usually in each of the bigger rooms, assisting the children
if needed, but the children often played by themselves in the small rooms
and I was often the only adult.

Video recordings as an observation method also have certain limitations.
The quality of the recordings is crucial, as both sound and picture can
influence the value of the data (Heath, Hindmarsh & Luff, 2010). The video
lens captures only a small part of the situation under study, and important
parts of the context might be missing. Therefore, it can be beneficial and
increase the trustworthiness of the study to use other methods such as
field notes.

Ostrosky and Mouzourou (2014) argue that there is no common
definition of field notes and that researchers use them differently. Some
use field notes as research journals where daily entries as well as ideas and
questions for further reflections are recorded. Others use the term field
notes for everything that is collected during the research process, including
interviews, video recordings and artefacts. Walsh et al. (2007) claim that
when using video recordings as the main method in a research, field notes
can offer additional important context information as well as an overview
of the recorded situations. In the study, field notes were used as a research
journal during the entire research process. After each day, I wrote a short
description of children’s actions and relationships and the context of the
video recordings. I also recorded my reflections and thoughts regarding children’s interactions and issues concerning my own role and interactions as well as the next step in the process.

5.4 Data analysis

Data analysis includes the process of looking closely at and organizing the information to increase understanding of the data and to present it to others. In qualitative research, the phases of data gathering and analysis often are integrated during the research process. Regardless of which method of analysis is chosen, it is important to ground the interpretation in empirical data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Hence, in my study the analysis started during the data construction period. A continual review of the video recordings was conducted in order to become acquainted with the material, and to reflect on and make decisions about the next steps in the research process. The decisions could deal with certain play excerpt that I wanted to explore further or with following certain children in order to better understand their communication or relationships. The written field notes made during the research process were also helpful in clarifying the context of the children’s interactions.

5.4.1 Transcriptions of the video recordings

Part of the analysis process was to transcribe the video recordings in order to have a textual record. The transcription process occurred in four reciprocated phases: (a) I viewed all of the video data and organised it by rendering the films into excerpts that showed a process of the children’s or a child’s communication within a play; (b) in the process of rendering and organizing the data I wrote short descriptions of each excerpt along with my reflections regarding the children’s interactions; (c) each excerpt was given a descriptive name related to the actions that the play situation involved; and (d) all the excerpts were transcribed using the software program Inscribe (2009). When transcribing video recordings into written text it is important to be as accurate as possible in the transcriptions, and to ensure that the written text is related to the focus and aims of the study (Bucholtz, 2007; Flewitt, 2006; Heikkilä & Sahlström, 2003). In the study, the transcriptions centred on the children’s actions,—i.e., emotional expressions, gestures, orientation of the body, sounds, and words—directed towards their peers’, educator’s and researcher’s reactions. Even with a special awareness and effort to be precise in the transcriptions, one cannot capture everything that occurs in children’s non-verbal
communications and translate it into text. Greve (2007) points out the importance of comparing the film and the transcriptions during the analysis process. Transcriptions always include the transcriber’s personal judgements concerning verbal expressions and how these are turned into text (Lichtman, 2013; Mason, 2002). Therefore, the text can never be considered anything other than a reconstruction of what occurred in reality during the children’s communication (Flewitt, 2006; Johansson, 2011b).

Hermeneutics are used as the main approach to interpret and analyse the data in this study. Additionally, the organisation and analysis of the data were inspired by thematic research analysis.

5.4.2 Hermeneutics and thematic analysis

All research is built upon some philosophical assumptions that are often referred to as the epistemology to which the researcher adheres. This epistemology includes the researcher’s theories about knowledge and how it is gained. Hermeneutics is the study of the methodological ideas of interpretation, and originally deals with interpretation of a text (Crotty, 2006). These ideas originate from the German tradition of hermeneutics, the Verstehen tradition in sociology, the phenomenology of Alfred Schutz (1972), and the critiques of scientism and positivism in the social sciences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Bengtson (2013b) discusses the integration of life-world phenomenology and hermeneutics. He claims that they meet in the life-world approach, where interpretation and understanding are not limited to text, but also include tools and actions. Life-world hermeneutics endeavour to understand a text or actions through the meaning that is expressed in the action or in the text. Children’s life-worlds in preschool are both intertwined and ambiguous, and therefore it is important to describe both the wholeness of the life situation and the diversity of meaning in which children experience the life-worlds.

The hermeneutic circle points to the fact that the interpreter is obligated both to conventional tradition on one hand, and to the specific object of interpretation on the other (Schwandt, 1997). Thus, our interpretations and understanding, observations or descriptions are not free from the influences of the observer’s experiences, pre-judgements, or of his or her personal values and expectations. Bengtson (2013b) claims that it is not possible to escape the hermeneutic circle as we always already base our understanding and interpretations through our own state of being in the
world. But these encounters enable the researcher to investigate and change the pre-judgement.

The phenomenological approach and Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) theory of the life-world establish relational conditions for understanding and interpreting children’s subjective experiences. Accordingly, as previously mentioned, I use hermeneutics and Gadamer’s (2004) concept of horizon to think about, reflect on and interpret children’s actions. The concept is described as being intertwined with the position from which we are looking, and involves everything that can be observed from a certain perspective. Interpretation of each other’s interactions always entails variations. Therefore, children’s and adults’ interactions always involve a degree of ambiguity with regard to the horizons that are embodied in the actions (Johansson, 2011b).

The formal analysis process was inspired by thematic analysis. Thematic analysis, according to Braun and Clark (2006), is a flexible method of organising and analysing data to identify and describe repeated patterns or themes within a set. A theme describes important parts of the data connected to the research questions which correspond to some level of meaning within the data-set. The analysis of data for this study was not a linear process, but occurred in reciprocal phases where the themes gradually grew out of the analysis. The first phase was to read all the transcripts in detail and identify and code the instances where children communicated their perspectives connected to each of the research questions. Then the examples where children’s expressions regarding each of the research questions became visible were categorised and the initial codes were collated into themes. The next step entailed defining the themes and connecting them to the examples in order to better understand the context of the children’s expressions of their perspectives. Following this, the themes, transcribed examples and video-recordings were reviewed in order to check the relationships between the coded extracts and the entire data set. The final step in the analysis was to write the report, which included a selection of extract examples that were related to the research questions and literature.

The analysis of the data is a reciprocal phase where it became necessary to look steadily at the video recordings in order to scrutinise details and better understand children’s communication. Sometimes in the transcriptions the context of a child’s expression was unclear, or the direction of the gaze and the positions of the body were not clearly evident. In these instances, the field notes often provided important information
about the context of the play. In the analysis and presentation of the findings, emphasis was placed on the communication that took place in the video recordings, as confirmed by the written descriptions.

It is necessary to point out that all of the original transcriptions are in Icelandic, which can possibly lead to missing information or meanings becoming distorted in the English translation. Furthermore, as I have already emphasised, I can never be certain how the situation truly appears to the children, although I interpret it using their experiences and perspectives.

### 5.5 Trustworthiness and reflexivity

The use of the concepts of reliability, validity, and generalizability in qualitative research have been criticised and seen as being connected to the paradigm of positivism. Hatch and Coleman-King (2015) talk instead about the trustworthiness of data as giving legitimacy to qualitative research, where the focal point is that multiple meanings exist. In this light, the concepts of trustworthiness and reflexivity are relevant in my research project. During the analytical process I was aware of conflicting interpretations, and attempted in the descriptions of children’s actions to point to more than one possible meaning of their perspectives.

Trustworthiness of a study, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), involves the arguments that the researcher provides to others and to her/himself to persuade them that the work is worth noting. This means it is necessary to provide trustworthy descriptions of the findings as reconstructions and interpretations. The trustworthiness and value of the research is connected to whether or not the attempt to capture the phenomenon intended in the study is achieved. This is in turn connected to the possibilities of answering the questions that have been put forward in the study.

According to Lichtman (2013), the trustworthiness of the study builds upon the researcher’s recognition and reflection regarding the assumptions and possibilities of the researcher’s bias, such as whether or not the researcher is aware of and sensitive to the way his or her own experience and history shape the study. In the field work, as well as during the analysis process, I carefully considered my participation in children’s life-worlds and attempted to be sensitive to the children’s and the educators’ understanding of my being. As a former preschool teacher I have, to a certain extent, established assumptions about the field; on the other hand, I have been a preschool teacher educator for a long time, and so can be
considered as having an “outsider” perspective that also influences my views and interpretations of children’s actions. During the field work as well during the analysis process I endeavoured to be aware of these factors and their impact on the construction of the data.

Furthermore, in order to ensure the trustworthiness of my data, the field notes were used as a research journal where children’s interactions and relationships were described, along with the context of the play session. The field notes were also utilized for reflections and questions regarding my understanding and interpretation of the children’s interactions and my role therein. Furthermore, to ensure the trustworthiness of the data, it was also important to play back the video recordings and compare them with the written transcriptions.

The concept of reflexivity is usually connected with the researcher’s presence and critical reflections in the research process and the role of the researcher (Degotardi, 2011; Lichtman, 2013). It concerns the mutual impact of the researcher on the issue under study and vice versa. Thus, reflexivity acknowledges the mutual relationships between the researcher and the participants in the study. Degotardi (2011) argues that reflexivity requires researchers to think about their own thinking in order to make visible the different roles of the researcher and others in the creation and construction of research knowledge. During the research process I used the field notes to reflect on my experiences in the field. These reflections centred on my daily interactions with the children, often in regard to my “here and now” responses, and whether these responses were ethically “right.” My reflections also examined questions of participation in and the development of relationships, and if there were a clash between the role of the researcher and the pedagogical work. Thus, these reflections in the field notes functioned as a learning process involving my personal evaluations and feelings, as well as solving problems and making decisions regarding the next steps in the research project.

5.6 Ethical issues

Researchers have ethical obligations towards the participants in a study, no matter their age. The main obligations are to handle people with respect for their integrity and as human beings (Alderson, 2014). Thus, ethical questions are a part of the research from the very beginning and continuing throughout the entire research process. Understanding ethics as a continual process has been highlighted in studies with vulnerable subjects (Einarsdóttir, 2007; Fern & Kristinsdóttir, 2011). Young children as
participants in research can be seen as vulnerable subjects and as being dependent upon adults in a research situation. Hatch and Coleman-King (2015) argue that the use of visual technology in research with young children demands extra care during the process, as well as the way in which data are presented. Video recordings can be intrusive into children’s lives and privacy. These video recordings are a real time observation, and demand care regarding the preservation of the recordings during the research process, as well as properly erasing these recordings when the research is complete. Decisions about the presentation or publication of the video data have to be based on ethical considerations in order to secure children’s privacy and confidentiality. To ensure confidentiality and privacy in this project, the video recordings were only used during the data analysis; they were not reported with the research results.

Ethics also pivot on the standards and codes included in Icelandic laws on research with human subjects, as well as good ethical conduct and regulations about personal protection. Data in the study were handled according to laws on the protection of privacy, where emphasis is placed on not giving the name of the preschool or any personal information about the children in the presentation of the study (Lög um persónuvernd & meðferð persónuupplýsinga 77/2000). Informed consent was obtained from the municipal authorities, the preschool principal, the educators, and parents. All of the parents agreed on behalf of their children, and during the study emphasis was also placed on obtaining the children’s assent for participation throughout the study.

Access to the research participants has traditionally been determined by adults. In childhood research, children’s participation and rights to consent and assent are stressed, as well as their rights to impact the implementation of the research (Bae, 2009; Dockett, Einarsdóttir & Perry, 2012). One critical question is whether and how it is possible to give young children satisfactory information regarding research. Children and adults occupy different positions of power, which can influence children in giving their real consent (Einarsdóttir, 2007; Robson, 2011). Seeking assent from young children can be problematic, as it is possible to argue that young children’s assent to the presence of the researcher should not necessarily be understood as consent to have their data reported. Further, it also can be argued that young children are unable to provide informed consent as they are likely to be unaware of the ways in which the data will be used. However, research with children demands ethical awareness where the researcher is responsible for interpreting children’s expressions regarding their assent or dissent. With young children, this may involve paying close
attention to children’s bodily communication (Dockett, Einarsdóttir & Perry, 2012; Løkken, 2012). Each day, before I started the video recordings I tried to be aware of the children’s bodily expressions as to whether or not they wanted me near. The children in my study sometimes indicated that they felt uncomfortable with my presence. Although all of the parents had given their consent on behalf of their children, I considered it important to listen to the children’s own voices and respond accordingly. When I interpreted children’s expressions to mean that they did not want to participate, I left or looked another way. As the study went on, the children’s behaviour changed, and they did not express dissatisfaction with my presence, which might indicate that the research process is a relational process. Sørensen (2014) argues that the role of the researcher is an ethically informed position where the researcher has to be certain of children’s continued assent throughout the study.

A research process involving young children can raise ethical questions regarding relationships, interactions and children’s safety (Dockett, Einarsdóttir & Perry, 2009; Einarsdóttir, 2007). As a researcher being involved in children’s life-worlds over several months, I became a part of the children’s world and began to develop mutual relationships with them. This was one example of how the research process became an emotional process for me as a researcher as well as for the children. The research process requires decisions regarding “here and now” actions and reflections on participation in the children’s life-worlds as well as one’s own role as a researcher. Hence, it brings out questions of how to end the study and leave the field. My strategy for leaving was to visit the preschool less often during the final phase than I had in the beginning. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), this can be a good psychological approach to help ease the transition out of the field for both the researcher and the children. One cannot be certain whether this strategy worked or not, but at least it was an honest attempt.
6 Overview of findings

This research aimed to deepen the understanding of young children’s perspectives of their communities in play in the preschool setting. The specific focus was on issues of importance for the children in creating play-communities; that is the communication and relationships with peers, the educators, as well as the researcher. To achieve this four studies were conducted, each of them focusing on children’s perspectives on different aspects of their communities of play. Here the main research question – *in order to create communities during play sessions, what do young children in one Icelandic preschool find important and how do they communicate and express their perspectives?* – is answered by describing the findings of the four studies. The findings are based on my empirical data from the four studies, outlined together with short examples from the articles describing children’s communication in the play sessions. First, the findings from each of the four studies are presented, and finally the key themes across the four studies are illustrated.

6.1 Study I

The first article, “Yngstu Leikskólabörnin: Samfélag í Leik” [“The Youngest Preschool Children: Communities of Play”], co-authored with my supervisor Jóhanna Einarsdóttir, was published in *Uppeldi og Menntun* (see Pálmadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2012).

In this study, data were constructed in the group called Shore unit with children one and two years of age. Children’s meaning-making in acting towards each other in play and the effects of their actions on their interactions were explored. The focus was on understanding how the children communicated and expressed their desires to play with their peers. The participation in each other’s life-worlds demanded that the children construct meaning and context with their actions. The following example describes the communication that took place between the children in one of the play sessions.
Anna (2.4), Sara (2.0), and Tomas (1.4) are in one of the big playrooms. Anna and Sara are walking around with doll prams. Tomas is sitting in a low chair with a ball in his lap, watching the girls. Suddenly, Anna falls over Tomas, but immediately she chucks his cheek kindly and smiles. Tomas smiles and extends the ball towards Anna, who turns back to continue playing with Sara. Tomas throws the ball away, looks miserable, and gazes at the researcher and then at the educator.

In the study three main approaches that illustrate children’s meaning-making in their interactions in play sessions were found: (a) to start to play, (b) to maintain play, and (c) to join the play.

To start to play
Children communicated their desires to start playing with their peers through bodily expression such as movements, and positions of the body, gestures, gazes, sounds, and words. The children attempted to present themselves to peers, and gazing played an important role in creating relationships and a mutual ground essential in order to begin playing.

To maintain play
Children’s participation in play demanded that they recognised each other through mutual playful actions. When children succeeded in initiating play their excitement and pleasure were visible through their expressions. Within the context it was important to create new elements for their peers to respond to and to sustain the mutual focus for play, which often appeared to be a difficult task.

To join the play
Children’s playful actions often attracted other children’s attention. In order to engage in play that a child or children had already started, it was important to know the codes of play; that is, to present one’s own intentions as well as to respect the other’s perspective and rights to the play arena and the toys. The children who were playing together often seemed to experience other children’s entering as a threat to their interactive space.

Important issues regarding children’s experiences and whether or not their intentions were recognised by their peers seemed to be connected to
their experience and relationship within the group. This provided children with power that was used to influence who was included in the play and who was excluded. Although the younger children often demonstrated their competence in expressing their desires to start playing, their vulnerability appeared when their voices were not heard by their peers.

6.2 Study II

The second article, “Young Children’s Communication and Expression of Values during Play Sessions in Preschool”, was co-authored with my co-supervisor Eva Johansson and published in *Early Years: An International Research Journal* (see Pálmadóttir & Johansson, 2015).

In the study, data were constructed through observations, video recordings, and field notes with children in both units: Shore and Mountain. Study II aimed to explore how young children between one and three years old communicate and prioritise values in order to create and be a part of a community during play session in an Icelandic preschool. Furthermore, it aimed to investigate the value conflicts that might occur and how the children resolve such conflicts. Children’s interwoven bodily and verbal communications are considered as their experiences and creation of meanings of good and bad or right and wrong regarding their own or others’ behaviours. The following example shows how the children interpreted each other’s bodily expression with eye contact in the centre of the communication.

Alex (1,11) and Robert (2,6) are sitting together in a corner in one of the big playrooms. Alex is holding a wrench, and Robert is trying to take it from his hand. He stops and reaches out towards Alex and gazes at him with a sad expression on his face. Alex gazes back while holding the wrench away from Robert. Now Robert looks at the other children in the room, and Alex starts to use the wrench to pretend to mend a wooden pram. When Robert gazes at Alex again, Alex immediately hides the wrench behind his back. The boys gaze intensively and quietly at each other for a while. When other children in the room draw Robert’s attention, Alex starts using the tool again. After a short while, he hands the wrench to Robert, who begins to mend the pram as Alex had done. Alex watches him and looks excited. He fetches a small shovel and puts it beside Robert, who starts mending it.
In the study five main patterns, were found that illuminate children’s communication and expression of important values during their play were found: (a) rights and ownership, (b) the well-being of others, (c) a sense of belonging, (d) confronting others’ perspectives, and (e) uniting different perspectives. The five patterns identified are linked to two main value fields that were communicated within children’s play: values that were *individually* oriented and values that were *collectively* oriented. In the play, the children attempted to unite or confront these different perspectives.

*Rights and ownership*

The findings indicate that the values of rights and ownership were important and meaningful for children’s interactions in play, especially in regard to play areas and toys. The children expressed rights to play and ownership of toys. Being the first child to reach the play area and the first to have a toy seemed to provide children with ownership, and it was important for the children to respect the rights of others.

*Well-being of others*

Values that were connected to children’s awareness regarding the well-being of others were from the perspectives of the children being kind and caring for others. The values were expressed towards both their peers and their educators.

*A sense of belonging*

The children indicated the importance of their communities with their communication. They prioritised values that involved togetherness and sharing the world of play with their peers. A toy could serve as a tool for reciprocity when a child gave a toy to another child, indicating that he/she wanted to play. Other values that the children expressed involved concern for the educators and for their peers. The children took on the responsibility of maintaining order, as emphasised by the educators, and guiding their peers who were not following the rules in play sessions.

*Confronting other’s perspectives*

During play, the children confronted each other’s perspectives and priorities of values, sometimes resulting in conflicts. The values that were communicated could also be in opposition to values that were prioritised
either within the group of children or emphasised by the educators. The children sometimes experienced a toy in another child’s hand as an opportunity for creating a mutual ground for play. This might result in conflict, although the intention often seemed to be to create a relationship and togetherness with a peer. Power became a value dimension when children’s right to play and ownership of toys were challenged.

**Uniting different perspectives**

The resolution of value conflicts involved children trying to clarify their views and to unite different perspectives that arose in their interactions. Children often defended their rights and attempted to negotiate with their peers. The children seemed to use a gaze to clarify their own intentions and prioritise values, to defend different values, and to interpret each other’s perspectives. Some of the children in the groups were in a vulnerable position regarding other children’s actions and did not defend their rights. Children’s relationships and emerging friendships seemed to influence the resolution of conflicts, and the children managed to create a mutual ground for their interaction in play.

**6.3 Study III**

The third article, “Young Children’s View of the Role of the Educators in their Play,” co-authored with my supervisor Jóhanna Einarsdóttir, was published in *Early Child Development and Care*, (see Pálmadóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2015),

Data were constructed through observations, video recordings, and field notes with children in both units: Shore (one–two years old) and Mountain (two–three years old). The aim was to explore young children’s perspectives of the role and pedagogy of educators in preschool play sessions, and whether or not they experienced the educators’ actions as resources for their play. The following example describes how the children invited an educator into their play.

Nicholas (2,7), Laura (2,4), Rose (2,8), and Simon (2,11) are in one of the big playrooms putting some railway tracks together. The children start to walk around making happy sounds, and using the railway tracks as lollipops. Suddenly, Nicholas sits down on the floor and starts to bark. Laura drops the ‘lollipop’ and grips his sweater and says, ‘Doggy?’ in a soft voice. They start to ‘walk the dog’, and Rose and Simon watch. The dog
takes blocks from the floor with its mouth and puts them on the tables. The children enter the other big playroom, walking in the direction of the educator who claims that the ‘dog cave’ is in the other playroom. The children return back, and Rose says to Simon, ‘Doggy’, to which he responds by crouching on all fours. Rose takes his sweater and they walk into the other playroom as Nicholas and Laura did before. The educator asks whether the children have finished playing with the wooden train, and if so, they have put it into the box again. The ‘walk the dog play’ stops and the children walk back and start to put the train into the box, humming a ‘collect the play material’ song with cheerful voices.

Four main patterns emerged in the study and are considered as expressions of children’s lived experiences that were interwoven in their interactions. These patterns serve to illustrate children’s perspectives on the roles of the educators in their play: (a) assistance in play situations and with play materials, (b) confirmation of competence, (c) support connected to social interactions, and (d) participation in play and playful actions.

**Assistance in play situations and with play materials**

The children seemed to experience that the educators were in control of important conditions for their play, as the educators decided the location of the play materials and where the play should take place. The youngest children often circled around a high table or, by using sounds and gazing at the toys communicated their wish to be lifted up to a chair. Therefore, the younger children were dependent on the educators’ support to get to and from the high tables, as the educators placed toys on the tables for the children. The children also wanted an educator’s assistance getting toys that were kept out of reach. In the Mountain unit, the children had more access to the toys, but the educators decided how many children would be in each play area and emphasised that children should not be moving between play areas during the play session.

**Confirmation of competence**

In the eyes of the children, it was important that the educators were emotionally involved and confirmed their subjective world. The children sought the educators’ confirmation concerning their competence in play and personal recognition. The children seemed to experience different
involvements by the educators in the two units. The younger children’s competence of handling toys was often confirmed in the Shore unit. While the older children in the Mountain unit seemed to experience that the involvement of the educators was predominantly as supporters regarding external conditions and play materials.

Support connected to social interactions
The children wanted the educators’ support in different phases of the play, such as starting play, maintaining play, and joining play. A toy could be used as a tool for reciprocity to create mutual ground between children. A toy in the hands of one child fascinated another child and caused conflicts in which educators’ support was required, by either one or both of the children. Different perspectives of the children and educators might arise. From children’s perspectives, the actions often seemed to represent their approach to relating and interacting with their peers. The educators emphasised often that the children were to share and exchange toys. Children’s competence appeared when they expressed their intentions, but at the same time, their vulnerability emerged when they were not able to resolve conflicts on their own and when the educators’ approaches did not seem to align with the children’s intentions.

Participation in play and playful actions
The children seemed to consider it important that the educators participated in their play and playful actions. They often wanted the educators to be involved and to participate and share the experiences and joy of a play. Thus, the children tried to create mutual ground with the educators through their communication within a play theme. Children’s expression with their bodies sometimes inspired the educators to become involved in children’s subjective worlds, and recognise their experiences. Thus the children and the educators created an intersubjective space for their playful interaction, and the active participation of the educator extended children’s experiences.

The four patterns illustrating the roles of the educators in children’s play are linked to two main dimensions that were important for children’s experiences of the educators as resources for their play: (a) emotional closeness and (b) emotional distance. The different dimensions influenced children’s opportunities to have their voices heard and to create an intersubjective space in their life-worlds.
The first dimension, *emotional closeness* appeared as the educators’ emotional involvement and responses to children’s life-worlds. The prevailing ethos in the play sessions was characterised by reciprocity and the educators’ actions were oriented towards children’s subjective worlds. The educators recognised children’s experiences, and through active participation, they created an intersubjective space through playful action and extended children’s experiences.

The second dimension, *emotional distance* included situations where the educators were emotionally reserved regarding children’s subjective worlds in the play sessions. Contrasting perspectives that influenced the intersubjective process between the children and the educators appeared. When the children attempted to involve the educators in their play and playful actions, the educators’ responses were mostly to emphasise rules regarding the external conditions of the play.

### 6.4 Study IV

The fourth article, co-authored with my supervisor Jóhanna Einarðóttir, “Video Observations of Children’s Perspectives on their Lived Experiences: Challenges in the Relations between the Researcher and Children,” is forthcoming in the *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* (see Pálmadóttir & Einarðóttir, 2015).

The study aimed to explore the encounter between the researcher and the children and challenges that the researcher faced throughout the research process. The focus was on how the video recordings that comprised the main research method provided insights into the relationships between the researcher and the children. The findings reveal that video recordings as a method have considerable potential to provide insights into young children’s lived experiences. Hence, relationships and ethical reflections are a part of the research process. Challenging situations sometimes occurred where the children confronted the educators’ rules about the use of the toys as the example below illustrates.

Four girls, Kristin (2.0), Johanna (2.2), Hanna (2.4), and Linda (2.4), are playing in the home corner. Hanna is sitting at a small table playing with a computer. Linda is walking around in a dress and high-heeled shoes. Kristin sits in a doll’s pram, and Johanna walks around with her pushing the pram. Kristin stands up and takes a doll bed, turns it upside down, and tries to use it as a slide. The girls gaze at Kristin, and Hanna says,
‘This is not allowed.’ They walk towards Kristin, emphasising this perspective by waving their fists in a threatening gesture towards her face. Kristin gazes, determined, at the girl’s faces, and then she climbs on the bed again and slides down. She happily encourages Johanna to join her, and after a while Johanna tries to slide also. They rotate in their play, repeating when the other one is sliding, ‘Take care not to fall down.’

In the study three main patterns that illuminate the relationships and the challenges the researcher faced during the research were identified: (a) children’s assent, (b) exploration of the researcher’s role, and (c) involving the researcher in play.

Children’s assent

Some of the younger children demonstrated with their bodies and words that they did not want the researcher to be near them, especially at the beginning of the research process. Thus the ambiguity of the children’s life-worlds might appear, as they showed competence in expressing their own views, while at the same time their vulnerability appears regarding participation in a study. Despite obtaining parents’ consent beforehand on behalf of their children to participate, it was considered important to respect children’s perspectives and to respond accordingly to the “here and now” interpretation. Children’s behaviour towards the researcher changed after a while, which pointed to the creation of a relationship over time and possibly children’s experience and understanding of the role of the researcher.

Exploring the role of the researcher

The children used different approaches for exploring the researcher role and relating to the researcher during the research process. Many of the younger children were interested and active in creating a relationship, while the older ones were more interested in exploring whether the researcher was following the rules that the educators emphasised in the group. As the research progressed, the children seemed to acknowledge through their experiences the researcher’s role as different from the educators.
**Involving the researcher in play**

The children in both groups involved the researcher in their life-worlds when they seemed to experience that the educators’ responses were not in harmony with their intentions or when they lacked support in their play. The children’s actions sometimes challenged the researcher’s involvement as the children were confronting the educator’s rules about the use of the toys and when playing a “risky play.”

**Table 3. Summary of the findings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study I</th>
<th>Study II</th>
<th>Study III</th>
<th>Study IV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children’s approaches that illustrated children’s meaning-making in their play situations:</td>
<td>Children’s communication and expression of important values:</td>
<td>Children’s lived experiences of the educators involvement:</td>
<td>Children’s and researcher encounter:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To start a play</td>
<td>• Rights and ownership</td>
<td>• Assistance in play and with play material</td>
<td>• Children’s assent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To maintain a play</td>
<td>• Well-being of others</td>
<td>• Confirmation of competence</td>
<td>• Exploring the role of the researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• To join a play</td>
<td>• A sense of belonging</td>
<td>• Support connected to social interactions</td>
<td>• Involving the researcher in play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Confronting other’s perspectives</td>
<td>• Participation in play and playful actions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Uniting different perspectives</td>
<td>• Emotional closeness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Emotional distance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.5 Integration of findings

Here the overall picture of the findings from the four studies is outlined. Children’s communication and expression were built upon intersubjective processes including peers, educators, and the researcher. Three key themes where contrasting perspectives appeared were identified across the four studies. Children’s communities of play provided an arena for the following issues: (a) relationships versus rejection; (b) commitment versus unequal power relations; and (c) closeness versus distance.
6.5.1 Relationships – rejection

Revisiting the findings in all of the four studies reveals that the play sessions were a desirable and challenging arena to create relationships, with peers, educators, and the researcher. Children’s participation in each other’s life-worlds demanded they create meaning about what they considered important, and interpret other’s meanings. Children’s bodily expression was a predominant factor in their meaning-making. The use of the gaze within the play seemed to be especially important in children’s communication and expression. The gaze indicated a mutual ground for play, to clarify own views, and interpret other’s perspectives as well as negotiate about different perspectives. The children also gazed towards the educators or the researcher when when they wanted confirmation or their intentions were rejected.

6.5.2 Commitment – unequal power relations

Important values in children’s communities comprised commitment of values that were either individually directed or collective. The individual values included rights and ownership. The collective values involved well-being of others, and belonging to and sharing the world of play with others, including the peers and the educator’s. The play required the children to create a mutual ground where they presented their individual perspective and responded to those of others. Thus the play demanded the children to unite different perspectives. The children often used toys as a tool of reciprocity to express their intentions to play. During the play the children also confronted other’s prioritized values and value conflicts arose, where toys were often involved. The interaction was not always easy to resolve for all the children. Children’s relationships and age provided them with power that might be used to include and exclude the peers from play or confront other’s peer’s perspectives and rights. Some of the children defended their rights while others seemed to be in a vulnerable position within the group. Thus, the children experienced their possibilities of being part of the communities differently.

6.5.3 Closeness – distance

The children gave meaning to the educator’s as well as the researcher’s roles during the play sessions. The children often indicated that they wanted the educator’s closeness to their subjective worlds in play. However, they seemed to accept to a great extent the involvement and the role that the educators played in the play sessions. Some of the children
took on the responsibility to guide their younger playmates when they challenged the rules and order emphasised by the educators. However, the children often seemed to experience the educators as distant in the play sessions. Children’s vulnerability became evident when the educators overlooked or showed distance from children’s perspectives.
7 Discussion and conclusion

In this chapter, I reflect upon the overall findings of the research, using the previously presented theories and prior research. Thereafter, some methodological challenges are addressed, and implications, limitations, and strength of the study discussed. Recommendations for further research are also indicated.

In the discourse about early childhood education and care, and whether or not preschool is an appropriate place for young children, it is not enough to explore curriculum documents, ambitious policy-papers about educational goals, or preschool educators’ views on children’s interaction in play. Children’s perspectives on their lived experiences in preschool have to be explored as well and be considered as an important part of the discourse.

7.1 Children’s perspectives on relationships

Creating relationships with their peers was highly valued among the children. This demanded construction of meaning and context, as well as negotiation about a meaning. Based on the findings of the research children’s emerging relationships seemed to create spaces for intersubjectivity. Children’s interactions and their creation of communities in play occurred across time, providing a reminder of the importance of time – both in children’s interactions and in the research process.

The play sessions motivated the children to take actions and make sense out of the lived experiences. The children communicated multiple meanings through various bodily expressions as they shared their perspectives regarding the creation of their communities in play (see in art. I-II-III-IV). Therefore, the play sessions occurred as a complex arena of intertwined relationships, where meaning-making and interpretation of the world around appeared. The findings of the research provide opportunities to discuss the centrality of the body in children’s meaning-making, as well as in the methodological approach taken in the study. The findings reveal that a child’s participation in play included the possibility that other children interpreted his/her intentions differently or rejected the child’s perspective. For example, in study I, a one-year-old boy showed his competence and used a ball as a tool for reciprocity when inviting a peer to play. At the same
time, he demonstrated his vulnerability by expressing tensions and gazing towards an adult when the peer rejected his intentions. This reflects Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) view that interactions between people involve emotional ambiguity expressed through the body.

Gaze and eye contact were crucial in children’s interactions. They served the purposes of creating relationships, clarifying own intentions, and prioritising values, defending different values, and interpreting each other’s perspectives. In this way, gaze became an important dimension in children’s creation of a mutual ground for their play, such as how to indicate a play, maintain a play with peers, and enter a play. For instance, a child might direct the gaze to a peer who was already playing before trying to join (see art. I). Gaze was also important when the children negotiated about a toy, or they directed the gaze towards a toy in the hand of a peer, before grasping it. The children also oriented the gaze towards educators or the researcher when seeking their involvement in the play (see art. I-II-III). Thus, children’s bodily actions towards the world reflected their lived experiences of how the world appeared for them. Consequently it is possible to argue that the body is a voice of the child. This is in harmony with studies revealing that various bodily expression create important premises for building relationships (Engdahl, 2011), and through the movements of the body young children create mutual meaning connected to the experience of being together (Løkken 2000a, 2000b). As put forward in the theoretical framework for the study – based on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Buytendijk’s (see Åm, 1989) – the children expressed their existence in the world through movements of the body. Thus, children’s movements are a part of and support children’s creation of their communities in play. This study confirms that play and playful actions are important vehicles in children’s creation of relationships in the preschool. Educators and researchers’ awareness of bodily communication and expression can provide a window to these.

7.2 Children’s perspectives on values

The intersubjective processes that appeared in children’s life-worlds in the play sessions and the relationships that develop through their participation were important for the quality of the social actions. The children communicated values that were prioritised within the group, comprising commitments regarding two value fields. The individual values involved children’s rights to play and their ownership of toys, while the collective values involved children’s concerns for the well-being of others and the
possibility to belong to the communities of play, involving the peers and the educators. The findings of the research reveal that collective values that were expressed towards the peers involved the importance of creating togetherness and sharing the world of play. The children expressed concern for their educators and their peers. Based on the findings of this study it can be concluded that young children are concerned about others, and take on the responsibility to maintain and include the values that they experience in their life-worlds to create their communities in play. Thus, the children expressed values that can be connected to democratic values. This supports previous research by Johansson (2009, 2011b) demonstrating that young children prioritise rights and care for others’ well-being in their play. However, the current research also showed that the children confronted other’s perspectives and prioritising values, and conflicts arose when the value of power appeared as a part of children’s relationships when creating a community in play.

7.2.1 Value conflicts and power relations

In children’s encounter in play multiple meanings occurred, sometimes resulting in tensions between contrasting perspectives. This, in turn, might influence children’s possibilities of having their voices heard within play (see art. I-II-III). The findings of this research indicate that the children considered the play sessions as an area for creating relationships, but also an opportunity to acquire a position within the group. At times, the values of care and well-being of others, as well as togetherness and individual rights, were challenged. Power was used to confront the other’s rights to ownership of toys and reject the peer’s participation in play. Thus, unequal power relations emerged in children’s encounter with each other. Some of the children defended their rights while others, often the younger children, seemed to be in a vulnerable position. This is in harmony with studies revealing that children’s close relationships and friendships, ages, initiation of the play, and experiences in preschool are important conditions for participation in communities of play (Greve, 2009; Grindheim, 2011), and shows children’s understandings of one another (Dunn, 2004). Furthermore, studies reveal that children use power to include and exclude peers from their communities (Johansson, 2011a; Løkken, 2000a; Löfdahl, 2010). Consequently, the creation of communities in play is a complex arena where children experience their possibilities of belonging to the communities differently.
In conflict situations between the children where toys were involved and the educators’ support were required, children and educators’ different perspectives might occur. From the participating children’s perspectives, the conflicts often seemed to have a social purpose and reflect their approaches to relate to, and indicate a play with the peer. While the educators might interpret the interactions as disputes over play materials and emphasised the skills of sharing and taking turns without supporting children’s relationships further. Thus, the ambiguity of children’s life-worlds appeared and different horizons influenced the intersubjective processes and learning. Other studies suggest that educators’ support concerning children’s interactions in play is crucial for children’s meaning-making and learning (Bae, 2009; Løkken, 2009; Emilson & Johansson, 2009). The findings of the research indicate that play sessions are valuable arenas for children to create relationships and learn values. The value conflicts appeared to be especially important, including children’s confrontation of each other’s perspectives, which required the children to clarify their views. The Icelandic curriculum guidelines for preschool emphasise democratic values in which children are supposed to learn through their participation in play (Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture, 2011). Therefore, it is the educator’s responsibility to reflect on young children’s learning in play and develop pedagogy for values education that brings together children’s life-worlds through a shared process of intersubjectivity.

7.3 Children’s perspectives on educators’ role

The children in both of the units seemed to experience the play sessions to some extent as child directed in which the educators were active facilitators regarding external conditions for the play. The children seemed to accept to a great extent the role that the educators played in making decisions concerning their play situations as well as assisting them in various circumstances. This harmonises with studies in which older children’s perspectives on the educator’s role have been explored, and children find educators important in supporting the play, such as helping to solve conflicts and finding peers to play with (Sandberg, 2002; Kragh-Müller & Isbell, 2011). However, children’s lived experiences regarding the educators’ roles and involvement in their play seemed to reflect to some extent the pedagogical emphasis in each of the units (see art. I-II-III). The children in the Shore unit (one to two years) had opportunities to move around in the playrooms when they were playing on the floor or sitting at high tables playing with toys. The involvement of the educators was primarily to take care of the children, offer them with toys, providing
assistance in getting to and from the high tables, as well as supporting the children in conflict situations.

The children in the Mountain unit (two to three years) seemed to experience the prevailing roles and involvement of the educators as taking care of the rules and order around children’s play. This included that the children were supposed to play in small groups on predetermined places during the play session. The variations in the educator’s involvements and roles in the two units might be explained by the age of the children. This indicates that the children in the Shore unit were not viewed as active and competent in social interactions and therefore the emphasis was to support their play with handling toys, as well as provide children with the opportunity to move between play areas. Thus, the roles of educators in children’s play might point to views that are connected to the notion that young children’s play and playful actions are not connected to meaningful interaction, but rather considered as stages in children’s motor development (Hangaard Rasmussen, 1996; Løkken, 2009). However, children’s lived experiences in both of the units regarding the educators’ involvement in their play and playful actions were in keeping with other studies that have shown that older children in preschool recognise it as the educator’s role and pedagogical approach to keep them busy and to wait on the side lines to see if support is needed (Einarsdottir, 2014b; Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen & Määttä, 2011). Furthermore, the educator’s prevailing role and involvement might also be clarified by the Nordic ideology built upon a “romantic” view of childhood, which holds that children should learn through their play experiences without too much involvement of educators (Wagner & Einarsdóttir, 2006). Hence, it is possible to argue that young children’s perspectives and contribution in a social context might be overlooked and not supported.

**7.3.1 Resources in play**

The findings of this study reveal that children give meaning to their lived experiences with educators in situations of play. Interpretation of these interactions provided clues as to whether or not the children experienced their educators as a resource in their play. If the educators’ actions were characterised by *emotional closeness* to the children’s subjective worlds, then the children expressed pleasure and excitement. If, on the other hand, the educators’ actions were characterised by *emotional distance* and an overlooking of the children’s perspectives, then the educators’ actions often contrasted with the children’s intentions. These findings are in line
with studies exploring older preschool children’s perspectives on educators’ involvement in play, emphasising that the educators understood the content of the play before they interfered (Hjort, 1996), and knowing what contributes to children’s conflicts (Kragh-Müller & Isbell, 2011). The results of this study imply that it is a pedagogical challenge to take part in intersubjective processes with children in order to support their communities in play. Inspired by Bengtson (2013a), the importance of building bridges between children’s life-worlds and educators is argued.

The research findings show that the children seemed to understand the order of the settings, including the roles and power positions connected with age of peers and adults. Some of the children took on the responsibility to maintain the order and rules emphasised by the educators and guide their peers. In a study by Karlsson (2014), responsibility, care, and respect were identified to be democratic values when older preschool children supported each other within their communities, and respected educators’ rules and positions. In Johansson’s (1999, 2009, 2011b) studies, it is pointed out that children appear to prioritise values according to what is relevant in their respective life-worlds and preschool settings.

In the study, children seem to interpret rules as a way to uphold the order of the preschool and to show concern for their educators. However, it is worth discussing whether the children’s efforts in taking on the responsibility of the educators might be interpreted as their approach to receive a power position within the group, since educators traditionally take the more powerful position. In this light, it is important that educators reflect on the prevailing values and the power relations that are embedded in the setting, and how they are mediated and practiced in the preschool.

### 7.4 Methodological challenges

The phenomenological approach opens up multiple understandings of children’s life-worlds, as well as possibilities for children to have their voices be heard. A focal point in the study is that multiple meanings exist, and that children and researchers experience their life-worlds in various ways.

In the two phenomenological theories by Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Bujtendijk (1933; see Åm, 1989), described in Figure 1 (p.34), the concepts; *lived body, lived experiences, ambiguity, intersubjectivity, movement, and play* are put forward to conceptualize children’s perspectives. The approach is explorative and connected to the lived encounters. It demands openness and yet distance in the research process, and interprets between the part and the whole. Gadamer’s (2004) concept of *horizon* demonstrates the
methodological principles of interpretation. The manner in which children’s perspectives are presented in research indicates a close connection between a child’s perspective and adult participation in children’s life-worlds. It is critical to understand how far one can go in interpreting children’s communications, intentions, and making of meaning. The concept of horizon describes the perceptions that result from a person’s bodily being in the world, which is interconnected with the perspectives from where a person looks. The concept of horizon indicates that the researcher and the children share an intersubjective space, which simultaneously encourage the researcher to be aware of the shared spaces and the differences in their life-worlds. Ambiguity is always involved in the presenting of children’s perspectives, and so researchers can never be certain as to what appears for the child. Merleau-Ponties’s (1962) theory points out that with all interactions there is the possibility of multiple meanings and interpretations.

Contradictions always arise when adults step into children’s worlds and try to speak on their behalf. It is important to recognise that the researcher’s history, horizon including his or her personal experiences, personality, and ideological stance influence how he or she will interpret children’s expressions. During my professional life—formerly as a preschool teacher, and currently as a preschool teacher educator and researcher in the field of ECEC—my focus and interests have centred upon children’s communication in play. This background may have influenced my encounter in the preschool, as well as my interpretations of children’s intentions during their play. However, I endeavoured to be aware of my role as a person interested in children’s play, being friendly, but different from the other adults in the units. In the methodological chapter of the thesis, I have provided detailed descriptions to inform the reader about how the research was carried out. These descriptions are provided in order to meet the study’s demands for trustworthiness and reflexivity.

My centrality to the children’s life-worlds became an important issue in the research, influencing my role and my construction of the data. Although the focus in the research project is communication among children, the video recordings made it possible to observe the children’s actions directed toward me as I held the camera. Thus, I (the researcher) was united with the video camera, and my experiences during the observations influenced the research decisions, as well as my responses to the children’s interactions and my interpretation of the data. This is in line with Pink’s (2009, 2012) ideas that the camera is not only directed toward the one who is observed, but it also influences the observer’s relationship to the world.
Video technology is becoming a regular part of children’s lives, and the cameras are smaller than they were in the past. The video camera made it possible for me to have eye contact with the children as I recorded. This might have influenced some relationships, as the children in the study were generally more interested in relating to me and exploring my role than in the camera. Thus, the researcher is no longer behind the camera as Løkken (2012) have described former. These changes provide opportunities and are also challenging and require reflection on the ethical issues of researchers’ involvement in children’s life-worlds, such as interpretations of children’s assent or dissent and judgment of when to stop recordings. The research process is an ethical and relational process, wherein children’s and researchers’ lived experiences and reciprocity, as well as researchers’ distance, influences children’s ideas about the possibilities of creating a relationship with the researcher; thus, the process influences the researcher’s role. The research project is an on-going, intersubjective process demanding the researcher’s knowledge and sensitivity regarding children’s communication, as well keeping “outsideness”. White (2011b) claims that these characteristics embody the necessary position of the researcher when participating in children’s life-worlds.

7.5 Study implications

In the first chapter the main aim was described, in which I wished to outline my doctoral thesis. The aim was connected to questions that were put forward in the four articles. The purpose of the study was to contribute in three areas.

The study firstly contributes to existing theoretical knowledge regarding the subjective experiences of younger children in preschool, how children create meaning in their peer interactions, and what they consider to be important in their play communities. The findings of the study reveal that creating relationships and influence in play was a desirable and challenging task for the children. In children’s encounters, intersubjective processes appear to be integrated in their communication involving contrasting perspectives of relationships and rejections. In children’s attempts to interact with others, the possibility of being recognised or rejected was involved. The encounters demanded the children to act within a certain context and to present their own perspectives and responses to others’ actions. In children’s encounter ambiguity of meaning appears where commitments of certain values became visible in the communication. Children’s various bodily expressions were a predominant factor in their
determinations of meaning, and this is where children’s competence and vulnerability appeared. The gaze played an important role in children’s meaning making. The gaze is also important in communication when children’s intentions are not confirmed or rejected by peers or educators. Furthermore, the study contributes knowledge regarding children’s perspectives of important values in their communities of play. Children’s commitments to treat others with care and be concerned for other’s well-being appears to be important in their play communities. However, the children also confronted other’s rights and values within their groups. Children’s relationships, including unequal power relations, seemed to influence their experiences belonging to certain worlds of play. The research shows that conflicts of values were of special importance in the intersubjective processes as children learn to participate in others’ worlds. The findings also indicate the importance of presenting children both as competent and as vulnerable, which points to the complexity in children’s life-worlds during play. This provides clues about the importance of a holistic approach toward children’s experiences in preschool.

Secondly, the study contributes to the discourse of pedagogical practice and policy connected to children under the age of three in preschool. There are many interrelated factors—social, educational, and cultural—that influence the lives of young children and their families. In the discourse on the position of preschools in society, it is important to build on existing knowledge and various perspectives. Based on the findings of this research, it is suggested that children’s perspectives and understanding of their social life within the preschool are an important aspect of the discourse. The findings indicate the importance of educators’ knowledge of children’s perspectives, as well the complexity of children’s communities in play. Thus, the findings of the study encourage educators and politicians who are involved in decision making regarding preschool issues to reflect on preschool experiences from children’s perspectives. It is important for educators and policy makers to take a holistic approach to children’s perspectives. This includes a need to reflect on the role of educators in young children’s play—specifically, educators’ ability to identify the complexity and to recognise children’s perspectives. Hence, sensitivity regarding children’s subjective worlds is crucial.

Thirdly, the study contributes to the methodological discussion in childhood studies. Children’s perspectives were utilised as an ideological and methodological foundation for the study. As such, this foundation directed my own perspective and understanding, as well as the methods used to construct knowledge about children’s perspectives. Despite the fact that video recording was the main research method, the researcher created
important premises for the study. Thus, the video camera and the researcher were intertwined. Nonetheless, the video recordings made it possible for the researcher to look closely at children’s communications and expression during the play sessions. Based on the findings, it is clear that video recordings are beneficial in research with young children, and they can provide important insights into multiple voices of children.

7.6 Study limitations and strengths

As noted earlier in the thesis, I have been involved in the ECEC field and discourse for many years. Therefore, I have a tendency to be aware of those incidences in children’s communication and expression that support my own ideas, rather than of those issues that are not in line with my ideas. Being aware of this during the research project, especially in my analysis and interpretations of data, I attempted to minimise those biases. On the other hand, my interest in and enthusiasm for the topic under study could be considered to contribute to the research.

There are several limitations of the study that are important to point out. The research was as small in scale, studying a small number of children in two units of one preschool. Therefore, one must be careful about making any generalizations based on the findings. However, this “limitation” could simultaneously be seen as a strength, as researchers’ can utilise the same data and analyse it from various perspectives.

Approaching young children’s perspectives by interpreting their bodily communication and expression might be a limitation, since ambiguity is always involved when interpreting others. In this context, it is important for me to point out that I chose which excerpts to analyse and interpret, and these choices were implemented in accordance with my research questions. The choice of excerpts influences the construction of the data and how children are presented in the study. It is important to be critical about the limitations that are embedded in the methodology, including the limitation about the interpretation of children’s communication, since such interpretations represent an intent to speak on their behalf. Furthermore, it is difficult to achieve young children’s views on the interpretations of their actions. However, the research approach could also be considered a strength, in the sense that a group that does not have a strong voice in society is being spoken for. Thus, this study raises issues for research, policy, and practice in connection with the implication of listening and responding to young children in preschool.
7.7 Further research

In the end, I want to highlight some issues that have emerged in the research process and point to the needs of further research. There is still a need for further knowledge on how the youngest children communicate and express their perspectives in everyday preschool life. Children’s perspectives on power relations that occur in the youngest children’s play communities especially need to be studied in greater depth. This issue is better documented regarding older preschool children. Gender issues have not been addressed in this study, and there is a lack of literature about whether gender and cultural differences influence young children’s perspectives of power relationships.

This research reveals that children’s communities are complex, and that educator’s involvement is important in children’s play experiences. The research focuses on children’s perspectives and on whether the children experienced the educator’s involvement as a resource for play. The findings raise questions about further research on involvement and on the role of educators in children’s play in conjunction with their education and knowledge in the field of early childhood education and care. This is especially important in light of young children’s increasing attendance in preschool, as well as because of the shift toward a multicultural society. Nationally there is a huge gap of knowledge in this field of education, and this study is the first of its kind to be conducted with children under the age of three in preschool. The national curriculum guidelines for all school levels in Iceland place emphasis on democracy and human rights (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2011). Since preschool is the first level of education in Iceland, it is important to reflect on ideas surrounding power issues versus democracy, including notions about participation and the rights of all citizens to have their voices be heard and addressed. This involves fostering values education from the beginning of children’s attendance in preschool.
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doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2013.807607


doi:10.1007/s1217-012-9328-1


Discussion and conclusion


Discussion and conclusion


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Discussion and conclusion


Nefndarálit með breytingatillögu um tillögu til þingsályktunar, um leikskóla að loknu fæðingarorlofi nr. 143, 2013-2014 [Committee’s report with proposed changes of parliamentary resolution regarding preschool after parental leave]. Retrieved from http://www.althingi.is/altext/143/s/0330.html


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Háskóli Íslands - Menntavísindasvið
Hrónn Pálmadóttir

v/ Stakkahlíð

105 Reykjavík

Efni:
Samskipi og tengsi ungra báarna

Leikskólasvið Reykjavíkur heimilar fyrir sitt leyti að ofangreind athugun fari fram í leikskólam
Reykjavíkur að því tilskildu að eftirfarandi skilyrðum sé fullnægt:

1. Að fyllsta trúnaðar sé gett.
2. Að viðkomandi skólastjórar heimili athugunina.
3. Að foreldrum verði kynnt rannsóknin og þeim gefinn kostur á að hafna þátttöku fyrir hönd barna
   sínna.

Leyfi þetta er veitt vegna þess hlua rannsóknarinnar er snýr að leikskólaböðum en leyfi Leikskólasvið
þarf ekki vegna annarra hlua rannsóknar.

Med kveðju

Hildur Björg Svavarstóttir
deildarstjóri töflæði- og rannsóknahjónustu

2.2.2009
Appendix 2
Til foreldra barna á

Fyrirspurn um leyfi til athugunar á samskiptum og þátttöku barnanna í leikskólastarfínun.

Ég undirruð er lektor við Menntavisindasvið Háskóla Íslands og er jafnframt í doktorsnámi. Leiðbeinandi við verkefninu er professor Jóhanna Einarsdóttir. Í náminu er ég að skoða samskipti og tengsl milli ungra barna (1-3ja ára) í þeim tilgangi að varpa líósi á félagsleg samskipti og reynslu barnanna í leikskólanum.

Gagnar verður aflað með athugunum og myndbandsupplökið í daglegu starfri; í samverustund og frjálsum stundum barnanna. Einnig hef ég hug á því að ræða við fáeina foreldra um leikskólagöngu barna þeirra.


Leyfi hefur fungist frá Leikskólasviði Reykjavíkborg og hefur leikskólasjóri einnig veitt samþykki sitt fyrir því að rannsóknin farí fram í leikskólanum. Ég önska því hér með eftir ykkaríbínu leyfi til þess að gera athuganir á delldinni þar sem barnið ykker/bítt svætur.


Ef heimild er veitt tyrri því að barnið verði þátttakandi í rannsókninni vinsamlega undirritið leyfi þess efnis á bakkilóð bráfsins og skilið því til Hörpu delldarstjóra sem allra fyrst. Heimild er að afturkalla samþykkið hvenær sem er.

Velkomandi er að hafa samband við mig í síma eða í tölvupóst af þörf er fyrir nánari upplýsingar.

Virðingarfyllst,

[Signature]
Hrónn Palmdóttir, hropalm@hi.is
S.: 5255394
Appendix 3
Til foreldra barna

Fyrirspurn um leyfi til athugunar á samskiptum barnanna og þátttöku í leikskólastarfni

Ég undirrituð er lektor við Menntavísindiðás við Háskóla Íslands og er jafnframt í doktorsnámi. Leiddinandi minn í verkefninu er prófessor Jóhanna Einarsdóttir. Í náminu skoða ég samskipti og tengsl milli barna í þeim tilgangi að varpa ljósi á félagsetg samskipti og reynslu barnanna í leikskólanum.

Gagna verður aflað með athugunum og myndbandsuppókum í daglegu starfi, í frjálsum stundum barnanna og samverrustundum.

Leyfi hefur fengist frá Leikskólaas við Reykjavíkurborgar og hefur leikskólastjóri einnig veit sambykki sitt fyrir því að rannsóknin fari fram í leikskólanum.

Ég óska því hér með eftir ykkar/bjínu leyfi til þess að gera athugarir á deildinni bar sem barnið ykkar/bítt dvelur.


Ef heimild er veit fyrir því að barnið verði þátttakandi í rannsókninna vinsamlega undirrituð leyfi þess aftan í bakið þeim af þeim sem ekki verði til deildarstjóra sem allra fyrst. Heimilt er að afturkalla sambykkið hvenær sem er.

Velkominnið er að hafa samband við mig í slma eða í tölvupósti ef þörf er fyrir nánari upplýsingar.

Virðingarfyllst,

Hrönn Pálmadóttir, hropalm@hi.is
S.: 5255394
Ég undirritaður foreldri/forraðamaður

Nafn barns

Veití hér með Hrönn Pálmadóttur leyfi til þess að gera athuganir á deildinni þar sem barnið mitt dvelur.

Nafn foreldri/forraðamaður
The articles in the PhD thesis

Article I


Article II
doi: 10.1080/09575146.2015.1048429

Article III

Article IV
Article I

Yngstu leikskólabörnin: Samfélag í leik

The youngest preschool children: Community in play
Yngstu leikskólabörnin: Samfélag í leik


Efnið: Yngstu leikskólabörnin, leikur, samskipi, samhuglægni, nám

INNGANGUR

Á síðustu áratugum hefur uppeldi og menntun ungra barna í vestrænum löndum færst í auknum mæli frá heimilum yfir á stofnanir. Flest börn fá því fyrr reynslu af félagslegu lifi í leikskólum en áður tókkaðist. Í þessari grein er sjónum beint að leikskólabörunum á öðru og þróðja aldursári í þeim tilgangi að bæta við þekkingu og auka skilning á því hvernig börnin líta á félagsleg samskipi sín við önnur börn innan tveggja leikskólans. Árið 2000 voru einungis um 10% eins árs barna hér á landi í leikskóla, 55% tveggja ára barna og um 87% þriggja ára barna. Í lok ársins 2010 voru nær öll tveggja til timm ára börn og um 35% eins árs barna í leikskólum landsins (Hagstota Íslands, 2011).

Rannsóknir á ungum börnum voru lengst af gerðar innan sálfræðinnar (Woodhead og Faulkner, 2000) og byggðar á hugmyndum um algilda eiginleika barna (Berthelsen,
Sá skilningur sem lagður er í hugtakið barn í slikum rannsóknun er tengdur því hvernig barnskan er móttöd í orðræðu fullorðinna (James og Prout, 1997). Lengi vel var lítið á bernskuna sem þrep í lifinu og undirbúining undir mikilvægari áfanga. Í þessum viðhorfum til barna og bernsku felst að líta á börn sem „verðandi fullorðna” (e. human becoming). Hugtakið félagsmótn hefur lóngum verið notað til að lýsa þroskaferli sem er línumlegt með þekktu endamarkmiði: þ.e. að verða fullorðinn. Hugtakið hefur verið gagnrýnt fyrir það að líta fram hjá því að félagsleg og menningarleg reynsla móti börn og hafi áhrif á nám þeirra; jafnframt því að börn hafi áhrif og móti umhverfi sitt (Dahlberg, Moss og Pence, 1999; Gullo, 1999; Jóhanna Einarsdóttir, 2008b; Quotrup, 2004; Sheridan og Pramling Samuelsen, 2001; Walsh, 2005).


Áhersla hefur verið lýðö á þáttösku barna í rannsóknun og ræða nú margir fræðimenn um að gera rannsóknir með börnum í stað á börnum eins og algengt var áður (Dockett, 2008; James, 2009; Jóhanna Einarsdóttir, 2007). Ínna nútíma menntunarfræði er upplifun barnsins og reynsla þess í breimidepli og tengist grundvallarbreytingum á hugmyndafélægi (e. paradigm shift) innan sálfræði, menntunarfræði og félagsfræði varandi sín á börn. Í stað þess að líta á barnið sem „óskriða blað” eða veru, sem rætur fyrirfram skilgreinda þroskaþrát, er lítið á það sem félagslega mannskegu sem hefur hæfni til að eiga í samskiptum frá því að hún er ung (Danby, 2002; Jóhanna Einarsdóttir, 2008a; Sommer, 2003; Stern, 1985; Trevathan, 2001). Jafnframt er lítið á börn sem samborga með réttindi til að hafa áhrif í skóla og í samfélagi (Kjörholt, 2005).


Þegar leitað er eftir röðum ungra barna gegnir líkamstjáning þeirra lykilhlutverki en með henni tjá börnin upplifun sína og skilning á umhverfinu (Bae, 1996; Eide, 2010; Elkind, 1997).
Hognestad, Svenning og Winger, 2010; Johansson, 2011a; Johansson og Emilsson, 2010). Leikur og leikrænnar athafnir barnanna einkennast af óreiðu þar sem líkaminn er þunga-
miðjan en um leið styður hreyfing líkamans við leikinn. Samkvæmt hefðbundnum
kenningum þroskásálfræðinnar hefur hreyfing líkamans oft verið skilgreind sem
þáttur í hreyfjálproska barna og flokkúð sem hreyfileikir en síður sem merkingarbaer
samskipti (Danby, 2002; Hangaard Rasmussen, 1996; Láken, 2009).

Í alþjóðlegu samhengi eru rannsóknir innan menntunarfræða með börnum undir
þriggja ára aldri nýtt rannsóknarsvið og þörf á frekari rannsóknum til að varpa ljósi
á margvislega þætti varðandi leikskólagengu barnanna (Berthelsen, 2010; Fleer, 2009;
Rayna og Laevers, 2011). Í samanteknum yfir norrænar menntarannsóknir meðal ungra
leikskólabarna kemur fram að þrátt fyrir fjölgun rannsókna hin síðar ár sé skortur á
þekkingu á samskiptum, leik og tengslum yngstu leikskólabarnanna (Broström og
Hansen, 2010; Greve og Solheim, 2010; Hännikäinen, 2010; Johansson og Emilson,
2010).

Bent hefur verið á að yngstu leikskólabörnin séu þaðarhópur í opinberri orðráðu
um menntamál og jafnframt hefur því verið velt upp hvort þekking og upplifun
barna, sem ekki er tjáð með orðum, sé minna metin en mælanleg formleg þekking sem
tjáð er með orðum (Biesta, 2009; Greve, og Solheim, 2010; Johansson, 2011a; Johansson
og Emilson, 2010). Yngstu leikskólabörnin, sem eru ekki enn farin að nota tungumálið
sem megintjánningarleidinn sína, gætu því haft takmarkaðri möguleika en þau sem eldri
eru á því að láta til sín taka í leikskólasemáfæginu.

Markmið rannsóknarrannnar, sem hér er kynnt, er að varpa ljósi á það hvernig yngstu
leikskólabörnin skapa félagslegt samfélag í leik í leikskólana. Leitast verður við að lýsa
því, greina og túlka hvernig börnin lita á, byggja upp og þráða samskipti sín í leik.

Líkaminn, rödd barna

Rannsóknin byggist á kenningu franska heimspekingsins Maurice Merleau-Ponty
(1962, 1994) sem nefnd hefur verið „fyrirbærafræði líkamans“. Í kenningu hans um
lífheiminn (e. life-world, fr. monde vécu) er samtínumduim tengslum mannskjunnar
við umhverfið lýst. Mannskján tjáir tilvist sína með líkamanum þar sem hið efni-
lega og hið slætra myndar heilið eða kerfi sem verður ekki aðskild. Lífheimurinn er
heimur þar sem náttúra, samfélag, menning, saga og barníð koma saman. Lífheimur-
inn táknar hið merkingarbæra samhengi sem hjálpar fulki að skilja og túlka umhverfi
sitt. Tjáning er samkvæmt kennungunni annað og meira en ein af aðgerðum manns-
skjunnar; hún er grundvöllur tilvistar og þroska hennar. Lífheimurinn einkennist
af margræðni (e. ambiguity) og er hlutlausur og huglægur í senn. Í þessum skilningi
felst margræðni líkamans meðal annars í því að barníð er alltaf bæði ég sjálfr/or og
ég eins og aðrir upplífa míga (Doud, 1977; Hangaard Rasmussen, 1996; Heinnmála,
1999). Margræðnin í lífheimi barnsins bírst innig í því að það getur bæði verið hæft
i samskiptum sínnum við umhverfið og hjálparþurfr í sömu aðstæðum (Johansson og
Emilson, 2010).

Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1994) undirstríkar að mannskjan hafi reynslu af því að vera
i heiminum löngu ádur en hún geti tjáð það með orðum. Frá upphafi beinir barníð

Í kennungunnir er hugtakið samhulglægni (e. intersubjectivity) notað til að lýsa grundvallarhæfni mannskjunar til að taka þátt í veröld annarra. Börn koma hvert inn í annars heim þar sem sameiginleg stafesting á tilveru hvers og eins á sér stað eða er dregin í efa (Johansson, 1999; Johansson, 2011b). Í samskiptum og leik í leikskólum skilja börn smá saman að það sem gerist hjá þeim gerist einnig hjá öðrum börnum. Samskipti milli fólks eru nauðsynleg forsenda samhulglægni sem er jafnframt forsenda þess að fólk myndi samfélag sin að milli.


Þegar litið er til kenningar Merleau-Pontys um lifheimin og skilgreiningar Bujtendikss á leik má sjá sameiginlega snertifleti þar sem litið er á barnið sem virkan geranda sem notar líkaman til þess að upplifia umhverfið og skapa merkingu í ljósi

**Félagsleg samskipti ungra barna**


Félagslegt samfélag ungra barna


Rannsóknspurningar


Meginrannsóknspurningin sem höfð var að leiðarljósi er þessi:
- Hvernig skapa ung börn samfélag í leik?
- Eftirfarandi undirspurningar voru hafðar til hlíðsjónar:
  - Hvernig hefja börnin samskipti í leik?
  - Hvernig viðhalda börnin leiknum?
  - Hvernig koma börnin sér inn í leik sem þegar er hafinn?

Aðferð

Rannsóknin fór fram í leikskóla sem er í grónu hverfi í Reykjavík og hefur starfað í riflegra 20 ár. Í leikskólanum voru samtals 90 börn, á aldrinum eins til sex ára, á fjórum deildum. Páttakendur í rannsókninni voru 20 börn á einni deild, nú drengir og ellefu telpur, á aldrinum 14 mánaða til tveggja ára og fimm mánaða. Sex barnanna áttu földra sem voru af ærlendum uppruna. Fjórir starfsmenn stórfræði á deildinni, þar af tveir leikskólabennarar og gegndi annar þeirra stöðu deildarstjóra.

Vettvangur


Gagnaöflun


Greining gagna

Að nálga og þúlka sjónarhorn barna kreist aðgangs að athöfnnum þeirra í þeirra eigin lífheimi eða fyrribærarféði barnanna sjálfrá (Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson og Hundeide, 2010).


**NIÐURSTÓÐUR OG UMRÆÐA**

Félagslegum samskiptum barnanna í leik verður hér líst með dænum sem eru túlkuð og rædd með hlíðsjón af þeim kenningarlega grunni sem rannsóknin gengur út frá. Dæmín voru valin með það fyrir augum að þau væru lýsandi fyrir niðurstóður rannsóknarinnar. Athugaðar voru þær leiðir sem börnin, sem hér verða kynnt undir dulnefni, notuðu til að skapa félagslegt samfélag sitt í leik, hvernig börnin mynduðu tengsl og höfu samskipti í leik, hvernig þau hældu leiknum áfram og hvernig þau komu sér inn í leik sem þegar var hafinn. Þau mýnstur sem fram komu í tjáningu barnanna á fyrirætunum sínum eru túlkuð sem sjónarhorn þeirra. Litið er á likamlega tjáningu barnanna, auk þess sem þau segja, sem tjáningu á því hvernig þau upplifa merkingu og hvað er merkingarþætt fyrir þau.

**Að hefja leik**


Myndbandsupptakak beindist að fjörum börnum en 10 mánaða aldursmunur var á yngsta og elsta barnini í þessu dæmi. Anna sem er tveggja ára og fjögurra mánaða (2,4), Sara (2,0), og Jón (1,4) stóðu þétt saman úti við glugga en Silla (2,0) var einnig í leikstofunni og kom inn í samskipti barnanna í lok upptökunnar.


Þegar Anna dettur að Jón sýnir hún honum umhyggju og lætur þannig í lýsi að þetta var ekki viljandi gert. Hún sýnir með athöfnun sínum að hún veit að það er


Að viðhalda leik

Leikur barna krefst þess að þau noti fjölbreytt samskipti við ákveðnar kringumstæður. Það getur falist í því að bregðast við og útiloka utanaðkomandi áreiti sem barn upp lifir að ögni núverandi samskiptum. Dæmið sem hér fer á eftir er úr sömu upptöku og hið fyrra. Anna og Sara hafa leikið ser saman með kerrurnar um stund. Jón hefur fylgst með þeim en Silla stendur skammt frá og handleikur bolta. Í myndbró tinu má sjá hvernig Anna reynir að halda leiknum við Söru áfram þegar hún sér að athafnir Sillu draga að sér athygli Söru og Jóns.


Að komast inn í leik

Félagslegt samfélag barna byggist á að börn eigi samskipti hvert við annað þar sem þau koma sér á framfæri og óðlast þjónframtt hlutdeild í heimi annarra. Börn þurfa að hafa á valdi sichin fjölbreytt fæmin til þess að koma inn í leik sem þegar er hafinn. Leikurinn kallar að að barnið aðlagi athafnir sínar bæði til að fullnægja eigin öskum og að vilja annarra (Frönes, 1994; Hundeide, 2003).

Hér á eftir verður tekið dæmi úr upptöku þar sem sjónum er beint að samskiptum og leik tveggja telpna, Höllu (2,4) og Maríu (2,2). Leikurinn á sér stað í heimiliskrók þar er fjölbreytt leikfini í hæð barnanna, svo sem eldavél, þvottavél, mjúkur sóti og tveir stólar. Auk þess eru þar dúkkur, vagnar með ábreiðum í og trékassí með flátum undan matvælum og borðúnaði úr plasti.


Í sömu upptökum skómmu síðar má sjá hvernig Halla og María ná sameiginlegum grundvelli fyrir samkísins sínu og stuttur leikkaflí á sér stað á milli þeirra.


**NÍÐURLAG**

Í rannsókninni er dregin upp mynd af félagslegum samskiptum og tengslum ungra barna í leikskóla. Bættakendur voru börn á öðru og þróða aldursári og var mesti aldurummunur á þeim ellefu mánuði. Skoðuð voru félagleg mynstur í samskiptum og leið barnanna og leitað við að varpa ljós á það hvernig börnin hófu samskipti sín í leið, hvernig þau viðheldu leiknum og hvaða aðferðum börnin beittu til að koma sér inn í leið sem þegar var hafinn.


Leikefni sem var á göfi í hæð barnanna veitti þeim fjölbreyttu möguleika á líkamlegri tjáningu og ýtti þannig undir gagnkvæman skilning í samskiptunum. Bútendík bendir á að leiðurinn eigi upphaf sitt í hreyfingu og að svörun frá umhverfinu felir í sér grundvallarvirkni leikins (Ám, 1989; Hangard Rasmussen, 2001). Þegar börnin voru að próa leik virtist það vera lykilatriði að þau áttuðu sig á fyrirætlunum þeirra sem þau leku við. Það er í samræmi við skilgreiningu Merleau-Pontys á samhuglagæni sem nauðsynlegri forsendu þess að taka þátt í heimi annarra og mynda og próa samfélag með öðrum.

Margræðini í lifheimi barnanna kom berlega í ljós þegar þau sýndu hæfni til að gefa afstöðu sína til kynna. Dæmi um það er þegar þau reyndu að komast inn í leið sem þegar var hafinn en tjáðu einnig varnarleysi þegar fyrirætlunin náði ekki fram
að ganga. Í kenningu Merleau-Pontys er bent á að samskipti feli í sér tilfinningalega margræðni sem tjáð er með líkamanum. Þessar niðurstöður benda til þess að börn geti verið hæf í samskiptum en jafnframt varnarlaus og öðrug með stöðu sína og þátttökun innan barnahópsins.


Margir samverkandi þættir, bæði félagslegir, menntunarlegir og menningarlegir, hafa áhrif á líf ungra barna og fjölskyldna þeirra. Í umræðu um stöðu leikskólsins í samfélaginu er mikilvægt að byggja á breiðum þekkingargrunni og hluti þeirra þekkingar er upplifun og skilningar barnanna sjálfrá á félagslegu lífi sínu innan leikskóls. Niðurstöður rannsóknarinnar benda til þess að líkamstjáning gegni veigamiklu hlutverki í merkingarskópun barna þegar þau móta félagslegt samfélag sitt í leik.

Ætla má að það eigi ekki einungis við um yngstu leikskólaborðin heldur einnig börn sem hafa ekki þau tök á íslenskri tungu sem vænta má samkvæmt aldri, til dæmis börn af erlendum uppruna og börn með fatlanir. Pegar rætt er um sjónarhorn barna er mikilvægt að taka mið af margbreytileika barnahópsins og leita leiða til að nálgast sjónarhorn allra barnanna.
Hugmyndir um börn, bernsku og réttindi þeirra ráða miklu um það hvernig unnið er með börnum og möguleika þeirra á því að láta til sín taka í leikskólalanum. Ábyrgð á því að virða hæfni og varnarleysi barna er í höndum hinna fullorðnu sem tilheyra umhverfi leikskólanans og samfélagssins. Niðurstöður rannsóknarinnar geta vonandi orðið leikskólaakennurum og öðrum þeim sem koma að málefnum barna hvatning til nánari ígrunum um félagsleg samskipti og nám í leikskólum og jafnframt gefið viðbendingar um það hvernig fullorðnir geta stutt við börn í samskiptum og leik.

HEIMILDIR


Lög um leikskóla nr. 90/2008.


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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to shed light on young children’s perspectives on their social interactions in play situations in preschool. Participants in the study were a group of twenty children, with ages ranging from fourteen months to two years and five months old. The children attended preschool in Iceland. Four adults, including two preschool teachers who worked with the children, also participated. The study is based on the phenomenological approaches emphasizing human bodily existence put forth by French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1994), whose concept of the life world describes the intertwined relations between human beings and the environment. The body is the foundation for the existence of the child. The child is viewed as an active body that is already engaged with its physical and social environment and in the process of making sense out of the experience (Johansson, 1999; Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1994). The life world is the meaningful context that helps people understand and interpret their environment. Children’s play has roots in movement of the body (Åm, 1989; Hangaard Rasmussen, 2001), and intersubjectivity between partners is an important
part of the process that occurs when children mutually create their communities in play situations.

The study was conducted over a five month period, and qualitative methods were employed, including participant observations, video recordings, and field notes. The focus was on children’s communication when they started play, how they continued the play, and how they tried to gain access to play that had already started. In approaching and interpreting children’s perspectives it is necessary to gain access to children’s actions in their own life worlds. The resulting portrait of children’s perspectives is connected to the ontological stance of the researcher and how he understands, interprets, and presents the data gathered. The objective of this study is to understand children’s actions, their intentions and views, as well as to interpret their experience and expression in light of their social interaction in play situations. The patterns that occur in children’s communication are considered to reveal their perspectives. Children’s bodily expressions, gestures, and gazes are considered as representations of how they experience meaning and which phenomena are meaningful.

The findings show that children communicate with, relate to, and influence their environments in various ways. Children’s actions are built upon intersubjective processes, a foundational component of development that involves taking part in the worlds of others. Children are active participants in their life worlds within play situations, constructing meaning and context with their actions. The play demanded that children communicate in certain contexts. Body movements, gestures, and gazes were important elements of children’s interaction when they tried to relate to each other and create a mutual ground for the start of play. Some of the children participated directly within the play context while others participated from the sideline, i.e. watched the play and imitated the actions later. The findings also show that play requires children to respond to and to eliminate motivation from the outside, which could be experienced as a threat to the ongoing interaction. Children’s social communities are built upon their interactions in which their self-construction and participation in each other’s worlds emerge. When children try to present themselves to others they have to know different codes of play, a requirement that both demands that the children adapt their own intentions and also recognise those of others. The ambiguity of children’s life worlds appeared in their expressions of competence as well vulnerability within the play situations. The children cared for each other and also used their social and physical positions to influence who was included in the play and who was excluded. Position within the group seemed to be connected to children’s age and size. Children’s actions in play situations gave the appearance that they were participating simultaneously in their own worlds and in others’ worlds, an intertwining of the individual and the social that follows the theory proposed by Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1994).

Keywords: Young preschool children, social interactions, relations in play
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The Youngest Preschool Children: Community in Play

Translated into English by Kjartan Þór Ingvarsson

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, schools and similar establishments have increasingly replaced homes as the institutions responsible for the upbringing and education of young children in Western countries. Most children are therefore exposed to social experiences in preschools at an earlier age than before. In this article, the focus is directed toward preschool children, aged between two to three, with the aim of increasing knowledge and understanding regarding the ways in which children view their social interactions inside preschool spaces. In 2000, only around 10% of year-old Icelandic children were registered in preschools, 55% of two-year-old children and around 87% of three-year-olds. At the end of 2010, all children aged two to five and 35% of one-year-olds were registered in Icelandic preschools (Statistics Iceland, 2011).

Research among young children was for a long time conducted within the field of psychology (Woodhead and Faulkner) and couched in ideas on children’s universal qualities (Berthelsen, 2010; Elkind, 1997). However, the understanding of the concept of the child presupposed in such studies is connected to the ways childhood is shaped through the discourses of adults (James and Prout, 1997). Childhood was for long considered a temporary step in life and preparation for more important stages. According to these ideas concerning the child and childhood, children manifest human becoming. Moreover, the concept of socialisation was used to define child development as a linear process moving towards a determined final goal: i.e. becoming an adult. The concept has been criticised for overlooking the fact that children’s social and cultural experiences influence their education; as well as disregarding how children influence and shape their environment (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999; Gulløy, 1999; Einarsdóttir, 2008b; Quorup, 2004; Sheridan and Pramling Samuelsson, 2001; Walsh, 2005).

In the two preceding decades, the child’s perspective has become a key concept in the discourse regarding children’s childhood and education. The concept is multifaceted and it has been utilised as both an ideological and methodological term in scientific contexts (Halldén, 2003). Children’s perspective is connected with the researcher’s ontological position and the manner in which the researcher comprehends, interprets and presents data gathered with the children (Johansson, 2003). If children are viewed from this perspective, they can offer imperative information, and in that way, contribute towards shaping knowledge in relation to their life in the preschools. Scholars from a number of different fields have developed theories and methodologies which seek to understand children based on their own experiences (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999; Dockett and Perry, 2007; James and Prout, 1997; Einarsdóttir, 2008a).

An emphasis is placed on children’s participation in research, where researchers underline the importance of conducting research with children instead of on them, which was the common practice before (Dockett, 2008; James and Prout, 1997; Einarsdóttir, 2007). The focus of contemporary education centres on the child’s experience, associated with a paradigm shift
within psychology, education and sociology revolving around the conceptualisation of children. Instead of viewing the child as an “empty canvas” or as a being that follows a predefined trajectory, the child is seen as a social being capable of expressive interactions from an early age (Danby, 2002; Einarsdóttir, 2008a; Sommer, 2003; Stern, 1985; Trevathen, 2001). Moreover, children are viewed as citizens adorned with the right to influence schools and society (Kjørholt, 2005). This interest in children’s voices can also be traced to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Sameinunóþ fjóðirnar, 1992), which states that every child has the right to be heard. Furthermore, a general comment on the Convention specifically holds that these rights also refer to children from birth to the age of eight (United Nations, 2005). The same emphasis is discernible in Icelandic preschool laws and the National Curriculum for the Preschool, according to which the children’s must be heard and every child ensured ample opportunities to participate, regardless of age, in constructive communications with peers. Further, when it comes to childhood, the concepts of play, communication and education are intimately interlinked (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012).

When listening to children’s voices, their bodily expressivity plays an essential role; it is through the body that children express their experiences and understanding of the environment (Bae, 1996; Eide, Hognessad, Svenning and Winger, 2010; Johansson and Emilson, 2010). Children’s play and playful activities are characterised by chaos in which the body figures as the central element, but where the movements of the body simultaneously maintain the balance of the play. According to traditional ideas of developmental psychology, the movements of the body are often defined as an aspect of children’s overall motor skill development and solely categorised as motion games rather than meaningful expression (Danby, 2002; Haagard Rasmussen, 1996; Løkken, 2009).

In an international context, studies with children under the age of three are rare within the field of education and further research is therefore needed in order to shed light on the multitude of issues that concern children’s preschool life (Berthelsen, 2010; Fleer, 2009; Rayna and Laevers, 2011). The findings of Nordic education research among young preschool children indicate that, despite a growing number of studies in recent years, knowledge is still lacking with regard the interaction, play and relationships of the youngest preschool children (Broström and Hansen, 2010; Grave and Solheim, 2010; Hännikäinen, 2010; Johansson and Emilson, 2010) It has been noted that the youngest group of preschool children are marginalised in the public educational discourse as well as that children’s knowledge and experiences, unexpressed by words, are less appreciated than measurable and verbalized formal knowledge (Biesta, 2009; Grave and Solheim, 2010; Johansson, 2011a; Johansson and Emilson, 2010). The youngest preschool children, whose primary means of expression is not yet spoken language, have therefore less opportunities in impacting the preschool community than older children.

The aim of this study is to shed light on the ways in which the youngest preschool children create a social community of play in the preschools. The study seeks to elucidate, analyse and interpret how children view, create and develop communication through play.
The Body, a voice of Children

The study is based on the theories French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1994), whose inquiries are generally referred to as the phenomenology of the body. Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the ‘life-world’ (monde vécu) describes the interwoven relationship between a human being and his/her environing world. Humans express their existence through their bodies to an extent where the subject and the object form an entwined whole or an inseparable holistic system. The life-world is a world in which nature, society, culture, history and the child meet. The life-world refers to a contextual horizon or a perceived network of meaning by means of which human beings comprehend and interpret their environment. For Merleau-Ponty, expression is not simply a tool that a person uses, instead, expressivity forms the foundations of existence and development. The life-world is therefore by its nature ambiguous, simultaneously objective and subjective. In this sense, the body’s ambiguity means that a child is always both ‘I myself’, as well as an ‘objective me’, i.e. a worldly body perceived by others (Doud, 1977; Hangaard Rasmussen, 1996; Heinämaa, 1999). The ambiguity of the child’s life-world is furthermore manifested in the fact that the child can be fully capable in communicating with its environment as well as exhibiting vulnerability and requiring support in the very same contexts (Johansson and Emilson, 2010).

Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1994) underlines that embodied human beings are always already embedded in the world. In other words, the experience of being in a world is an inseparable part of being human, accompanying a person from the very beginning of life, long before the verbal skill arises of communicating the contours of the same world. From the start, the child directs attention to the web of social cues and association of the environment and, in this way, the social and the individual merge into a continuous social totality. The world is not solely perceived as an objective thing, but instead, worldly phenomena appear first and foremost as gestures, expressions, or manifested in human beings that are always either attractive or repellent (Heinämaa, 1999). Phrased differently, every response of the child in face of the environment summons an emotional reaction or some form of judgment. The child experiences and expresses him/herself with and through the body in order to react to, create connections with, and learn about, the environing world. What is more, the child expresses intentions and motivations, perceives the world, acquires knowledge and creates meaning in light of experiences (Greve, 2007; Johansson, 1999; Løkken 2000a, 2009; Merleau-Ponty; 1962, 1994). Through interacting with the environment, the child acquires and embraces new meanings, learns from experiences and interprets by means of bodily movements (Hangaard Rasmussen, 1996; Johansson, 2011b).

The term ‘intersubjectivity’ is in the theory utilised to refer to human beings’ fundamental ability of sharing and participating in the each other’s world. Children continuously enter the world of other children, where a mutual affirmation of each other’s existence takes place or, by the same token, is questioned (Johansson, 1999; Johansson, 2011b). In preschool interaction and play, children gradually learn that what takes place in their world also presents
itself in the experiences of others. Communications between people are the necessary condition of intersubjectivity, which in turn is also the condition for a community of people and society in general.

The basis of the study is sought in definitions of play offered by Dutch psychologist and phenomenologist Buitendijk (1993). According to Buitendijk’s theory, play is characterised as childlike activity grounded in movement (see Åm, 1989; Hangaard Rasmussen, 2001). Buitendijk points out that arbitrary actions and repetitive movements constitute the primordial functions of playing. The child is attracted by the environment, and by his/her engagement, creates meaning and context through activity. The child’s spontaneous movement means that the child enters into different engagements with the world than an adult does. The difference between the child’s movements and playing is crystallised in the fact that the play requires reaction and response in which growing tension, excitement and structure are essential constituents (Åm 1989; Løkken 2000b). Playing is based on a certain reciprocity between, on the one hand, the environment, as a spark for the play, and the necessary tension, on the other, required to sustain and develop the playing. The play always involves communication where the child either engages with an object or another person. The playing comes to an end when the child no longer receives response and repetitive movements cease (Åm, 1989; Hangaard Rasmussen, 2001; Løkken, 2000b; Röthle, 2005). The child’s self-construction takes place through the activity of play, where children presents themselves and make their intention known to others, and conversely, learn about themselves and the world and the environment. Children seem to have special abilities of reading one another’s embodied expressions, and in this sense, they are social agents in a co-created collective world. Young children’s play is not sparked by reflection or imagination, rather, all these elements occur simultaneously. Play calls for quick shifts between thought, imagination, sounds, bodily expressivity and words, all of which are imperative and entwined in the holistic activity of play (Hangaard Rasmussen, 1996; Johansson, 2011b).

Merleau-Ponty’s thesis of the life-world and Buitendijk’s definitions of play overlap in an idea of the child as an active agent who utilises the body in order to engage with the environment and create meaning by virtue of his/her experiences. As children participate in social interaction and relations through play, they simultaneously participate in the co-creation of meaning. The body is the child’s voice, where emotions, perception and thought all merge to form a whole. Through play, children create relations between each other and hence a shared foundation for their ongoing activities of play. Children react to each other’s ideas, and by that, establish new ones. The interactions are therefore equally and mutually individual and social. Children must adjust their actions, both to appease their own desires, as well as the wishes of others. The development of playing hinges on the fruitful interweaving of these elements. Intersubjectivity is therefore the condition of possibility of the process that transpires when children bond and shape their shared world of play. Moreover, it is possible to detect a point of intersection between Merleau-Ponty’s ambiguous life-world, Buitendijk’s conceptions of play, and researches that suggest that playing is by definition ambiguous (Steinsholt, 1998; Sutton-Smith, 1997) and
entails more obscure elements than developmental theories, grounded in psychology, would lead to believe, for instance, by viewing play as the manifestation of the development of motor skills, cognition and sociality (Evaldsson, 2009; Hangaard Rasmussen, 1996; Løkken, 2009).

Social Interactions of Young Children
The preschool environment encourages children’s activities and influences their play. Løkken’s (2000a; 2000b) research, conducted in Norwegian preschools, which focused on the young children’s social interactions, indicates that the children co-created shared meaning by means of playful embodied expressions, beyond the staff’s influence. The children’s social interactions were based on jumping, running, stamping, turning, romps, sounds and imitations of one another. Through movements, the children created games and routines based on their intersubjectivity and experience of being “we” together, which is the grounds of human communication. The children experienced themselves as “I” or “me”, yet, at the same time they participated in, and sustained, the shared conditions of the intersubjective play.

A recent study by Engdahl (2011) looked at the structure of play with 17-24 month-old Swedish preschool children. The findings suggest that the children applied diverse means of communications in their play. Non-verbalised actions played an important role in the interactions, in which the children applied movement, gesture, volume of vocal sounds and facial expressions in order to take turns throughout the play.

Studies that focus on young children’s play with differing sets of toys have shown that large toys facilitate different kind of play than smaller ones. Furthermore, Musatti and Panni’s (1981) research indicates that larger toys called for diverse play based on embodied mobility as well as being more likely to establish social atmosphere of collective playing, than smaller toys. According to Løkken’s (2000a) study, on the other hand, small toys often resulted in conflicts over the same toy. In fact, a study by Sandvik (2002) implies that the concept of private property is altogether unclear to young children; they seek to imitate other children in play and toys held by others become attractive and therefore a condition for imitation. Similar findings are presented in studies carried out by Lindahl and Framling Samuelsson (2002) who note that imitation and peer-guide in young children’s playing and interaction are imperative aspects of their education. The youngest preschool children also exhibit an ability to identify with and involve themselves in the emotions of others (Løkken, 1996) and form friendships (Dunn, 2004; Greve, 2009).

Corsaro’s (2003) research, which focuses on the social interactions of peers, sheds light on the methods used by children aged three to six, who regularly meet, in order to enter each other’s play. These methods fall into three categories; namely, nonverbal entry, where children use their bodies to suggest intentions; encirclement, where children circle around the play area and offer objects; or they enter by means of verbal reference to affiliations. Stambak and Verba (1986) describe a process through which children negotiate meaning during play without using words. Firstly, the child presents an idea which the playmate interprets and reacts to. The
reaction summons further actions from the child who initiated the process and the interaction proceeds along these lines for a while. In this way, children shape shared interpretations and adjust and alter their behaviour according to the behaviour and interpretations of their playmate. Alvestad (2010) also analysed the methods of negotiation of two and three-year-old preschool children, but simultaneously looked at the contents of their negotiations. The findings bring to light that the children sought to reach an agreement about affiliations, materials and the contents of the play. The methods were mainly of an emotional nature and solution-orientated. Moreover, the study showed that the children used humour in order to reach an agreement. The study also suggested that socially-inclined children and ones who were on familiar terms with one another were most skilled in negotiations. Humour was also a part of Loizou’s (2007) study with young preschool children, who participated in humour-based activities and who used humour as a method of control and to advance themselves in social situations.

Moreover, Johansson’s (1999, 2007, 2009) research brings to light how young children, through their interactions, co-create meaning which has to do with morality. The findings of Johansson’s studies in Australian and Swedish preschools furthermore suggest that “doing the right thing” is important from the children’s perspective, i.e. adhering to established preschool rules and also caring for one another, both for adults and children. The value of “doing the right thing” seems intertwined with the children’s intersubjective development with regard to preschool life and the relations formed between the children and adults.

**The Social Community of Young Children**

A preschool is a community in which children and adults meet and spend time together. In everyday interaction and play, children share experiences, emotions and objects. The social relationships and friendships of children are based on the opportunities they have of getting to know each other (Howes, 1987). Children comprise a complex group of individuals with differing skills of communication and bonding, and who all arrive into the preschool community carrying their own experiences (Howes, 2011). Children mould their ideas concerning peers by means of interactions and social relationships gradually form, where children mutually influence one another.

Strandell (1999) points out that the children’s methods of expressing their views concerning who should play together and where the playing should take place is a part of their social preschool activities. Furthermore, Skånfers, Löfdahl and Hägglund (2009) note, in an overview of studies focusing on children’s interactions within their peer-group, that children’s interactions are defined in terms of exclusion or belonging, rather than the way in which mutually informed relations are formed.

It has come to light that in children’s interactions, certain social patterns can emerge that can influence the children’s position within the group. Relations of power, forged amongst the children, can influence their opportunities of forming social relations within the group (Lee and Recchia, 2008; Löfdahl, 2006; Löfdahl and Hägglund, 2006). Johansson’s (1999, 2011b) research with young children indicate that children use both negative and positive means to
influence who is allowed to participate in the play and who is excluded. Moreover, children seek playmates who are close in age and avoid playing with younger children. These findings correspond with Yrterhus’s (2002) research which focused on the social coexistence of preschool children between the ages of three and six. If the children were allowed to choose a playmate, they would usually prefer someone who was of similar age, size and of same gender. A study conducted by Shin, Recchia, Lee, Lee and Mullerkey (2004) scrutinised the leadership behaviour of children between the ages of 22 months and four-year-old. The findings of the study suggest that the children’s methods had more to do with relationships rather than the children’s specific personal qualities. The children seemed to make use of their social authority in order to develop relations with peers and adults, which both entailed inclusion and marginalisation.

Preschool children gradually shape common traditions and culture (Vienneze, 1971). Corsaro’s (2003; 2005; 2009) studies with children between the ages of two and six have shown that the children highly value their social participation in the group and they develop ways that challenge the authority of adults. Furthermore, two central themes emerged from Corsaro’s studies which characterised the children’s behaviour within their shared peer-culture, namely, the children’s attempt at gaining autonomy, on the one hand, and their sharing of authority, on the other hand. Adjusting to and maintaining interactions can be a complicated feat for children. Corsaro interprets children’s exclusion or rejection of others from play as means by which they attempt to protect the ‘interaction space’ which was already established collectively by the playmates. Corsaro notes, however, that there is a temptation to construe this behaviour as selfish or as a marker of the children’s lack of maturity with regard to the act of sharing.

Children’s movement and playing can contradict preschool teacher’s ideas regarding the ways children should use their bodies and how the preschool environment should be structured. Chairs, for instance, can serve the purpose of “accustoming” the children’s bodies to a predetermined structure and reduce chaos, which adults generally experience as the defining feature of young children’s embodied expressivity (Kirkeby, Gitz-Johansen and Kampmann, 2005). Children’s play is not necessarily chaotic from their perspective; they create their own rules (Andersen and Kampmann, 1996). A study by Corsaro and Molinari (1990) with two-year-old preschool children showed that they experienced shared joy and used objects in the environment in creative ways, in contrast to the preschool staff’s intentions. Rutamens’s (2007) study in a Finnish preschool arrived at similar conclusions, which brought to light that young children, aged one and two, actively participated in co-creating shared culture through movements, gestures and facial expressions. The children created innovative movements and meanings using toys offered to them but their behaviour not always corresponded with the intentions and expectations of the preschool teachers concerning the use of the toys.

Moreover, Løkken’s (2004a, 2004b) research indicated that children aged one and two shaped their own methods with regard to welcoming and celebrating other children at their arrival to the preschool in the morning, whereof 21% of the methods were essentially “childlike” and the welcoming behaviour was based on a celebration ritual which was often drawn-out. This
behaviour suggests that specific traditions emerge amidst groups of children that regularly meet over a certain period of time.

**Research Questions**
The aim of the present study is to increase current knowledge regarding the ways in which children, aged between one and two, utilise their bodies to shape social a community of play inside the preschool. Most researches, which look at the social patterns of children’s play, have been conducted with older preschool children. The uniqueness and originality of this study is manifested in how the attention is cast toward the experiences of the youngest preschool children and the meaning they themselves give to the social interactions of play. The study assumes that children shape their own culture and that they engage with and understand their environing world in light of their own assumptions and experiences (Pramling Samuelsson and Sheridan, 2003; Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson and Hundeide, 2010). Previous studies among young children have mainly emphasised universal qualities in their development and behaviour. However, this study focuses on the children’s interactions and relations and how they view and build social communities through play, i.e. the children’s own phenomenology. The study examines children in situations of play and seeks to describe, analyse and interpret the children’s behaviour and activities in that context.

The central research question is the following:
- How do the youngest children create a community through play?

The following sub-questions are also considered:
- How do children initiate interactions in play?
- How is the play sustained by the children?
- How do children enter play that has already commenced?

**METHODOLOGY**
The study was conducted in a preschool situated in a well-established Reykjavík neighbourhood and which has operated for roughly 20 years. The preschool has a total of 90 children, aged from one to six. 20 children participated in the study, aged between 14 months and roughly two-years-old. Seven of the children had parents of foreign decent. The department staff consisted of four employees, two of which are preschool teachers, where one of them acted as head of the department.

The children’s free play was chosen as the object of analysis. The rationale for this choice was that play represents a part of that which children mutually co-create. Furthermore, play is something that develops between the children and through their interaction with the environment. Free play entails a certain level of freedom for the children in regard to the choice of activity and playmates. It is therefore useful to scrutinise and analyse patterns of the play in
order to capture the children’s own voices (Pugh and Sellek, 1996). The data gathering took place over a period of five months or from late winter 2008 and into the spring of 2009.

The Field
The preschool unit contains four playrooms, two larger ones and two smaller, as well as a clothes-room. High tables and chairs and shelves containing toys were found in both of the larger playrooms. Moreover, various appliances and furniture, adjusted to the size of the children, stood in the homecorner, located in the corner of one of the playrooms, along with plastic cups and plates, and food packaging. There were large wheeled wooden boxes on the floor that contained purses, cars and woodblocks. In one of the smaller playrooms, shelves rose high along the walls, containing paint and paper. A large wooden box was placed on the floor, filled with large woodblocks, as well as a small table and a few chairs appropriately sized for the children. The other smaller playroom was as good as empty aside from a mirror on the wall at the level of the children’s height.

Following breakfast, the children played for roughly an hour in free play. Toys, such as puzzles and a variety of stacking toys, were placed on the tables and the children were offered to play with them. Some of the children chose objects that they fetched themselves but the staff occasionally placed toys on the floor in one of the smaller playrooms, such as a carpet for toy cars and large sponge cubes. The staff sporadically put plates and cups on the tables and invited a few children to sit at the table and play with them together. During most of the playtime, the children were also free to travel between the rooms. Moreover, when one of the playrooms had become too crowded, the children were divided into two groups and the doors between the playrooms closed. The staff’s coffee break coincided with the children’s free playing so one staff member supervised each group and came to the children’s assistance or interacted with them if such was required.

Gathering of Data
The data were gathered through participant observations, using video recording as the central research method. Participant observations are common in researches that focus on children’s everyday preschool life. Furthermore, participant observation invite the researcher to become aware of his/her role in the research process and to evaluate to what extent he/she participates in the field studies and to what degree the participants are influenced by the researchers presence (Lichtman, 2006; Roberts-Holmes, 2005; Robson, 2011; Rolfè, 2001). Throughout the process of data gathering, it was ensured that the children’s world was encountered with respect and caution. The researcher was in close proximity to the children and sought to react if the children initiated communication, but otherwise avoided direct participation in the children’s activities.

Video recording commenced as the study proceeded and the children grew accustomed to the researcher’s presence. Video recordings have proven fruitful in research with preschool children (Gillund, 2007; Greve, 2007; Pálmdóttir, 2004; Løkken and Søbstad, 1995; Pramling Samuelsson and Lindahl, 1999). The video recordings, however, only manage to capture a part
of what really takes place in social interactions and field notes can therefore offer important additional information regarding context and oversight of the examined situation at hand (Walsh, Bakir, Lee, Chung and Chung, 2007). During the course of the study, field notes were written both before and during the video recording sessions. The field notes describe the children’s social interactions as well as documenting reflections and ideas that arose concerning the research material. When video is used in research, it is imperative to ensure recordings are carefully made since both visuals and sound can influence the overall quality of the data (Flewitt, 2006; Heath and Hindmarsh, 2002). In order to obtain a closer look at the children’s life-world and ensure the quality of both the visuals and sound, the camera had to be handheld so the movements of the children could be properly captured. However, it was also necessary to limit the movements of the camera to the greatest extent possible. The recordings focused on the structure of the children’s interaction at certain points within the playrooms, such as in the homecorner, where children played with larger toys on the floor, and as they sat at the table. One or two children were also followed specifically, and in those cases, their behaviour led the camera’s perspective. As opposed to adults, children quickly grow accustomed to being filmed (Greve, 2007; Pálmadóttir, 2004; Lokken and Sebstad, 1995). Johansson (2011b) emphasises that, even though young children are quick to accustom themselves to the researcher and the process of being recorded, they also seek to understand the significance of situations, what is expected from them and how they are supposed to behave around the researcher. As the study progressed, the children sought to communicate with the researcher and the camera attracted some children’s attention. The children were then invited to view their companions through the lens, which aroused momentary interest, but they quickly lost patience and returned to their previous activities.

**Data Analysis**

Gaining access to and interpreting children’s perspectives requires a point of entry into their activities and behaviour in their own life-world, or the children’s phenomenological world (Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson and Hundeide, 2010).

Several ethical issues emerge as a consequence of entering the children’s world which is heavily demanding for the researcher, requiring him/her to ensure confidentiality and respect with regard to interactions with participants (Dockett, Einarsdóttir and Perry, 2009; Einarsdóttir, 2007; Johansson, 2011a). Accessing children’s voices is a complicated task and the interpretation thereof is a thorough and meticulous process. In this context, it is important to pay close attention to the children’s expressive bodily movements and describe their experiences. Perhaps, however, this can be viewed as an honest attempt at speaking on their behalf (Eide et al. 2010; Johansson, 2003; Johansson and Emilson, 2010).

The video recordings afford the opportunity to properly scrutinise details, and in that way, analyse the children’s verbal and bodily expressivity. Similarly, it is possible to control the speed of the images and capture stills, in order to, for example, examine what the children are focusing their attention toward (Gillund, 2007; Graue and Walsh, 1998; Greve, 2007; Roberts-
Holmes, 2005). The video recordings were then transcribed, and it is imperative to exercise rigour throughout the process of transcription and organise it in a way that benefits the research (Bucholtz, 2007; Hewitt, 2006; Heikkilä and Sahlström, 2003). The program InqScribe was used for the transcription and an effort was made to include unverbalised communications, such as facial expressions, posture and intonation. The way in which the children initiated play was also documented as well as what measures they sought to sustain it. Moreover, the children’s methods of entering already established play were also documented, along with the children’s reactions. Transcribing from video to text proved difficult and the results were in essence a recreation of what really took place in the children’s interactions (Flewitt, 2006; Johansson, 2011b). Due to these discrepancies, Greve (2007) underlines the importance of continuously comparing image and text throughout the analytic process. In this study, the aforesaid was indeed the case, where, for instance, certain body postures were closely examined in order to interpret with more confidence the children’s expressivity and experiences of the interactions.

Children’s behaviour and play take place here and now and within a specific cultural and historical context which influences the interpretive process (Graue and Walsh, 1998; Johansson, 1999, Punch, 2006). Following hermeneutic theory, the study sought to interpret and explain the children’s behaviour in light of the meaning they themselves made of their interactions (Crotty, 2006). The field notes were repeatedly reread and coded, and then categorised according to themes that emerged through the analysis of the video recordings. Moreover, categories emerged which were specifically searched for in the video recordings (Roberts-Holmes, 2005). In the analysis and presentation of the findings, a special emphasis is placed on the interactions that featured in the video recordings, and confirmed with descriptions from the transcribed texts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The social interactions of children in play will be here described by means of examples which are interpreted and discussed in light of the theoretical basis mentioned above. The examples were chosen in order to best accentuate the findings of the research. The study examined the ways in which the children, whose names have been changed for reasons of confidentiality, formed their intersubjective communities through play, how the children formed relations and initiated interactions in the play, the means by which the play was sustained and how children entered play that had already begun. The patterns that emerged in the children’s expressions of intent are interpreted as their own perspectives. The children’s bodily expressivity, including verbalisations, are viewed as expressions of how they experience meaning and what they find meaningful.

Initiating Play

Buitendijk has noted that children in play are active participants in their life who create meaning and context through their activities. The play also requires the use of diverse modes of communications within specific situations (Âm, 1989; Hanggaard Rasmussen, 1996). The findings of the study show that the children’s used their bodies to express intentions aimed at
initiating interaction and in an attempt to involve their peers in play. The findings moreover suggest that the children’s position within the social hierarchy decided which child is allowed in the play and which is rejected. The following example describes communication that took place in one of the playrooms. Eight children were in the playroom along with a preschool teacher who observed the children and responded to their needs.

In this example, the video recording focuses on four children with around 10 months in age separating the youngest child from the oldest. Anna, who is two years and four months old (2.4), Sara (2.0), and Jón (1.4) huddled together by the window, whereas Silla (2.0) was also present in the room and enter the children’s interactions toward the end of the recording.

Sara is standing and gazes at a ball she is holding, Anna sits in a chair, looking down the end of the playroom, while Jón is spread out on a mattress by their side, looking at Sara. Sara fetches a chair like the one Anna is sitting in and sits down with the ball in her arms. Jón and Sara make eye contact. Jón stands up, looks at Sara, who follows Jón with her eyes. Presently, Anna stands up and Sara follows suit. Anna glances at Sara and then gets a pram which is close by. Sara drops the ball and procures similar pram. Jón picks up the ball, has a seat on the chair and observes the girls driving the prams back and forth. Jón looks joyful, shrieks and stretches his body. Suddenly, Anna trips and falls on Jón, but turns around and gives him a friendly stroke on the cheek. Jón smiles and hands the ball to Anna, who turns away from him. Jón throws the ball away and seems sad. He then has a seat on the mattress and looks toward the researcher with a serious look on his face.

At the beginning of the recording, the children’s attention is focused on forming connections and making a case for themselves with the others. Sara’s and Jón’s eyes meet and in that way momentarily participate in each other’s worlds. At the same time, Anna seeks eye-contact with Sara, follows it through with her movements and gets a toy. Buitendijk’s theory holds that the origins of play concerns a childlike act founded on bodily movement (Åm, 1989, Hangaard Rasmussen, 2001). Through her movements, Anna sparks Sara’s interest in play. Sara throws the ball, which might have perhaps acted as a mediator in her ongoing interactions with Jón. Sara seems to consider Anna as the preferable playmate over Jón, which corresponds to findings of studies that have shown that with increased age comes a stronger social position (Johansen, 1999, 2011b; Ytterhus, 2002). Jón, who is much younger than the girls, seeks to establish connection with Sara through eye-contact, which can be interpreted as an attempt to form a shared basis for interaction and play. Through their behaviour and actions, the children seek to build connections and make their intentions known to others. This process invokes their experience of being together, or their intersubjectivity, where the children directly encounter the existential bearing of one another (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1994).

The girls’ play revolves around pushing prams back and forth inside the playroom, which harmonises with Buitendijk’s contention that one of the primary functions of play resides on repetitive back-and-forth movements. Løkkens’ (2000a, 2000b) research also indicates that reciprocated embodied expressivity characterises the young children’s constitution of meaning,
where children construct play that reflects their intersubjective experiences, which is the
foundations of both play and necessary for its continued development. The foregoing also echoes
Merleau-Ponty’s (1962, 1994) thesis that intersubjectivity is at the very root of the child’s ability
to interact and enter relationships with others and the environing world.

Jón emulates Sara’s earlier behaviour and takes a seat on the chair with the ball in his
arms and watches the girls’ play. Jón’s bodily expressions imply that he relates to their play and
therefore seems to dwell in his own world and simultaneously participate in the girls’ life-world.
Here, the individual and the social are intertwined, as highlighted by Merleau-Ponty (1962,
1994). Moreover, this also rhymes with the findings of studies that show that an important factor
of young children’s educational development is their capacity to imitate others (Lindahl and
Pramling Samuelsson, 2002) and their ability to empathise and relate to the emotions of each
other (Løkken, 1996).

Anna is earing toward Jón after she falls on him, thereby showing that the act was
involuntary. She shows, through her behaviour, that hurting others is not socially acceptable.
that ethical behaviour and care are important values in the preschool. Jón, however, apparently
interprets Anna’s care as an opportunity to communicate with her and begin play involving the
ball. Anna rejects his offer and demonstrates her position on the matter by turning away from
him. Anna’s reaction could be connected to age-difference, an observation made by other
studies, i.e. that older playmates are more desirable than younger ones (Johansson, 1999, 2011b)
and that children, if the choice is up to them, generally choose playmates of similar age and
gender (Ytterhus, 2002). The complicated nature of young children’s interactions has also been
noted (Corsaro, 2003) and that they seek to maintain already-established relationships and to
protect a recognized interaction space.

Jón’s gestures reveal his disappointment with Anna’s behaviour. He has observed the
girls’ interactions and he already holds the experience of expressing his intention of initiating
play. Applying is body and a toy, Jón expresses his desire to play with Anna, which accords with
Corsaro’s (2003) study with older children, namely, that children often use objects or refer to
affiliations with the aim of entering the play of other children. When Jón’s intentions are
thwarted, he appeals to the researcher. The interaction brings to light that Jón is capable of
explicitly expressing his stance but nevertheless also shows his helplessness in the situation.
According to Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1994), communications and interactions involve ambiguous
emotions, manifested in the above example as interactional ability, on the one hand, and
helplessness in face of rejection, on the other hand. Johansson and Emilson (2010) have noted
the importance of directing the analytic focus toward both aspects of children’s social
interactions. It is necessary to acknowledge the complexity of children’s interactions as well as
the fact that children can become defenceless and insecure about their position and participation
within the group of peers.

**Sustaining Play**
Children’s play requires them to apply diverse means of communication within particular situations. This can entail reacting to and excluding external stimulus experienced by the child and that might threaten ongoing interaction. The following example is extracted from the same recording session as the previous one. Anna and Sara have played together with the prams for a while. Meanwhile, Jón has observed them, but Silla is standing close by clutching a ball. The video footage shows how Anna attempt to sustain her play with Sara when the former notices that Silla’s activity is attracting the attention of Sara and Jón.

Anna and Sara continue pushing the prams back and forth. Jón climbs and bounces on the chair all the while looking toward the girls. Silla plays with the ball elsewhere in the playroom. Now, both Jón and Sara are looking at Silla. Anna knocks the side of the pram against Jón’s leg, who is startled, but Anna continues playing with Sara. Jón walks away, looking at Anna with accusing eyes. Silla, who had observed the events, approaches Jón and caresses his head while Anna watches. Jón walks to the teacher who picks him up, but later places him on the floor in a seated position, his body facing the girls. Jón stands up and walks away and Silla follows him carrying the ball. Anna and Sara continue playing with the prams.

The girls participate in and acknowledge each other’s existence through shared activity. In other words, they mutually participate in a social process, a shared intersubjective project, as proposed by Merleau-Ponty’s (1962, 1994) theories. Jón watches them but simultaneously busies himself with the chair. The prams and the chair afford the children opportunities of embodied expression and play, much like Musatti and Panni’s (1981) study showed, namely, that engaging with larger toys offers more possibilities of bodily activity than smaller ones. The chair, which is soft, summons response from Jón’s body which then contributes to continued embodied activity and play. Furthermore, the children’s behaviour corresponds to Buitendijk’s idea that play always entails interaction with an object or other children and the play elicits responses from that which is played with (Am, 1989; Hangaard Rasmussen, 2001; Løkken, 2000b). Jón is actively involved in his own world while simultaneously taking part in the girls’ world. Jón’s behaviour moreover echoes Merleau-Ponty’s theory regarding the intertwined nature of the individual and the social; how the child, as a subject directed at the environing world, also always already belongs to an intersubjective world. Moreover, Johansson’s (1999, 2011b) research shows that young children seek to involve themselves indirectly in their companions’ interactions and play.

When Jón and Sara establish mutual connection through their shared interest in Silla, Anna seems to interpret this as a threat to her interaction with Sara. Anna, who has previously proven that she is aware of the importance of ethical behaviour and consequently expressed care for Jón, now reacts differently and undermines the burgeoning interaction between Jón, Sara and Silla. It is possible to view Anna’s reaction, as she attempts to impede the development of the interaction, as an attempt to protect and preserve her interaction space, as noted by Corsaro (2003). Anna uses her social position as means to hinder the interaction, which seems aimed at sustaining her already established connection with Sara. Studies by Shin, et al. (2004) have
revealed that children’s methods of exclusion and inclusion with regard to play are connected to
their position in the social hierarchy rather than their personal qualities. The children’s
interaction in these play situations moreover accord with Alvestad’s (2010) findings, which
showed that children’s social negotiations most commonly revolve around internal affiliations
and interactions, as well as negotiations concerning play objects and the contents of the play.

Silla, who has observed the series of events, approaches Jón and cares for him and hence
seems concerned about his wellbeing. This echoes Løkken’s (1996) findings which reveal that
young children concern themselves with each other’s emotions. Silla perhaps viewed the events
as an opportunity for her to establish connection with Jón. Furthermore, Silla’s behaviour
indicates that she, even though she did not directly participate in the children’s play, did so
indirectly. Silla also seems to interpret the children’s expressive activity in the context within
which the play takes place. Anna and Sara both observe Silla’s behaviour before returning to
their previous activity. It has been noted that children are capable of reading each other’s
embodied expressivity, and in that way, their bodies engage in interactions and communications
with one another (Hangaard Rasmussen, 1996). Children’s observations and imitations of their
peers in play are an important aspect of the educational process (Lindahl and Pramling
Samuelsson, 2002; Løkken, 1996). However, Silla’s care is not sufficient for Jón, who seeks the
attention of the teacher. Jón seems discontent with the teacher’s response and expresses his
frustration by removing himself from the situation. Silla follows Jón, which suggests she is
interested in establishing connections with him through play with the ball.

**Entering Play**

The communities of children is based on children’s interaction and communications where they
present themselves and gain access to the world of others. Children must be equipped with
diverse abilities in order to enter the play of their peers’ that has already commenced. The play
requires the child to adjust their behaviour and actions both to fulfil their own wishes and to
concede to the will of other children (Frønes, 1994; Hundeide, 2003).

In the following, an example is provided from a recording that features the interaction of
two girls, Halla (2.4) and Maria (2.2). The play took place in the home corner, in which diverse
toys and objects could be found, all fit to the children’s size, such as a stove, laundry machine, a
soft sofa and two chairs. In the room are also dolls, prams containing blankets and a wooden box
filled with empty food containers and plastic cutlery.

Seven children are in the playroom and some are sitting by high tables where they play
with puzzles or woodblocks. A few children briefly enter the home corner while filming. A
preschool teacher is sitting on a chair by the window and observes the children’s activities. The
teacher interacts with the children when they seek attention, for example by fetching a toy from
the shelves or when the teacher feels there is reason to intervene in the children’s interactions.
Halla arrives before Maria in the home corner and begins playing with blankets. Halla’s
behaviour seems to attract Maria’s attention, who proceeds to make her intentions known and
influence Halla’s play.
Halla is standing in front the sofa holding a small blanket and a pillow. Maria stands by the door to the playroom and watches Halla, before walking towards her and exclaiming in a loud and clear voice: “Together!” Halla bends her body over the sofa and looks at the blanket. Maria positioned herself next to Hall and takes a look at the sofa and the blanket. Next, she raises her arms and says with great emphasis: “There, fix!” Halla continues looking at the blanket and is standing tight up against the sofa. Maria glances at the blanket and places her knees on the sofa, tries to lie down and says: “Sleep?” Halla looks at the blanket and folds it out on the sofa. Maria attempts to lie down of the sofa but Halla pushes her to the side and squeezes both her knees into the sofa, saying: “I sleep.”

The footage shows how the girls make their position and their intentions known through their bodies as well as by way of words and intonation in order to accentuate their wishes even further. Halla’s behaviour with the objects seems to awaken Maria’s interest who watches Halla from a distance before making an attempt to enter in the play. Maria’s approach echoes Corsaro’s (2003) point, that children utilise diverse methods with the aim of entering each other’s play. Maria expresses her desire to enter the play, without using of words, instead, her body makes her intentions explicit. Maria appears to read Halla’s embodied expression before they establish a connection and form a shared basis for play. Maria emphasises her intentions through her body, including verbal utterances, in conjunction with intonations. Halla also makes her intention known by means of her body and words. She looks at the objects and simultaneously refers to herself by the pronoun “me”, as she lies down on the sofa. This is in concert with Merleau-Ponty’s (1962, 1994) idea regarding the merger of the individual and the social, explicated above. Halla attempts to protect her rights over the toys and rejects all of Mara’s attempts at entering the play, which is, once again in concert with Corsaro’s (2003) findings, which show that children’s socio-cultural behaviour is characterised by both their attempt to gain control over their own lives and sharing authority with others.

Maria employs her body, intonation and words to attract Halla’s attention and to make her intentions known. Maria’s behaviour here accords with Buitendijk’s theory regarding the child’s dynamic interplay with the environment, namely, that the environment provides the spark for play which however summons reciprocation on behalf of the child in order to produce the tension required to develop further (Åm, 1989; Hangaard Rasmussen, 2001; Løkken, 2000b). Moreover, Halla’s reaction in the situation reflects the findings of studies conducted by Sandvik (2002), which show how one and two-year-old children clearly indicate, through un-verbalised communication, their refusal to share toys in cases where they believe they have rights over them. Shortly afterwards in the same footage, Halla and Maria establish a shared basis for their interaction followed by a brief encounter of play.

Halla lies on the sofa covered by the blanket, poised, with a relaxed expression on her face. Maria watches Halla and runs her hands softly over the blanket, wiggles her hips and says: “There.” Halla remains under the blanket, looks at Maria, who walks behind the
sofa, and places her hands around the latter’s legs and looks sharply at her, and saying: “Wake up!” The girls look each other in the eye, Maria laughs loudly and Halla reciprocates the laughter, smiling. Maria looks at the blanket and removes it from Halla and says: “Done napping!” Halla sits up, gazing at the blanket. Maria looks at the blanket again, waddles backwards around the sofa with her eyes on Halla. Halla stands up, follows Maria, glances at the blanket and says: “Don’t take my blanket!” Maria stands still, stares at Halla, who takes the blanket from Maria as the she emphasises: “Mine!” Maria walks away.

The girls express their delight over the trajectory of the interaction and display, through smiling and laughter, an affirmation of each other and in that way manage to form a shared foundation for play. This highlights their ability of participating in an intersubjective encounter, noted by Merleau-Ponty as the primary structure of human communication (Johansson, 1999; Løkken, 2009; Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 1994). The girls’ behaviour also corresponds with the findings of other researches with young preschool children and that elucidate how children use humour as means to negotiate in play (Alvestad, 2007), and how children generally seek to participate in social interaction involving humour (Loizou, 2007).

Maria continues her effort of creating a shared platform for developing play through bodily expressivity and spoken words (Am, 1989; Hangaard Rasmussen, 2001; Løkken, 2000b). She alters her pose, sharpens the level of her voice and asks Halla to wake up, putting her words into action by removing the blanket. Maria lays emphasis on her intentions by walking backwards, distancing her slightly from the situation, while keeping her eyes fastened on Halla, blanket in arms. In this way, Maria seems to indicate her willingness to maintain the play in open form. It is possible to interpret Mara’s behaviour in terms of her desire to signal that she feels it is her turn to lie down on the sofa. Engdahl’s (2011) studies have precisely shown that children use a diverse set of expressive ways to indicate their desire to take turns. Halla regards the blanket instead of Maria, seemingly suggesting that she is not prepared to go along with Maria’s advances. Halla, in turn, also emphasises her perspective and her right over the toy by making Maria aware that the latter is removing the blanket from her. Halla underscores her social position, most likely due to her advantage of age and size, and appears to argue for her ownership of the toy, given that she arrived in the play area before Maria did. Halla is considerably taller than Maria, despite an age difference of only two months. In this context, research has brought to light that children will make a case for themselves if they believe they have a right to certain play objects (Sandvik, 2002) and, furthermore, that children use authority, connected with physical or mental strength, to maintain their hold on toys sought by other children (Johansson, 1999, 2011b).

IN CONCLUSION

This study sketches an image of young children’s social interactions and relationships through play within the preschool. The participants were children aged between one and two-years-old, with 11 months separating the youngest child from the oldest. The study examined patterns that
emerge in the children's interactions in play sessions in order to shed light on the ways in which the children initiated interaction, how they sustained already established play and the means by which children attempted to enter play that had already commenced.

The findings of the study show that the participation and co-creation of a community of play was important for the children. As the children sought to engage with other children and the environment, the interactions involved complex embodied expressivity, conveyed and manifested through the body, by means of, for example, facial expressions, glances, intonations, as well as verbal communication. According to Merleau-Ponty's (1962, 1994) theory of the life-world, the human beings are inseparable from the world in which they find themselves, with which they continuously interact. The children employed diverse methods in order to make their wishes known, engage in the world of others, express their position, interpret each other's intentions and views and influence the environment. In that way, the children expressed their existence through their bodies and become active agents in the social context of preschool play. Through movement and embodied expressivity they experienced, comprehended and interpreted the contexts of their environing world. The children used objects and toys to connect with their peers, both by offering toys and seeking them from others. Facial expressions and glances played an important part when the children sought assistance or recognition of their actions from the preschool staff.

Toys and objects on the floor, adjusted to the children's height, afforded diverse possibilities for embodied engagement and expression and therefore facilitated mutual understanding within the space of interaction. Bajtendijk notes that play has its origins in movements and the foundations of play are contained in environmental responses (Ám, 1989; Hangaard Rasmussen, 2001). The children's awareness of their playmates' intentions was the key element as the children mutually developed their play, which echoes Merleau-Ponty's thesis of the intersubjective grounds of communication and society.

The fundamental ambiguity of the children's life-world was clearly manifested as they displayed their ability of expressing their position. For example, when they attempted to enter play that had already begun but then expressed their helplessness if those same attempts were impeded. Merleau-Ponty points out the interaction involves emotional ambiguity expressed through the body. The findings of this study imply that children show communicational skill but can simultaneously become defenceless and insecure about their position and participation within the group.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that the children's social position influences their opportunities of participating in play. The children's social position seems hinged on their age, size and social experience within the preschool group. The older children, or the ones that had reached the second year, carried social authority to the extent of being able to choose who participates in the play and who is rejected. They guided the younger children and concerned themselves with their wellbeing but also rejected their attempts at entering in the play. The younger children, around or under the two years of age, seemed socially aware and carefully observed the older children's play. Merleau-Ponty contended that children's life-world is
contemporaneously subjective and objective and involves ceaseless emotional interaction with the environing world. Through their interaction, the children indicate the eligibility of potential playmates and appropriateness of play-material. The active participation of the younger children and their efforts to advance and realise their intentions with regard to interaction and play was determined by the older children’s affirmation of their advances. This accords with the findings of other studies which show that power-relations among a group of children can determine children’s opportunities of participation (Lee and Recchia, 2008; Löfdahl, 2006) and that children apply both positive and negative methods to influence inclusion or exclusion of others in the play (Johansson, 1999, 2011b).

The aim of this study was to increase knowledge and understanding in relation to how the youngest preschool children perceive their social interactions and relationships to other children within preschool play-sessions. It poses an undeniable challenge to describe the activities of young children and to interpret the meaning that arises in their interactions. The researcher must employ methods that reveal the multifarious nature of children’s life-world and their possibilities of expression. Johansson (2011b) has noted the importance of critically approaching the term ‘children’s perspective’ within research. She furthermore wonder whether the researcher is overall capable of interpreting children’s embodied expressivity and identifying with their perspectives. However, Kalliala (2011) emphasises an open mind with regard to research and analysis of children’s everyday preschool life.

A number of overlapping factors, both social, educational and cultural, influence the lives of young children and their families. In discussions surrounding the societal position of the preschool, it is important to build on an extensive foundation of knowledge, and a part of that knowledge entails the children’s experiences and understanding of their social life in the preschool. The findings of this study suggest that bodily expressivity plays an imperative part in children’s creation of meaning as they co-create and shape their social community of play. It is safe to assume that this is not limited to only the youngest preschool children but also holds for children whose language proficiency is disproportional to age, for example, children of foreign decent or children with disabilities. When children’s perspectives are discussed, it is important to consider the diverse nature of the group and seek to extract every child’s perspective.

Ideas regarding the child, childhood and children’s rights determine to a large degree how children are approached and their opportunities of having their voices heard in the preschool. Adults involved in the preschool environment and community carry the responsibility of respecting children’s abilities and vulnerabilities. The findings of this study can hopefully become an encouragement to preschool staff and other concerned parties for closer reflection concerning social interaction and education in preschools and provide clues for how adults can support children in their interactions and play.
Article II

Young children’s communication and expression of values during play sessions in preschool
Young children’s communication and expression of values during play sessions in preschool

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(Received 17 February 2015; accepted 2 May 2015)

The article explores how young children between one and three years old communicate and prioritise values in order to create and be a part of a community during play sessions in an Icelandic preschool. Furthermore, it aims to investigate the value conflicts that might occur and how the children resolve such conflicts. The study adopts the phenomenological approach of Merleau-Ponty emphasising human bodily existence. Data consist mainly of video recordings. The findings show three main categories that illustrate the values that the children prioritised and found meaningful to their interaction in their play: the value of ownership of toys, the value of others’ well-being and the value of belonging to the community. The values could also be in opposition to values that were either prioritised within the group of children or emphasised by the educators. The study implies that play situations are a valuable arena for children’s learning of values. The value conflicts appeared to be especially important, including children’s confrontations with each other’s perspectives and requiring the children to clarify their views. Thus, children’s positions and possibilities within the group became visible and influenced the resolution of the conflicts.

Keywords: preschool; lived values; young children; play

Introduction

Preschools in Western societies have acquired an important role in educating young children in skills, knowledge and values. This article focuses on a study in an Icelandic preschool; it aimed to to explore communication and expression of values in play among children between one and three years old. The study is part of a broader research project where the aim is to describe and understand young children’s lived experiences and meaning-making when they create their community in play in preschool (Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir 2012, 2015).

The concept of values is complex and is often connected to moral or values education in order to examine pedagogical practices and processes. According to Halstead and Taylor (2000), values are fundamental beliefs that direct human behaviour and help humans evaluate a given action as good or desirable. In this study, we focus on lived values (Johansson 1999). Such values are intertwined in everyday life and emerge in interrelations among children in preschool. Lived values are not a result of one individual’s objective judgements; instead, they are relational and often

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spontaneous and physically expressed. They refer to children’s experiences of good and bad, right and wrong, and are part of children’s very existence.

As young children are increasingly attending preschool programmes, there is an increased interest in knowledge concerning the youngest preschool children. To improve practice with the youngest children, the main focuses have been on interactions between educators and children (Kalliala 2011; Musatti and Mayer 2011; Rayna and Laevers 2011; Roberts 2011) and exploration of the values and democracy communicated between the youngest children and their educators (Emilson and Johansson 2009; Fugelsnes, Röthle, and Johansson 2013). These studies reveal important conditions for children’s well-being as well as highlighting children’s perspectives. However, it is important to capture the meaning the children themselves place on their communication of values within play. Interacting in play is a complex task which requires children to negotiate and resolve conflicts. Play provides children with pleasure and togetherness (Hundeide 2003; Hännikänen 2001), and often leads to conflicts around social status (Corsaro 2003; Löfdahl 2010). It requires children to position themselves and respond to others’ perspectives, and thus is an important arena for the negotiation of values (Johansson 2011a). Studies that explore the perspectives of preschool-aged children on how to treat their fellow beings and how children deal with value conflicts are scarce. Most of the studies have been conducted in the field of psychology (Woodhead and Faulkner 2000) and have centred upon universal factors in children’s development and behaviour (Elkind 1997; Berthelsen 2010). Children’s conflicts and their resolutions have also been connected mainly to developmental changes corresponding to age and relationship (Laursen and Pursell 2009). Children’s resistance and strategies in conflict management and the role of disputes in early childhood settings have also been studied (e.g. Tobin 2005; Haan and Singer 2010; Danby and Theobald 2012; Singer et al. 2012). However, these studies do not focus on values. Instead, studies on values in an educational context have focused more often on older children, especially in regard to learning outcomes and values in curricula, the ethos of the school and practical approaches to values education (Halstead and Taylor 2000). In this context, Powell (2010) argued that in Early Childhood Education and Care settings in England, values were missing from policy documentation despite requirements that adults working in preschools promote particular ‘universal’ values in their work.

Young children’s communication of moral values in play was explored in Johansson’s (1999, 2007, 2009) studies in Swedish and Australian preschools. She found that rights, and care for others’ well-being, were important for children in both contexts. Values referring to conventions, however, appeared to be of higher interest for children in Australian preschools compared with those in Swedish preschools. Rights seemed to have a higher priority for Swedish children. Johansson concludes that children appear to prioritise values according to what is relevant in their respective life-worlds and preschool settings. Similar findings were observed in Karlsson’s (2014) study, which explored democratic values communicated between three- and six-year-old children in a Swedish preschool setting. The democratic values involved responsibility, care and respect. The children related to the needs of others and supported each other within their community, sometimes even in contrast to the perspectives of the adults. The children communicated rights when they acted to support the interests of their peers. They also expressed respect for preschool rules and educators’ positions.
Johansson’s (2007) study showed how children are confronted with each other’s perspectives and values. Such conflicts force children to express their views, clarify their perspectives and prioritise their values, suggesting that conflicts can be important for children’s learning of values. Other studies among young children show that toys are often involved in children’s conflicts (Løkken 2000), and Engdahl’s (2011) study showed that young children communicated various expressions regarding exchanging toys in their play. Pálmadóttir and Einarsson’s (2012) showed that conflicts around toys often seemed to have a social purpose and represented children’s approaches to relating and interacting with their peers. Alvestad’s study (2010) centred upon young children’s negotiation strategies in their interactions during play. The children communicated different negotiation strategies in order to unite their perspectives. The main focus was on peer relations, toys and the content of the play. The approaches were either emotionally oriented or centred on problem-solving. Children who frequently played with other children and those who were in a relationship were the most successful in their negotiations.

The intersubjective processes that appear in children’s life-worlds in preschool and the relationships that develop through children’s participation are important for the quality of social actions. Children share experiences with other children in preschool, and friendship, with its own values, has been identified at an early age (Dunn 2004; Greve 2009; Engdahl 2011). In Greve’s (2009) study, four different categories of friendship among toddlers in preschool were identified. The first was connected to rules and regulations, the second to humour and danger, the third to bodily togetherness and the fourth to negotiation. Accordingly, different kinds of friendships challenge children’s interactions and learning in various ways.

In Johansson’s study (1999, 2011a) of young children’s morality, the value of power was utilised to influence the participation of other children in play. Thus, power was used both to include and exclude peers. Power was also visible as a value in studies (Löfdahl 2006, 2010; Löfdahl and Hägglund 2006) of older children’s play in preschool. Löfdahl (2006) studied how preschool children make use of the content in play to gain useful positions in their peer culture. The children used strategies based on age, appearance, clothes and other personal traits, to reach a desirable position in play. Hence, in their play, the children contributed to values of both inequality and justice in their community. Studies of young children in preschool settings in Norway and Iceland explored children’s opportunities to participate in creating a community in play. Even though values were not the focus of these studies, children demonstrated that rights, friendships, age, responsibility for initiating the play and number of years in the preschool were important prerequisites for participation in play and becoming a part of the children’s community (Grindheim 2011; Pálmadóttir and Einarsson’s 2012).

Most of the studies that focus on values within educational settings are implemented among older children and indicate that children communicate values regarding their own behaviour and that of others, both towards their peers and educators. On the one hand, the values can be connected to democratic values and, on the other hand, children express values in order to enhance their own positions within the group and to exclude other children from participation in play. In spite of increased international interest, there is still a lack of research where the endeavour is to capture the subjective experiences of children’s life-worlds. A recent revision of Iceland’s national curriculum guidelines for preschools increased the emphasis on democratic values that children are expected to learn through participation in play.
(Ministry of Education, Science and Culture 2011). Hence, each child is expected to become a part of the preschool community and to learn to be a democratic citizen in society. Further knowledge is needed about values and value conflicts as aspects in children’s communication and how they are expressed and resolved.

The aim of this study was to explore how young children between one and three years old communicate and prioritise values during play sessions in an Icelandic preschool. The focus is on children’s bodily communication and the objective is to reveal children’s intentions in acting towards each other, and the meanings and influences of their actions for their interactions in play. In this context, values refer to notions communicated by children through their bodily expressed preferences for positive and negative, good and bad, and right and wrong, according to their own and others’ actions (Johansson 1999, 2011a).

Theory

The study is inspired by a phenomenological approach that examines young children’s experiences and their expression of values through their bodily communication in a specific context. Merleau-Ponty’s theory of the life-world (1962) illustrates the intertwined relationship between human beings and the world. A child is considered a bodily subject that is inseparable from the world and is in the process of making meaning out of the experiences of encountering the world (Løkken 2009). The existence of the human being is expressed by the lived-body where the physical and psychological create an inseparable unit (Merleau-Ponty 1962; also Johansson 2011b). Through children’s bodily being, they are in the process of presenting themselves and understanding other people. Hence, children’s communication, including gestures, positions of the body, sounds and words, is fundamental to the existence and development of the child. The concept of intersubjectivity is used to describe the ability of a human being to participate in another person’s life-world. Children meet each other’s worlds where each other’s being is recognised or dismissed (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Johansson 1999, 2011b).

Preschool is a place for values to be communicated and negotiated. In preschool, children create their communities and express and negotiate values, and in turn, the values constitute children’s actions (Johansson 2007). Children’s participation in each other’s life-worlds creates important premises for the communication of values. The concept of lived values illustrates the intertwined relationship of values in everyday life in preschool (Johansson 1999). Lived values are a part of children’s intersubjective existence, and such values are expressed bodily in everyday interactions between children as qualities for good and bad, right and wrong.

The life-world is ambiguous, and is simultaneously subjective and objective (Merleau-Ponty 1962). The child is an active subject who uses the body to experience the world around him or her. In order to create a mutual ground for play children have to present themselves and take part in each other’s life-worlds through the process of intersubjectivity (Johansson 1999; Løkken 2000, 2009). The ambiguity in children’s life-worlds involves more than one possible meaning, and children might be competent and vulnerable at the same time in their interactions in play (Johansson and Emilson 2010; Pálmadóttir and Einarssdóttir 2012). Therefore, children’s interactions in play represent a complex, intersubjective process that influences their self-construction and their understanding of others.
Research questions
This study attempted to capture young children’s experiences and the meaning the children themselves place on their communication of values within play situations in preschool. It focuses on children’s interactions and relations, and their experiences of their own and others’ behaviours, actions, and meanings, i.e. the children’s own phenomenology.

The main research questions are:

- What values are important for children in play?
- What kind of value conflicts do children experience?
- How do children resolve their conflicts?

The context and data construction
The study was conducted during children’s free-play sessions in a preschool. The participants were 46 children divided into two groups. One group included 20 children of age one to two years; the second group had 26 children of age two to three years. Two educators usually worked with each of the groups during the play sessions. The fieldwork took place over a five-month period from late winter to early spring.

Data took the form of video observations. A small hand-held video camera was used as it offers an opportunity of being physically close to the children and following their movements and play. Additionally, field notes were written during the research process. At the beginning, the aim of the video recordings was to capture the ongoing actions in the different areas in the playrooms. After a while, the focus was more on the children’s actions in the home corner or in the small rooms. Sometimes one or two children were followed into different areas in the playrooms during the play session. Altogether, 32 hours of video observations of child–child interactions were recorded during the research project, from which 45 excerpts between 2 and 25 min long were transcribed. The criteria for selection of the video excerpts were that they showed a process of a child’s or children’s communication in a play situation.

The intention of the study was to describe young children’s communication of values that they perceive as good and bad or right and wrong, in their own or others’ behaviour, actions and meanings. Furthermore, the study aimed to describe children’s expressions when different perspectives on values occur and children’s resolutions of the conflicts. The study also aimed to reveal children’s intentions in their actions towards each other and the meaning and influences of their actions and interactions in play. Describing children’s experiences from their perspectives requires an attempt to understand children’s actions in their own social world. The free-play situations were of interest for the study, as this play requires the children to bring together their life-worlds through the process of intersubjectivity.

Research ethics
Research with young children requires the researcher to be honest and trustworthy (Einarsdóttir 2007; Dockett, Einarsdottir, and Perry 2009) and to respect the children’s integrity (Johansson 2005). Children’s assent is emphasised as well as
opportunities for them to dissent. However, obtaining young children’s assent might be difficult for several reasons.

The focus on children’s bodily communication demands ethical awareness regarding how children’s expressions are interpreted (Johansson and Emilson 2010; Dockett, Finarisdóttir, and Perry 2012; Løkken 2012). It is vital to view children’s assent as an ongoing process that is open to reconsideration during the study (Flewitt 2006; Einarsdóttir 2007). In this study, informed consent was acquired from the municipal authorities, the preschool principal, the educators and the parents. Particular attention was paid to children’s bodily expressions in an attempt to understand whether they accepted the presence of the researcher. In the beginning of the study, some of the children indicated that they did not want to have the researcher near, while others showed interest in creating relationships. In this context, it is also possible to argue that young children’s assent to the presence of the researcher should not be understood as consent to having their data reported, in ways of which they are unaware.

Johansson (2011b) described the role of researcher as one of an ‘interested observer’ in the children’s play, friendly but different from the other adults present. The approach in this study was to sit near the children and respond to their initiatives without direct participation in the pedagogical work. Continual reflections on ‘here and now’ decisions regarding our own role as participants in children’s life-worlds turned out to be an important part of the whole research process. Giving voice to young children is a challenging task and demands great responsibility, and perhaps we can only hope to make an honest attempt to approach children’s life-worlds.

**Analytical process**

The analysis started during the data collection period. A steady review of the recordings was conducted in order to get acquainted with the material and to make decisions about the next steps.

The formal analysis process was thematic. Thematic analysis, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), is a flexible method of organising and analysing data to identify and describe repeated patterns or themes within a set. The analysis of data for this study was not a linear process, but occurred in six iterative phases where the themes gradually grew out of the analysis. The first step was to view all the video data and organise them by rendering the films into excerpts that showed a process of a child’s or children’s communication within a play situation. Each excerpt acquired a descriptive name related to children’s playful actions, and ideas around meanings, and patterns were jotted down. The excerpts were then transcribed in the software program InqScribe (2009) where the focus was on children’s actions towards each other, including children’s bodily and emotional expressions, i.e. gestures, postures of the body, sounds and words. The second step of the analysis process involved reading the transcriptions in detail and identifying and coding the incidences where the children communicated their perspectives connected to each of the research questions. After this, the examples where children’s expression of values became visible were categorised and the initial codes collated into themes. The fourth step entailed defining the themes and connecting them to the examples in order to understand better the context of the expression of values. Following this, the themes, transcribed examples and video recordings were reviewed in order to check the relationship between the coded extracts and the entire data-set. The final step in the
analysis was to write the report, which included a selection of extract examples, and these were related to the research questions and literature.

The field notes were used as information about the context of the play situations and as a source for further investigation of children’s communication of values. In the analysis and presentation of the findings, emphasis was placed on the communication that took place in the video recordings, as confirmed by descriptions.

Findings
Children’s expressions of lived values in the life-world of the preschool will be described from their own perspectives. The interpreted examples are viewed from the theoretical underpinnings of the study where it is assumed that children can both experience and express ethical values. The interpretations are also based on Johansson’s (see 1999, 2007, 2011b) previous research.

The patterns in children’s intertwined bodily and verbal communications are considered as their experience and creation of meanings of good and bad or right and wrong regarding their own or others’ behaviour. The findings indicate the values that children prioritise and find meaningful for their interaction in play situations. The values that were communicated could also be in opposition either to values that were prioritised within the group of children or to values that were emphasised by the educators.

The children communicated two main value fields in the play situations – on the one hand, values that were connected to individual rights, and on the other hand, values that were, first and foremost, collectively directed. Children’s expressions of values that were related to individual rights were connected to play and ownership of toys.

Values that were collectively directed were connected to children’s awareness of others’ well-being, including peers and educators. The expressions included showing care, being kind and not hurting peers. Collectively directed values were also related to children’s sense of belonging to the community. Values that were expressed towards peers involved the importance of creating togetherness and sharing the world of play. Other values of importance for the children involved concern for the educators and for their peers. This was expressed through a responsibility to maintain order, as emphasised by the educators in the play situations, and in guiding peers.

Although the children prioritised certain values in their play, they also confronted each other’s perspectives and priorities of values, resulting in value conflicts. Power was used to challenge others’ rights or to exclude children from the community of play. The resolution of conflicts involved children’s attempts to defend their rights, negotiate and clarify their views to unite different perspectives. Nevertheless, some of the children seemed to be in a vulnerable position regarding other children’s actions and did not defend their rights.

The results below are presented in themes where the examples are considered as expressions of lived values that are intertwined in interactions among the children in the preschool. In the examples, all of the children have been given different names to ensure confidentiality.
Ownership of toys

From the children’s perspectives, the value of rights was important. The children expressed rights to play, and ownership of toys was expressed in their interactions. The first one into the play area and the first to have the toy seemed to claim ownership, and it was important for the children to respect this ownership. Some of the youngest children often carried a small toy throughout the play sessions without any efforts from the other children to grasp it. The children often defended their rights if a peer desired the same toy, as the following example shows.

Alex (1,11 – One year and eleven months old) and Robert (2,6) are sitting together in a corner in one of the big playrooms. Alex is holding a wrench, and Robert is trying to take it from his hand. He stops and reaches out towards Alex and gazes at him with a sad expression on his face. Alex gazes back while holding the wrench away from Robert. Now Robert looks at the other children in the room, and Alex starts to use the wrench to pretend to mend a wooden pram. When Robert gazes at Alex again, Alex immediately hides the wrench behind his back. The boys gaze intensively and quietly at each other for a while. When other children in the room draw Robert’s attention, Alex starts using the tool again. After a short while, he hands the wrench to Robert, who begins to mend the pram as Alex had done. Alex watches him and looks excited. He fetches a small shovel and puts it beside Robert, who starts mending it.

Robert tries at the beginning to take the wrench from Alex, who holds it firmly. Soon Robert seems to recognise Alex’s responses as claiming his right to the toy. Still, Robert expresses his desire and clarifies his perspective by gazing at Alex with a sad expression. The boys seem to interpret each other’s bodily expressions with eye contact at the centre of the communication. They had for some time shown interest in each other’s actions and sought to play together. Their relationship and emerging friendship might have influenced the recognition of each other’s perspectives and thus influenced their negotiations and their ability to create a mutual ground for play.

In the play situations, some of the children exhibited superior positions towards their peers. Power became a value dimension in children’s interactions when the children’s right to play and ownership of toys were confronted. Some of the children seemed to be in a vulnerable position and did not defend their rights, as the following excerpt shows.

Kathy (3,8). Hugo (3,9), and Björn (3,3) are sitting on the floor with small animals and an animal house between them. Mikael (3,5) and Isabella (3,8) are moving around in the room. Björn is sitting close to Kathy and Hugo, holding two animals in his hands. Björn moves his animal quietly and gazes at his peers’ actions while they are putting the animals in the house. Hugo and Kathy do not pay any attention to Björn. Now, Hugo starts looking for a certain dog that he wants for the play. Kathy says, ‘Björn is holding it,’ with a positive tone in her voice. Hugo takes the dog from Björn’s hand, without resistance from Björn. Instead, Björn takes another animal from the floor and starts to move it, gazing at Hugo and Kathy once in a while. Mikael and Isabella are making noise, and a boy enters the room and asks, ‘Who is making the noise?’ Kathy browses around and says, ‘It’s Björn.’ The boy answers, ‘We are not supposed to make any noise here,’ in a commanding voice and leaves the room. Björn gazes at the toy in his hand.

In the play situation, two groups of children are playing without the involvement of Björn. Björn is expressing his desire to play with Kathy and Hugo by following their play with his eyes and moving his animals towards them. Kathy and Hugo are occupied with their play, and they ignore his expression. However, Kathy points out
that Björn has the dog, and the tone in her voice seems to encourage Hugo to confront Björn’s rights, and he takes the dog from Björn. Björn does not defend any right to the toy. Maybe he experiences this as an opportunity to participate in the play without claiming any rights. Perhaps Björn realises that it is no use for him to defend a right and clarify his perspective towards the two friends. Björn is the youngest one in this group, and Hugo and Kathy often play together. Björn’s vulnerable position and exclusion from the community of play is confirmed when Kathy claims that Björn is guilty of making the noise. Björn does not defend himself this time either and withdraws by looking down at his toys with a sad expression.

**The well-being of others**

The children communicated values that showed their awareness regarding the well-being of others. A meaningful value from the perspective of children was to care for and not hurt their peers. The children sometimes hurt each other accidentally. On such occasions, it was important to let the child know that this was not the purpose of the action, as we can see in the next example.

Anna (2.4), Sara (2.0), and Tomas (1.4) are in one of the big playrooms. Anna and Sara are walking around with doll prams. Tomas is sitting in a low chair with a ball in his lap, watching the girls. Suddenly, Anna falls over Tomas, but immediately she chucks his cheek kindly and smiles. Tomas smiles and extends the ball towards Anna, who turns back to continue playing with Sara. Tomas throws the ball away, looks miserable, and gazes at the researcher and then at the educator.

Anna shows that she is concerned about Tomas’s well-being by trying to make amends when she hurts him accidentally. With this action, she takes responsibility for her own behaviour and tries to comfort her friend. The value of the community can also be interpreted in their interaction. Tomas is sitting near the girls, watching their play. He seems to want to play and tries to relate to Anna when she chucks his cheek. The ball can be seen as a tool for reciprocity, to create a mutual ground between them. Perhaps he also wants to show that he accepts and approves of Anna’s care by smiling and giving her the ball. However, Anna does not respond. She seems to be eager to continue playing with Sara. Sara is older than Tomas, and it is possible that she is more attractive to play with. Anna demonstrates her perspective by turning her body away from Tomas, who gives the impression that he is disappointed and that he experiences this as a rejection of his attempt to become involved in their play. His body language portrays sadness, and he throws the artefact away. The ball loses its value as a tool for reciprocity.

**Belonging to the community**

In their communication, the children indicated the importance of the community in the preschool. The values that the children prioritised involved togetherness and sharing the world of play with their peers. The next example illustrates a child’s attempts to come close and create togetherness with another child.

Anna (2.0) is in the home corner, standing in front of a sofa with a small blanket and a pillow in her hands. Maria (1.9) is close by and keeps an eye on Anna for a while before she walks to the sofa and says, ‘Together’ with a questioning tone of voice, and gazes at the blanket in Anna’s hands, and so does Anna. Now Maria kneels on the sofa and says invitingly, ‘Sleep?’ Anna looks at the pillow and puts it on the sofa. Maria
tries to lie down on the sofa, but Anna pulls Maria to the side and Anna is on her hands and knees on the sofa and says, ‘I sleep,’ and lies down on the sofa, relaxed in her body and facial expression with the blanket on top of her. Maria gazes at Anna, chucking the blanket at her, wiggles her hips, and looks satisfied. After a while, Maria moves to the side of the sofa and puts her hand on Anna’s feet and says, ‘Wake up!’ with a cheerful voice. Anna gazes at Maria and Maria gazes back, and they both laugh. Now Maria says, ‘Finished sleeping,’ and takes the blanket. Anna gazes at the blanket and says, ‘Don’t take my blanket.’

Anna is in the play area first and is engaged in handling the toys. Maria expresses her desire and tries to establish togetherness with Anna. Conflicting perspectives on the individual rights of ownership and creating a mutual ground for play appear in this interaction. Anna might interpret Maria’s attempt as a threat to her rights to the play area and the toys, while Maria wants to share the world of play with Anna. Maria defends her rights and indicates that she is going to sleep. Anna accepts this, and the girls succeed in creating a short interplay where they gaze towards each other laughing. Maria proposes a new element in the play and suggests that Anna wake up. Maybe Maria’s intention is that now it is her turn to ‘sleep’ on the sofa. Anna again points out her individual rights to the toys and the play ends.

The children communicated values that were connected to their educator’s emphasis on order in play situations. The children expressed respect and responsibility for maintaining the orders of handling the toys and guided their peers as shown in the next excerpt.

Four girls, Kristin (2.0), Johanna (2.2), Hanna (2.4), and Linda (2.4), are playing in the home corner. Hanna is sitting at a small table playing with a computer. Linda is walking around in a dress and high-heeled shoes. Kristin sits in a doll’s pram, and Johanna walks around with her pushing the pram. Kristin stands up and takes a doll bed, turns it upside down, and tries to use it as a slide. The girls gaze at Kristin, and Hanna says, ‘This is not allowed.’ They walk towards Kristin, emphasising this perspective by waving their fists in a threatening gesture towards her face. Kristin gazes, determined, at the girl’s faces, and then she climbs on the bed again and slides down. She happily encourages Johanna to join her, and after a while Johanna tries to slide also. They rotate in their play, repeating when the other one is sliding, ‘Take care not to fall down.’

At the beginning, Kristin and Johanna played together doing the same playful actions. Kristin seemed to want to create new elements in their play by using the doll’s bed as a slide. This action attracted the other girl’s attention. The communication shows the expression of different perspectives and priorities of values. The girls take responsibility for upholding the educator’s instruction about handling the toys and guide Kristin in regard to the right behaviour. The expression of power, threatening gestures, positions of their bodies and sounds seem to be used as tools to defend different values and clarify different perspectives. However, Kristin defends her right to play and confronts the educator’s rule. Kristin continues her play and encourages Johanna to join her. Johanna’s desire to participate with her friend seems to be stronger than respecting the educator’s rule, and she accepts the invitation. In their interplay, they express the value of responsibility and concern for each other by pointing out that they have to be careful not to fall from the slide.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the lived values expressed and prioritised by children between one and three years old. The aim was also to study the kinds of
value conflicts the children experienced and how they resolved those conflicts during play situations. The study adds to the prevailing knowledge about children’s intentions in their actions towards each other, and the meaning and influences of their actions for their interaction in play. It also adds to understanding of values and value conflicts where different perspectives on values occur and children express their interpretation of each other’s actions regarding good and bad, and right and wrong, as well as their approaches to resolving the conflicts in which they become involved.

Important values for the children were both individually and collectively directed. The individual values consisted of rights of ownership, while the values that were collectively directed involved the children’s concerns for the well-being of others, including their peers and educators. The children showed care and demonstrated that it was important to be kind to others. This supports previous research by Johansson (2007) showing that young children prioritise rights and care for others’ well-being in their play. The children in the study were concerned with the order that the educators emphasised about play and took on the responsibility of guiding their peers to maintain the order. Johansson (2007, 2009) interpreted this concern for rules both as a way to uphold the order of preschool and to show concern for and solidarity with their educators. Responsibility, care and respect were identified as democratic values in a study by Karlsson (2014) of older preschool children’s communication. These were demonstrated when the children supported each other within the community and respected educators’ rules and positions. It can be concluded that, at an early age, children are already concerned about others, and take on the responsibility to maintain and include the values that they experience in their life-worlds to create their community of play in the preschool.

Other values that the children prioritised and directed towards others were belonging to the community of play. The children expressed togetherness in their attempts to play with their peers. These findings are consistent with the Hännikänen (2001) study, which showed that playful actions encourage togetherness amongst children. However, this study reveals interesting aspects regarding children’s expression of togetherness. A toy could serve as a tool of reciprocity when a child offered the toy to another child, indicating that they wanted to play. In the eyes of the children, the toy seemed to be an important prerequisite for creating a mutual ground for play. The youngest children’s value conflicts about toys sometimes also seemed to be connected to children’s attempts to create relationships and togetherness. This aligns with a study by Pálmdóttir and Einarsson (2012) that showed that conflicts around toys often seem to represent children’s approaches to relating with their peers. Moreover, the study shows that eye contact was crucial in children’s encounters. The gaze served the purpose of clarifying children’s intentions and prioritising values, defending different values and interpreting each other’s perspectives. Thus, the gaze became an important dimension in children’s attempts to create togetherness and a mutual ground for their play.

Children’s relationships within the group seemed to influence whether or not they succeeded in their attempts to negotiate with their peers. Other studies have shown that emotional expression, bodily togetherness and friendships among young children are important premises for their negotiations in play (Greve 2009; Alvestad 2010). However, the study revealed that children’s positions within their relationships and friendships provided them with power that could be used both to include and exclude their peers. The value of care and well-being of others, as well as
togetherness and individual rights, were challenged and conflicts between the children arose. Power was used to confront the other’s rights to ownership of toys and reject the other’s participation in play. Some of the children defended their rights, while others seemed to be in a vulnerable position within the group. The findings align with Grindheim’s study (2011) showing that important conditions for participation in a community of play were children’s friendships, ages, initiation of the play and experiences in preschool. Other studies have also shown children’s use of power as a value to include and exclude peers from play (Løkkken 2000; Johansson 2011b), and thus, power contributes to both justice and inequality in the community of play (Löfdahl 2010).

Play situations are valuable arenas for children’s relations and learning of values. The value conflicts appeared to be especially important, including children’s confrontation of each other’s perspectives, which required the children to clarify their views. Consequently, this contributed to the meanings the children acquired regarding their own and others’ roles and possibilities for experiencing belonging in the worlds of play.

The findings indicate that educators ought to reflect on the prevailing values that are prioritised and embedded in the setting, as well as how values are understood and mediated by the children and the educators. In this regard, it is important for educators also to acknowledge their own and children’s bodily communication and the values embedded in such processes. The curriculum guidelines for preschool in Iceland emphasise children’s learning of democratic values through their participation in play (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture 2011). Therefore, it is the educator’s responsibility to reflect on children’s learning in play and develop a pedagogy for values education that brings together children’s and educators’ life-worlds through a shared process of intersubjectivity.

Exploring young children’s lived experiences through their bodily communication calls upon critical reflections regarding the use of children’s perspectives in research. It is important to be aware of how children’s perspectives are presented in the study as well as the researcher’s participation and influences on the children’s life-world. Therefore, despite the limitations of the methodology used in this study, it is also a strength because of the intention to approach children’s expression and to talk on their behalf.

References


Article III

Young children’s view of the role of the educators in their play
Young children’s views of the role of preschool educators

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(Received 23 October 2014; accepted 31 December 2014)

This article aims to explore young children’s (from one to three years old) perspectives of the role and pedagogy of educators in play in an Icelandic preschool. The intention is to explore the meaning that children put into involving educators in their play and whether the children experience educators’ actions as a resource for their play. The study is based on a phenomenological approach. Data consist of video recordings and field notes of 46 children, from one to three years old, as well as eight educators. Four main categories that illustrate children’s perspectives on the role of the educators emerged: (a) assistance connected to play situations and play material, (b) confirmation of competence, (c) support connected to children’s social interactions, and (d) participation in play and playful actions. The findings reveal that children’s perspectives and experiences in their own life-worlds in play can be considered an important dimension that contributes to changes in the pedagogical practices that are emphasised in curriculum.

Keywords: preschool educator’s role; children’s perspectives; play

Introduction
Over the past several decades, childrearing and education in Western countries have gradually moved from homes to institutions, and the Nordic countries have been at the forefront of this development (Eydel, 2006; Kampmann, 2006). Children, therefore, currently spend longer periods of their lives in preschools than ever before and gain the experience of participating within a group of children. In Iceland, where this study was conducted, these changes have occurred in a relatively short period of time, and the number of young children attending preschool has increased considerably. Furthermore, the number of hours each day that children stay at preschool has been gradually rising. At the end of 2012 over 92% of two-year-old children and 35% of one-year-old children spent seven to eight hours a day in preschools (Statistics Iceland, 2013). This study examines the views of young children (from one to three years) in their daily lives in an Icelandic preschool, with a special focus on their perspectives of the educator’s role.

The recently revised national curriculum for preschools in Iceland (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012) accords with contemporary views of children as competent, active participants with a right to have their voices heard who learn in collaboration with other children with the support of adults (Christensen & James, 2000; Dalberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999; United Nations, 1989). The pedagogical tradition of
Icelandic educators in preschools, on the other hand, is grounded in a Nordic ideology built upon a ‘romantic’ view of childhood, which holds that children should learn through their play experiences without too much interference from adults (Einarsdóttir, 2006; Wagner & Einarsdóttir, 2006).

In light of young children’s increasing preschool attendance and the revised curriculum that emphasises the educator’s role in supporting children’s learning through play, it is important to shed light on the possibilities of having children’s voices heard within the context of play to see if their knowledge and experiences are valued and responded. The aim of this study is to explore young children’s perspectives of the role and pedagogy of educators in preschool play situations. The intention is to explore the meaning that children put into involving educators in their play and determine whether the children experience educators’ actions as a resource for their play. In this context, children’s perspectives refer to how children communicate their intentions and ideas through their lived bodily expressions. In the study, attempt is made to obtain access to children’s actions in their daily lives in preschool.

**Theoretical perspectives**

A phenomenological approach is used in this study and ontologically it is inspired by the theory of life-world offered by French philosopher Merleau-Ponty (1962). The theory describes the intertwined relationships between human beings and their world. Concepts from the theory are applied as tools to describe and analyse children’s communication within their life-worlds in preschool.

The life-world is characterised by ambiguity and is objective and subjective at the same time. It is through the perception of the lived body that the intentions of the human being are shown and the most direct experiences occur (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). The experiences of the lived body are a ground for the existence and the voice of the child. Thus, the physical and the psychological create an inseparable unit including emotions, perceptions, and thinking (Johansson, 2011a; Rasmussen, 1996). The child uses the body to experience and encounter the social and physical environment, and creates meaning in light of his/her experiences (Johansson, 2011b; Løkken, 2009). Interaction is a precondition and creates a foundation for social actions where children communicate their intentions through positions of the body, gestures, facial expressions, as well as words. In young children’s encounters with everyday life in preschool, they make meaning out of their experiences and thus learn about themselves and others.

**The child and the others**

The focus in the study is on children’s communication through their lived body. The concept of intersubjectivity describes the participation of human beings in others’ worlds where shared recognition or rejection of the others’ being takes place (Johansson, 1999, 2011a; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Other theories (Bruner, 1990; Stern, 2003) have also highlighted this concept as a foundation for understanding others’ intentions.

Young children’s play and playful actions are characterised by centrality of the child’s body. Traditionally, the movements of the body have not been defined as meaningful interactions and play, but rather been thought of as a stage in children’s motor development (Danby, 2002; Løkken, 2009). However, scholars have pointed out that young children’s play is more characterised by bodily and ambiguous aspects than
has previously been emphasised (Øksnes, 2010; Steinsholt, 1998; Sutton Smith, 1997). A child’s self-construction and learning about him/herself and the world take place through play and children seem to have a special ability to understand each other’s bodily expressions, and in this way, the body negotiates with other bodies (Åm, 1989; Falken, 2000; Rasmussen, 1996, 2001). Through the process of intersubjectivity, children have to create a mutual ground for the play to continue, and thus the individual and social aspects unite in the interaction. These elements of intersubjectivity and the construction of intersubjective space are also an important part of children’s and educators’ interactions (Johansson, 2011a). In order to understand children’s communication and interactions in play, the educator has to tune in both emotionally and mentally to children’s subjective worlds (Bae, 2009; Emilson, 2007; Stern, 2003).

The metaphor of the horizon is used to describe the perceptions that result from the child’s bodily being in the world. The horizon is interconnected with the perspective from where we look and is defined as the knowledge and notions that individuals have obtained and taken for granted (Johansson, 2011a; Merleau-Ponty 1962). The horizon is not static, but rather constantly changes. The experience and interpretation of others and others’ perception of us is always ambiguous. Children’s and adults’ interactions involve a degree of ambiguity with regard to the horizons that are embodied in actions (Johansson, 2011a). Social interactions will always entail differences in horizons, and therefore people can never fully understand each other’s worlds. Hence, educators’ as well as researcher’s interpretations of children’s actions during play, as well as their reactions, are dependent on their understandings, previous experiences, and views.

Previous studies
Internationally, few studies have examined children’s perspectives on the role that educators occupy in children’s play, and most have focused on older children. Nordic studies on this issue reveal a pedagogical approach in which educators remain in the background observing the children, ‘waiting to see’ if assistance is needed and keeping the children occupied (Einarsdóttir, 2005, 2014; Kyrölämaki-Kylmänen & Määttä, 2012; Pramling-Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009). In Finland, five- to seven-year-old children’s experiences of day-care centres were studied. The children indicated that one of the educator’s roles was to control the number of children in play areas and step in if the children got noisy and restless (Kyrölämaki-Kylmänen & Määttä, 2012).

Children seem to consider it important that the educators are available while they are playing to support different levels of their play. In Sweden, one- to eight-year-old children’s reasons for involving teachers in their play situations were explored (Pramling-Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009). The following five purposes for inviting teachers into play and learning were identified: (a) to get help from the teacher, (b) to be acknowledged as a competent person, (c) to make the teachers aware of other children breaking rules, (d) to get information about and confirmation of how things work, and (e) to involve teachers in play. All of these categories also appeared among the youngest children, except making the teacher aware that other children were breaking the rules. Sandberg (2002) found that children wanted educators’ support in conflicts that occurred in the course of their play, and that educators also functioned as a substitute playmate if no peers were available to play with. Kragh-Müllers’ (2006) study showed similar results, in that some of the children wanted assistance in order to
engage in play with their peers or to achieve position within the group. The findings of Hjorth’s (1996) study imply that children and educators might have different understandings of an ongoing play, and the children stressed that it was important that educators understand the content of the play before they interfered.

Children’s experiences of educators’ multiple roles are evident in a recent Icelandic study (Einarsdóttir, 2014). Two distinct cultures were identified in five-year-old children’s views of educator’s roles. The first involved interaction with children which included issues such as care-giving, observing the children, assisting, making rules and decisions, offering support, and teaching. The other culture consisted of duties that were connected to organisational issues in the preschool. According to the children, educators exhibited positive attitudes when they assisted children’s play and smiled, and negative attitudes when the teachers scolded, were angry, or did not play.

Studies in preschool have clearly illustrated that educators’ views of children can influence their interactions with the children (Goouch, 2008; Johansson, 2004) and the construction of the adult’s role (Kalliala, 2011). The importance of educators’ support for children’s interactions and play is well documented, and the type of support provided seems to impact children’s learning (Bae, 2009; Emilson & Johansson, 2009; Løkken, 2009). A study by Emilson (2007) indicates the importance that the educators created meaningful contexts, and their control is derived from being emotionally present, supportive, and responsive. Other studies have revealed that playfulness in the communication between adults and children seems to be an especially important factor in young children’s learning experiences (Emilson & Johansson, 2009; Goouch, 2008; Ødegaard, 2007).

Studies of educators’ control of children’s play situations show that organisation of play rooms, furniture, and access to play materials create conditions for children’s experiences of self-construction as well as making of meaning in their interactions (Nordin-Huultman, 2005). Children’s movement and play can conflict with educators’ assumptions about how the body should be used and how order is maintained within the group and the physical space. Chairs, for example, can carry out the role of taming children’s bodies, reducing the chaos that adults often experience regarding young children’s expression (Kirkby, Gitzt-Johansen, & Kampmann, 2005). Findings in a study of Leavitt and Power (1997) indicate that great emphasis was placed on managing children’s movements and controlling their physical needs.

Knowledge about the youngest preschool children’s views on the role and pedagogy of educators in play situations is scarce. This study adds to previous knowledge about young children’s (from one to three years) lived experiences and making of meaning in the preschool context. The intention of the study is to explore the meaning that children assigned to the involvement of educators in their play, and determine whether the children experienced educators’ actions as supportive of their play. This was examined through children’s bodily communications, inspired by Merleau-Ponty’s theory (1962) that highlighted the bodily communication of the human being, a relatively novel approach in early childhood research. The research questions that guide the study are the following:

- What does children’s communication within their life-worlds in play situations imply about their views of the role of educators?
  - Why do children invite the educators into their intersubjective space within play?
  - How do the children experience the educator’s involvement into their play?
Methodology

The study was conducted during children’s free play situations in a preschool. There were 46 participants altogether, divided into two groups of children. In one of the groups there were 20 children, from one to two years, and in the other group there were 26 children, from two to three years. Four educators worked with each of the groups. Data were gathered during a five-month period, from late winter to early spring. Informed consent was obtained from the municipal authorities, the preschool principal, the educators, children, and their parents. All the parents agreed on behalf of their children.

When seeking young children’s informed consent, their bodily expressions need to be observed and interpreted (Dockett, Einarsdóttir, & Perry, 2012; Løkken, 2012). In this study, attention was paid to children’s bodily expressions in an attempt to understand whether they accepted the presence of the researcher or not.

In order to interpret children’s perspectives it is important to obtain access to children’s actions. Free play situations were therefore of special interest for this study which are, to a certain extent, child-initiated in the preschool context. After breakfast, the free play session started, and lasted for about one hour, where the children could play with various play material in different areas of the playrooms.

Children’s perspectives involve children’s experiences, perceptions, and understanding in their life-world. The focus is on the child as subject in his or her own world, children’s own phenomenology. The attempt is to understand and interpret through the researcher’s own child perspective, children’s intentional acts and statements (Sommer, Pramling-Samuelsson, & Hundeide, 2010, pp. 22–23). During data collection, children’s actions were in the forefront and the educators in the background.

Context

Both groups had four similar playrooms: two bigger rooms and two smaller ones. In one of the bigger playrooms there was a home corner where the children had access to diverse play materials such as household equipment and child-height furniture. Toys and books were also stored at children’s height, while some other materials were stored on high shelves. There were tables in adults’ height and high chairs for the younger group of children. Some of the smaller toys were kept out of reach of the younger children. Material for both of the groups’ art and craft work was kept on high shelves. The educators placed toys such as puzzles and blocks, on big tables for the children in the younger group.

The educators invited the children in the older group to play with particular toys, or the children themselves requested certain toys to play with. The educators also controlled the number of children playing in each play area. In both of the groups, the educators sometimes facilitated the children’s play by, for example, placing blankets over chairs, or by placing cups and dishes on a table and encouraging a small group of children to play. While the children were playing, usually one educator stayed in each of the big playrooms, while the others took their coffee-breaks. Often the educators divided the children into groups up between the rooms.

Data construction

In this study, data were mainly collected through video recordings. Based on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, Løkken (2012) puts forward the concept of ‘lived
observation’ where the emphasis is on the bodily existence of the human beings in the world. When an observational research method is used, the researcher’s ‘lived attention’ in the research project is emphasised, and thus, the researcher is co-constructing knowledge at all stages of the research process.

Several ethical issues arise when stepping into children’s worlds, with regard to relationships, interactions, and children’s safety, requiring the researcher to be trustworthy and show respect in interactions with participants (Dockett, Einarsdóttir, & Perry, 2009; Einarsdóttir, 2007; Robson, 2011). In this study, emphasis was placed in the beginning on sitting near the children and responding to their initiatives, without taking direct part in the work.

A small handheld camera was used to follow children’s movements and play. The children displayed different kinds of approaches to understand the meaning of the situation. Some children showed their interest in the video camera, while others seemed to be more interested in relating to the researcher, and some of the children did not show any obvious interest. Neither video recordings nor any other research method can reveal the whole truth about children’s everyday lives in the preschool. Nevertheless, field notes can offer important additional information about the context as well as an overview of the situations that have been recorded (Walsh, Bakir, Lee, Chung, & Chung, 2007). Field notes were written before the video recordings started and while they proceeded. The field notes were concerned with describing what seemed to interest the children and the researcher’s reflections and ideas about the issue under study.

**Analytical process**

In phenomenological approaches, the purpose is to understand the lived experiences of individuals. Such descriptions endeavour to draw up a picture of an event, describe a process of events, and shed light on situations, people, or incidents, as well how things are related to each other (Crotty, 2006; Rasmussen, 1996). The study is built upon the belief that to be able to understand the world of meaning one must interpret it, and that human behaviour is intentional (Gadamer, 2004; Lichtman, 2006). Researchers have a great responsibility in speaking on behalf of children and the importance of reflecting carefully on what child is ‘seen’, how the child is ‘seen’, and whose voices are heard and presented has been emphasised (Dockett et al., 2009; White, 2011).

The attempt in the study is to understand, interpret, and explain children’s actions in light of the meaning they put into involving educators in their play. Children’s actions and play occur in a context that includes ‘here and now’ situations involving both the past and the future, and are also situated within certain cultural and historical contexts that influence the interpretation (Johansson, 1999; Løkke, 2012).

After viewing all the video recordings, they were organised by rendering the films into excerpts that showed a process of a child or children’s communication in play. Each excerpt was given a descriptive name and date and transcribed using the software programme InqScribe (2009). Thematic analysis was used in the organisation of the data and to identify and describe patterns and themes within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The analysis focuses on salient patterns in children’s lived experiences of involving educators into their play, and on educators’ reactions. Exploring the context of the children’s communication when they directed their expression towards the researcher was also considered important.
Transcription of children’s bodily and emotional communication into words is complex and can only be considered to represent a reproduction of what occurred in reality in children’s interaction (Flewitt, 2006; Johansson, 2011a). In this study, the transcriptions as well as the original video excerpts and field notes were used as a source for a further investigation of children’s reasons for involving the educators into their life-worlds within play situations. In the analysis and presentation of the findings, emphasis is placed on the communication that took place in the video recordings, as confirmed by descriptions from the transcriptions.

Findings
The analyses of the data show that the children indicated their views about educators’ roles through emotional and bodily expressions, and involved the educators into their play and playful actions for various reasons. Four main categories that illustrate children’s perspectives on the role of the educators emerged: (a) assistance connected to play situations and play material, (b) confirmation of competence, (c) support connected to children’s social interactions, and (d) participation in play and playful actions. Children’s experiences of the educator’s responses are grouped into two main categories: emotional closeness and emotional distance. The results that are presented below in themes and examples illustrate the children’s communication, and considered as an expression of lived experiences that are intertwined in their interactions. Some of the children tried to involve the researcher while they were playing, actions that will also be included in the descriptions that follow.

Assistance in play situations and with play material
The children seemed to experience that the educators were in control of decision-making regarding important conditions for their play. The educators decided the location of the play materials, the number of children in each play area, and where the play should take place. The educators placed toys on the high tables in the younger group. The youngest children needed educators’ support to get to and from the table. Some of the children circled around the table or, by using sounds and looking at the toys in order to be lifted up to a chair. Sometimes this expression of desire was overlooked, and the children walked into another area of the playroom. When the children who sat on the high chairs wanted to get down to the floor, they often got restless and gazed around the room without playing. Many of the children managed to climb to a chair and often vocalised ‘push me, push me’ in order to request support to reach the table. The children often tried to involve the researcher in their actions when they did not get sufficient response from the educators as the following excerpt shows.

Martin (2,0) has managed to climb to a high chair but is still a bit far from the table. He stretches his arms towards the table while moving a bus back and forth and humming with a happy face. He gazes at an educator, ‘push me, push me’. The educator does not respond, and he lowers his voice, ‘push me, push me’. He looks to another educator who is passing by in the direction of another child. Then he gazes at the researcher, who asks him whether he wants to be pushed, and he nods.

Here, Martin shows his intention to gain the educator’s support to move closer to the table. His experience within the group is obvious, and he uses his competence to
perform playful actions ‘push me, push me’ to get attention. He does not succeed, and neither receives confirmation of his competence or better conditions for his play. Then Martin turns to the researcher, who helps him to the table. The researcher’s bodily position and engagement in children’s actions indicate the importance of physical proximity to young children’s life-world in play situations.

**Confirmation of competence**

It seemed to be important for the children that the educators were emotionally and mentally involved in their life-world in play. The children sought for educator’s confirmation concerning their competence in play and to confirm them as a persona. In the older group, emphasis was placed on that the children should play in the same play area during the play session, as the following example shows.

Gabriel (3,4) and five other children are playing with animals and houses on the floor in one of the small playrooms. Gabriel is sitting and connects small fences together to create a long stick that stretches out on the floor. He concentrates and moves the stick back and forth on the floor. After a while, he pushes it into the other playroom were the educator stays. Gabriel crawls on all fours, looking at the fence, and says ‘See my big fishing rod!’ with excitement in his voice. The educator agrees ‘it is big’ but at the same time points out that these toys should not be in this room. The other children in the room follow this interaction. Gabriel withdraws and takes the fence back into the room.

Gabriel’s purpose seemed to be to get the educator’s confirmation of his competence. The educator’s horizon at the other hand seems to be to control the play emphasising the rule of playing in the same area during the play session. The reaction is characterised as one of emotional distance regarding Gabriel’s subjective world and does not seem to be in harmony with Gabriel’s intentions.

It was also important for the children to approach the educator as people confirmed their persona, as the next excerpt shows.

Simon (1,6) is sitting at a high chair and has been playing with a puzzle for a short while. He stops his play, looks around in the playroom, and the presence of an educator catches his attention. He points towards her and calls her name gladly. She calls his name back with a cheerful voice. He climbs down on the floor and walks to her. She lifts him up, saying, ‘Come here, my little one’. Simon smiles.

Here, Simon’s purpose seems to be to relate to the educator and receive confirmation of him as a persona. The responses to his initiative are in a playful mode and show emotional closeness with his life-world, which Simon recognises with pleasure which seemed to indicate that the educator’s reaction was in line with his intention.

**Support in social interactions**

Within both of the groups, the children were encouraged to share and exchange the toys and play together. A toy in the hands of one child often fascinated the other children and caused conflicts, and educators’ support was required. From children’s perspectives, the conflicts around play materials often seemed to have a social purpose, and represented their approach to relating and interacting with their peers. The ambiguity of children’s life-worlds where children’s competence and vulnerability within the play situations appears clearly as the following excerpt shows.
Conflicts around toys

Emily (1.9) is walking around with a doll pram with several dolls in it. Kristin (1.7) tries to take one of the dolls, but Emily screams and gazes at an educator who is sitting on the floor reading a book for two boys. The educator instructs the girls to share the dolls. She stands up and takes one of the dolls, which she intends to give to Kristin. Kristin shakes her head and gazes at Emily. Emily takes the doll from the hand of the educator and gives it to Kristin, who accepts it. The educator starts to read again. Kristin now tries to take the doll pram, and Emily screams. The girls are reminded on that they should share the toys, and the educator points out that they can use the pram together. Kristin lowers her hand from the pram and walks away and gazes at Emily, who continues to walk around with the pram, gazing back at Kristin. Kristin walks to the educator, who asks her if she wants to come and listen to the story with the boys.

The purpose of involving the educator into the conflict seems to be to get support to manage the interaction. Different horizons that influenced the intersubjective process were apparent. The educator interpreted the conflict as one dealing with sharing the toys and emphasised the ‘rule’ of sharing. Kristin’s expression, on the other hand, indicated that she wants to relate to Emily and enter her play, but she does not know how to do so. Emily seems to be amenable to Kristin’s intention.

Support in play

The children often sought educators’ support in different stages in their play. The educators’ approaches varied and often did not seem to be in congruence with children’s intention as the next example shows.

Isabel (1.6) and Alexander (2.0) are sitting at the high table playing with a bus and a boat on wheels. Alexander is leading the action of putting animals into the toys and pushing them back and forth on the table, and Isabel is imitating. Alexander puts one of his animals into Isabel’s boat and leans forward, saying ‘hello’ with a joyful voice looking into her boat. Isabel gazes at him and swipes at his face, and smiles. Alexander withdraws, looks in surprise at Isabel, and says ‘you are not allowed’. He gazes towards an educator with a serious face while he wipes his face and then rubs his hand on Isabel’s chair, which Isabel protests. The educator is supporting another child and does not notice this incident. Alexander puts his head on the table and Isabel gazes forward in the playroom.

Alexander is leading the play with Isabel, and they succeed in creating an intersubjective space for a short while. When Alexander tries to introduce new elements into the play, Isabel seems to experience this as a threat to her ownership of the boat. But at the same time, she smiles and thereby indicates her satisfaction with the play situation. Alexander wants to involve the educator to get support by confirming that Isabel’s behaviour was wrong. His expression indicates that he considers this attack completely without reason, and he seems to want support in emphasising this perspective. Alexander might also be looking for a confirmation of his competence in this knowledge. Alexander is not satisfied with the lack of response on behalf of the educator and Isabel also seems disappointed with the conclusion of the interaction.

Participation in play and playful actions

The children often wanted the educators to confirm their experiences, and it also seemed to be important that the educators act as participants in their play and playful
actions. The children took initiative and tried to create mutual ground in various ways through their communication within play, as the next example shows.

Sharing experiences and joy

Nicholas (2,7), Laura (2,4), Rose (2,8), and Simon (2,11) are in one of the big playrooms putting some railway tracks together. The children start to walk around making happy sounds, and using the railway tracks as lollipops. Suddenly, Nicholas sits down on the floor and starts to bark. Laura drops the ‘lollypop’ and grips his sweater and says, ‘Doggy?’ in a soft voice. They start to ‘walk the dog’, and Rose and Simon watch. The dog takes blocks from the floor with its mouth and puts them on the tables. The children enter the other big playroom, walking in the direction of the educator who claims that the ‘dog cave’ is in the other playroom. The children return back, and Rose says to Simon, ‘Doggy’, to which he responds by crouching on all fours. Rose takes his sweater and they walk into the other playroom as Nicholas and Laura did before. The educator asks whether the children have finished playing with the wooden train, and if so, they have put it into the box again. The ‘walk the dog play’ stops and the children walk back and start to put the train into the box, humming a ‘collect the play material’ song with cheerful voices.

Children’s purpose in involving the educator seems to get confirmation of their subjective world and invite her to share the joy of play. The different horizons that appeared seemed to influence children’s opportunities to build an intersubjective space for the interaction. The educator reacts at the beginning within the play theme by mentioning the doggy cave but at the same time directing attention to the rule about where to play. When the children repeat the action, the educator takes another step regarding the rule, and emotional distance, emphasising that the children are not performing the ‘right’ kind of play. Another possible explanation of children’s actions might be that they are challenging the rules regarding the play sessions, that is, the requirement that they play in predetermined areas. However, the children show their respect for the educator’s control of decisions, their willingness to cooperate as well as competence by starting to pick up the wooden train, and create a new intersubjective space in a playful way.

Expanding experiences

Children’s use of the space in the playrooms and their movements often led the educators to become emotionally involved to participation as the following excerpt shows.

Victor (1,11) is on all fours looking at a sunray that has appeared on the floor in the playroom. Daniel (2,0) is sitting in a nearby sofa, looking at a book. Victor gazes at the floor, moving around the sunray. The educator asks him if that is a light on the floor and if he knows where it comes from. He looks at her and moves around and onto the sunray. The educator purposely walks in front of the light, and the sunray disappears for a moment and then it appears again. Victor gazes at it, and his excitement is visible. He stands up and starts to dance and step on the sunray with light movements and happy sounds. Once in a while, he gazes at Daniel, who continues to sit in the sofa, but follows Victor’s actions and smiles.

Victor’s actions involve the educator participation into his life-world. The educator’s actions were directed towards Victor’s subjective world, and recognising his experience. Victor’s actions and the educator’s reactions created an intersubjective space for their playful interaction. Thus the active participation of the educator extended
Victor’s experiences. However, it also seemed important for Victor to share this experience and involve Daniel into the play, and Daniel confirmed it by smiling and gazing at Victor’s actions.

Discussion
The aim of this study was to explore young children’s (ages from one to three years) experiences of the role and pedagogy of educators within preschool play situations. The study was inspired by Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) theory of the life-world, in which the child is considered an active bodily subject engaged in the process of making meaning in encounters with the physical and social world of preschool. The data were collected mainly through video recordings and field notes of children’s communications within play situations in two groups in one preschool.

The findings of the study illustrate four important roles of the educators in the eyes of the children. The first role was the provision of assistance and materials in play situations. The second role was the confirmation of children’s competencies, and the third role consisted of supporting children’s social interactions. The fourth role that the educators exhibited was that of being an active participant in children’s playful actions. These findings are consistent with studies that show that children want educators to participate in their life-worlds in play situations for various reasons (Einarsdóttir, 2014; Pramling-Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009).

The manner in which the educators responded to the children’s requests for assistance and materials in play situations varied according to the individuals and situations. The educator’s role often appeared to be one of organising the physical environment, controlling the rules regarding various aspects of the play situations, and regulating the children’s actions. This is in keeping with other studies that have shown that children in preschool recognise that it is the educator’s role and pedagogical approach to keep them busy and to wait on the sidelines to see if support is needed (Einarsdóttir, 2014; Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen & Määttä, 2012).

This study reveals that high tables and chairs often hindered the youngest children’s movements and inhibited their opportunities for bodily expression and, in addition, kept them in predetermined places. Thus, the children were often dependent on the educators’ decisions and assistance regarding the play materials. This is consistent with studies that point out that high tables and chairs might be an adult’s strategy for containing children’s bodies (Kirkeby et al., 2005; Leavitt & Power, 1997) and influencing their self-construction and independence in play, as Nordin-Huitman (2005) argues. The study indicates that the youngest children’s bodily expressions were not frequently recognised as meaningful interactions and therefore not supported by the educators, which aligns with other studies that have also revealed that young children’s playful actions are traditionally not defined as an important medium in interaction (Løkken, 2009; Rasmussen, 1996).

The findings revealed that the intersubjective processes that occurred within the groups often seemed to be intended to involve the educators in children’s life-worlds. The participating children showed interest in participating in others’ worlds and wanted the educators to share the intersubjective space with them. It seemed important that the educators were involved in their subjective worlds and recognised them as competent individuals. This is in harmony with the study of Pramling-Samuelsson and Johansson (2009), in which the children indicated the importance of the educators acknowledging their competencies. The children also wanted the educators’ support
when they were not able to sustain play, and in conflicts involving play materials, which is in accord with other studies (Sandberg, 2002). In conflict situations, the contrast between the children’s and the educators’ perspectives often became apparent. The children showed competence in indicating their intentions, but at the same time, they demonstrated vulnerability when their intentions were not realised. Merleau-Ponty’s theory (1962) addresses the ambiguity in children’s life-worlds, emphasising that the experiences and interpretations of others, and others’ interpretations of us, are always ambiguous. From the participating children’s perspectives, conflicts often seemed to have a social purpose and represented their approaches to relating and interacting with each other. The educators, on the other hand, frequently interpreted the interactions as disputes over play materials and emphasised the skills of sharing and taking turns without supporting children’s relationships further. Other studies imply that preschool teachers’ support concerning children’s interactions in play is crucial for children’s meaning-making and learning (Bae, 2009; Emilson & Johansson, 2009; Løkken, 2009).

The children in the study seemed to accept to a great extent the role that the educators played in making decisions concerning their play situations. Their actions indicated that they respected the educators’ control, and they showed willingness to cooperate and follow the educators’ rules. Although they also suggested that they wanted more involvement and active participation in their playful actions than the educators provided. These findings align with studies that have shown that educators’ use of control defines and impacts the construction of their role (Kalliala, 2011), as well as influencing children’s experiences and learning (Emilson & Johanson, 2009). The children indicated how they experienced the educators’ reactions during their play. If the reactions were characterised by emotional closeness to the children’s subjective world, the children expressed emotional pleasure; happy gestures and laughter made their excitement obvious. If, on the other hand, the educators’ responses were characterised by emotional distance and children’s social contributions were overlooked, the educators’ reactions often contrasted with the children’s intentions. This is in harmony with Hjorth’s study (1996), where older preschool children found it important that the educators understood the content of the play before they interfered. Other studies have also highlighted the importance of educators being emotionally present and playfully involved in children’s actions in play (Emilson & Johansson, 2009; Gooch, 2008).

During the first years of preschool, the participating children seem to be experiencing and learning how to internalise the verbal and non-verbal rules of the preschool pedagogy as well as the expected roles and actions of the educators. Listening and responding to children’s perspectives is therefore an important dimension and contribution regarding the emphases in the Icelandic national curriculum guidelines on educators’ roles in offering space and support for children’s actions and interests and in their interaction with children through play (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2012). The attempt to capture children’s voices is a challenging task and can open up various understandings of the life situations of young children. The research process requires awareness and reflection about decisions regarding the interpretation of children’s actions. It is a critical question how far one can go in interpreting children’s bodily communications, their intentions and making of meaning and their expression of assent and dissent. Furthermore, children have multiple voices as do adults, which demands that the researcher be attentive to whose voices are heard, as other scholars have also pointed out (Einarsdóttir, 2007; White, 2011). In order to speak on behalf of young children, it is important to recognise that the researcher’s
horizon, including his or her experiences, personality, and ideological stance, influences how children’s expressions are listened to and interpreted.

The study indicates that the children experienced the educators’ involvement in their play in various ways depending on the situation and the context. The educators’ roles comprised emotional closeness and participation in children’s life-worlds, and thus the process of intersubjectivity was intertwined in the educators’ roles in children’s play situations. The educators’ roles also included constriction through rules that limited children’s possibilities of meaning-making in the play situations. The findings of the study suggest the importance of reflecting on young children’s perspectives in order to evolve a pedagogy of participation where young children are viewed as participating subjects who have their voices heard within the preschool context.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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References


Article IV

Video observations of children’s perspectives on their lived experiences: Challenges in the relations between the researcher and children
Video observations of children’s perspectives on their lived experiences: challenges in the relations between the researcher and children

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The article seeks to explore the relationship between the researcher and children aged from one to three years old. The findings are drawn from a research project in an Icelandic preschool where video recordings were used as the main method. The aim of the research project was to understand children’s lived experiences when creating their communities in play. The study was based on phenomenological approaches of Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962). The findings indicate that video recordings have considerable potential to provide insight into children’s lived experiences, as well as reveal the importance of reflections during the research process. Three main themes emerged and provided insights into the relations between the researcher and the children during the research process: (1) assent; (2) exploring the role of the researcher; and (3) involving the researcher in play. In the article examples will be drawn from the research project to illustrate the ethical challenges in the relations between the researcher and the children.

Keywords: Research with children; children’s perspectives; video recordings; researcher’s role

Introduction

In Iceland, where this study was conducted, children from two to five years of age universally spend seven to eight hours a day in preschool, and children under two years of age are increasingly attending preschool (Statistics Iceland 2013). The pedagogical work in preschools has been connected to the Nordic tradition where children’s freedom and play is highlighted (Einarzdóttir 2006; Wagner and Einarzdóttir 2006). In the curriculum guidelines for preschools emphasis is placed on children as active participants with the right to have their voices heard. Hence children are expected to become a part of the preschool community and learn to be democratic citizens in society (Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture 2011).

Children’s participation in research has been stressed in recent years to obtain their perspectives on various issues in their everyday lives (Clark, McQuial, and Moss 2003; Einarzdóttir and Harcourt 2011; Lansdown 2005). To approach young children’s perspectives and to talk on their behalf is a challenging and complicated task. Moreover, in order to capture children’s perspectives, it is important to carefully consider whose voices are presented in the study (Dockett, Einarzdóttir, and Perry 2009; White 2011). The construction of the child in research is influenced by the theoretical...
perspective, including the methodology, methods, and the philosophy underpinning the study (Dockett, Einarsdottir, and Perry 2011; Lokken 2009; Rhedding-Jones 2005; Veresov 2014).

There is increasing interest in video recording as a research method in the social and educational sciences. Video recordings provide opportunities to observe people’s actions, where the making of meaning takes place and allows a new understanding of interaction between people (Heath, Hindmarsh, and Luff 2010; Walsh et al. 2007). Video recordings have been utilised within various disciplines and have thus contributed to a paradigm shift in early childhood education, psychology, and sociology of childhood, where the child is now, to a greater extent than before, viewed as a competent and actively social human being (James 2009; Rayna and Laevers 2011). Subsequently, non-verbal communication and subjective experiences of the child are considered important in the child’s socialisation processes (Sommer 2012; Stern 2003; Trewarthen and Aitken 2001).

This article focuses on insights about the relationship between the researcher and children and discusses the challenges that emerged during a research project where video recording was the main data-gathering method. In the research project the endeavour was to explore, describe, and understand young children’s lived experiences and the making of meaning when they created their communities through play in preschool.

**Theoretical framework**

The study was based on the theory of ‘life-world’ developed by the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), who described the intertwined relationship between human beings and the environment. The concept of the ‘lived body’ describes the foundation for the existence of the child where the world is interwoven into the child’s actions and provides dynamic interaction. To participate in social interaction and social relations is to make meaning. Children are seen as active body subjects, engaged with their physical and social environment in the process of making sense of their lived experiences. The child’s experiences appear bodily in all situations, and thus the child’s perspectives becomes visible through bodily expression (Johansson 1999; Merleau-Ponty 1962).

Merleau-Ponty uses the concept of intersubjectivity to illustrate the fundamental ability of the human being to participate in another’s life-world. Hence, interaction between people is seen as a precondition for intersubjectivity. Acquiring insights into relations between the researcher and the children, as intended in this study, involves understanding the intersubjective processes in their interactions.

The metaphor of the horizon is used to describe the perceptions, which are affected by our perspectives that result from the child’s bodily being in the world (Gadamer 2004; Johansson 2011a). The horizon is not static; rather, it constantly changes in the process of intersubjective human experiences, knowledge, and interpretations. The horizon is understood to be the knowledge and notions that individuals have obtained and take for granted (Johansson 2011a; Merleau-Ponty 1962). The experience and interpretation of others and others’ perception of us is always ambiguous. Children’s and adults’ interactions involve a degree of ambiguity. Thus, differences in horizons are constantly embedded in social interactions and therefore people can never fully understand each other’s worlds. The researcher’s interpretations of children’s actions during play are dependent on intersubjective processes that occur
between the researcher and the children, as well as the researcher’s understandings, previous experiences, and views.

**Video recordings in studies with young children**

Video recordings, more than other observation methods, allows for the possibility of unveiling and observing actions and interactions that occur in real time. In recent years video recordings have been increasingly employed in research within early childhood education to focus on young children’s communication of meaning through bodily expressions (Alvestad 2010; Engdahl 2011; Greve 2007; Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir 2012; Johansson 1999, 2009, 2011a; Løkken 2000a, 2000b). These studies reveal important insights into children’s perspectives on various elements of their daily life in preschool. The video technology offers the ability to observe and re-observe the film, to control the speed of the equipment, and acquire still pictures, making it possible to examine details in the data and analyse bodily expression and language with a higher level of scrutiny than before (Flewitt 2006; Heath et al. 2010; Walsh et al. 2007).

However, the attempt to understand children’s communication comprises various challenges regarding whether and how children’s bodily expression is interpreted. It has been suggested that the recent emphasis in social research on children’s strength and competences runs the risk of neglecting children’s vulnerability and need for guidance and care from adults. Johansson (2011b) claims that the ambiguity in children’s life-worlds, showing that the child might appear both as competent and vulnerable at the same time, is missing. After all, it is the ontological position of the researcher that decides the focus and influences the construction of the child, and whether and how children’s perspectives appear in studies (Komulainen 2007; Mason 2002).

Video recordings, like any other research method, cannot reveal the whole truth about children’s everyday lives, and therefore all phases of the research process require critical reflection and awareness. Furthermore, video recordings capture only a small part of the whole situation under study and can be more effective when used with other methods, such as field notes (Walsh et al. 2007), which can offer a richer understanding about the context of the observation.

**Participation in children’s life-worlds**

Utilising video recordings in research involving young children demands the researcher to become close to the children’s life-worlds. Based on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty (1962), in the research process the bodily existence of the human being in the world of the researcher’s ‘lived attention’ is emphasised (Løkken 2012). In the encounter where the embodied researcher is participating in children’s life-worlds, mutual relationships occur. Pink (2009; 2012) points out the importance of reconsidering the role of the senses and recognises it as an integrated part of the research process. The researcher is interconnected with the life-worlds of the children, where relations between the ‘seeer and the seen’ appear. Hence, the researcher must be sensitive to children’s lived experiences and create proximity as well as analytic distance (Johansson and Løkken 2013, 4). In this context Pink (2009, 105) argues that the camera is not exclusively directed on the ‘images’ in front of the camera but also connects the person behind it and his/ her relations to the world. Because of the physical closeness and following the children’s movement around the playroom, the researcher and the
camera are intertwined (Fleer 2014). The study is therefore a shared process in which
the interactions and relations between the children and the researcher create important
conditions and contribute to the construction of knowledge.

Video technology has evolved and has become a part of children’s life-worlds at an
early age. Today cameras are, for instance, much smaller than before and bring the possi-
bility of the researcher being in eye contact with the children while recording. The
researcher is therefore no longer behind the camera, as Lokken (2012) describes her
role in her studies of toddlers in 1994 to 1995. These changes provide opportunities
and also are challenging and require reflection on the participation in children’s life-
worlds. In studies within early childhood education, the researcher’s role is usually
explained differently from the pedagogical work of the educator’s. Bailey et al.
(2004) describes it as staying in the background, while Johansson (2011a) defines the
role as one of an ‘interested observer’ in children’s play – friendly but different from
the other adults. In the encounter, children, unlike adults, usually become quickly accus-
tomed to the researcher and the camera (Greve 2007; Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir 2012).
The understanding that children put to the researcher role influences the relationship
created between the researcher and the children (Fleer 2014; Johansson 2011a; Sørensen
2014), and thus the children influence and co-construct the role of the researcher.

Several ethical issues arise when stepping into children’s life-worlds with regard to
relationships, interactions, and security. Video recordings can be intrusive in children’s
life-worlds, demanding that the researcher be trustworthy and careful in handling and
presenting the data (Robert-Holmes 2005). Children’s participation in research has
brought forth discussion of the importance of involving children in all phases of a
study (Bae 2010; Einarsdóttir 2007), and children’s informed consent and dissent has been stressed. Robson (2011) claims that the main advantage of video data is
that they allow the participants to reflect on their informed consent, meaning that chil-
dren can give feedback concerning their participation in the study. Sørensen (2014)
argues that the role of the researcher is an ethically informed position, and therefore
the researcher has to be certain of children’s assent throughout the study. Acquiring
the youngest children’s assent can be problematic and demands ethical awareness.
The researcher is responsible for interpreting children’s expressions regarding their
assent or dissent and places attention on children’s bodily communication (Dockett,
Einarsdóttir, and Perry 2012; Flewitt 2006; Lokken 2012). In order to contribute to con-
fidentiality and privacy all the children in the study obtained pseudonyms.

This article adds to previous knowledge about the relationship between the
researcher and young preschool children and the challenges that emerged during a
research project focused on understanding preschool children’s making of meaning
when creating their communities in play situations. This was observed through chil-
dren’s bodily communication, inspired by Merleau-Ponty’s theory (1962) that high-
lighted the bodily communication of the human being, a relatively novel approach in
early childhood research. Further, limited studies focusing on the relation between
young preschool children and the researcher have been conducted. The aim of this
article is to illustrate how the video representations provided insight into the relation-
ship and what challenges the researcher faced during the research process. The follow-
ing research questions will be addressed.

• In what ways do video representations give insight into the relations between the
researcher and the children?
• What kind of challenges does the researcher confront during the research process?
Method
The data consist of 32 hours of video recordings gathered during a five-month period, with two groups of children in one preschool in Iceland; a total of 46 children. In one of the group there were 20 children, aged one- to two-years-old. In the other group there were 26 children, aged two- to three-years-old. Two educators usually worked with each of the groups during the play sessions. Informed consent was acquired from the municipal authorities, the preschool principal, the preschool educators, the children, and their parents. All the parents agreed on behalf of their children.

The video recordings were carried out during the children’s free play sessions, which are, to a certain extent, child-initiated in the preschool context. The play session lasted about one hour in the morning. Emphasis was placed on sitting near the children and responding to their initiatives, without taking a direct part in the work. A small handheld camera was used to follow the children’s movements and play. To capture children’s perspectives, children’s actions were in the forefront of the video observations and the educators in the background.

At the beginning an overview of the children’s actions in different areas of the play-rooms were captured. Gradually, the focus shifted to recording children’s actions in particular areas in the playrooms, or following a child’s actions during the play session.

During the research process, both before the video recording started as well as during the video observations, field notes were written about children’s interaction and the context of the video recordings, as well as the researcher’s reflections on the issue under study.

Context of the study
Both groups had four similar playrooms: two bigger rooms and two smaller ones. When children were playing one educator was usually present in the bigger playroom. When the children were playing in the small playrooms the researcher was the only adult present. In the bigger playrooms there was a home corner where the children had access to diverse play materials such as household equipment and child-height furniture. Toys and books were also stored at children’s height, while some other materials were stored on high shelves. There were adult height tables and high chairs for the younger group of children. Some of the toys, such as puzzles and blocks, were kept out of reach of the younger children, and the educators placed these on big tables for the children.

The children in the older group were invited to play with a particular material by the educators or the children themselves requested to play with certain toys. The educators often controlled the number of children playing in each play area.

Data analyses
When video recordings are used it is important to start analysing the data simultaneously with the data gathering, while the observations are still fresh (Flewitt 2006; Pálmarásdóttir and Einarsdóttir 2012). Thus, the construction of knowledge occurs on all stages during the research process.

The focus of the analysing process was on patterns and themes in children’s communication and the meaning and influences of their expressions that were directed towards the adults in the playrooms. Exploring the context of the children’s
communication when they directed their expression towards the researcher was also considered important.

Thematic analysis was used in the organisation of the data and the analysis to identify and describe patterns and themes within the data (Braun and Clarke 2006).

The formal analysis occurred in six reciprocated phases: (1) The first step was to view all the video data and organise it by rendering the films into excerpts that showed a process of children’s interaction in the play situations; (2) The excerpts were then transcribed in the software program InqScribe (2009), where the emphasis was on describing children’s actions, including gestures, orientation of the body, sounds, and words. Transcription of video recordings into a written text is a tedious and time-consuming process. It is important to be accurate in the transcriptions, and its organisation should be directly related to the focus and aims of the study (Bucholtz 2007; Flewitt 2006; Heikilä and Sahlström 2003). Both sound and picture can influence the value of the data; therefore, the quality of the recordings is crucial (Heath et al. 2010); (3) The transcripts were then reread with the research questions in mind, to identify incidences where children’s actions were directed towards the researcher and the researcher’s responses; (4) The examples where children’s expressions and the researcher’s responses became visible were then coded. The codes were listed and linked to the examples in order to ensure that the context of the expression was directed towards the researcher; (5) The video recordings regarding the coded examples were reviewed and the field notes written during the observation process were also reread for the same purpose. As the transcriptions can only be considered a reconstruction of what occurred in the reality it is important in the process of interpretation to repeatedly consider the video recordings and compare them with the transcriptions and possible interpretations (Heath et al. 2010; Os 2007; Pálmadóttir and Einarsdóttir 2012); and (6) Initial codes and related codes were categorised into themes.

In the analysis and presentation of the findings, emphasis was placed on the communication that took place in the video recordings, as confirmed by descriptions of the examples in the findings.

Findings

The focus of this article is on what ways the video representations gave insights into the relations between the researcher and the children and the challenges that emerged during the research process. Utilising video recordings provided various advantages in the study where the focus was on the bodily existence of the human being and the voice of the child. Although the interaction between the children in the play situations were in the forefront in the study the video recordings made it possible to examine the context and how the children directed their expression towards the researcher. Thus, the video technology provided opportunities to scrutinise children’s bodily expressions in the endeavour to understand their horizons and interpret their intentions.

The children in the study showed a number of different kinds of approaches in trying to come close to the researcher, and their purposes seemed to vary. Some children showed their interest in the video camera, while others seemed to be more interested in relating to the researcher, and some of the children did not show any obvious interest.

The researcher’s proximity to children’s life-worlds in play created important premises where intersubjective processes were implicated; these involved being sensitive
towards children’s perspectives and responding to their initiatives, while at the same time indicating the role as a researcher. The communication influenced the role of the researcher as well as children’s experience of the role.

Three main themes emerged and provided insights into the relations between the researcher and the children during the research process: (1) assent; (2) exploring the role of the researcher; and (3) involving the researcher in play.

During the research process the researcher was confronted by the children’s communication, which provided considerations and demanded reflections around the interpretation of the children’s expressions as well as the researcher’s own role and position.

In the analysis and presentation of the findings emphasis is placed on the communication that occurred in the video recordings and the field notes.

Assent

Interpreting children’s expression regarding their assent was challenging. Some of the younger children seemed to demonstrate with their bodies and words, especially at the beginning, that they did not want the researcher to be near. Other children were more engaged in creating a relationship and actively involved the researcher in their life-worlds.

The example below shows how a one-year-old girl, Anna, who had recently started preschool, indicated her view regarding the presence of the researcher, who was sitting on a couch and video recording the children’s actions during a play session.

Anna stands close to an educator that is supporting other children. Now Anna gazes at the researcher, and shakes her head saying ‘No, no, no!’ and looks anxiously towards the educator, who does not notice Anna’s expression. The researcher turns off the camera and changes her position by turning away from Anna.

Despite getting the consent from Anna’s parents to video record her actions, Anna seemed to express different views in the situation. Her expressions were interpreted as her not giving her assent to participate. Her perspective was considered to be more important to listen to than her parents’ consent. The ambiguity of Anna’s life-world seems to appear as she shows her competence to express her view, while at the same time reveals her vulnerability when her expression is overlooked and not responded to by the educator. Anna’s behaviour towards the researcher changed after a while, which pointed to the creation of a relationship over time and possibly Anna’s experience and understanding of the role of the researcher.

Exploring the role of the researcher

The children in both of the groups showed an attempt to understand and actively explore the role of the researcher. The children used different approaches in exploring the role and relating to the researcher. The younger children were more interested in creating a relationship while the older ones were occupied with exploring whether the researcher was guiding the rules that the educators emphasised in the group.

The example below is from the group of the younger children and shows how two girls approached the researcher.

In the beginning of the study, Alda and Vala, both under two years of age, started to call the researcher ‘grandmother’ and welcomed her gladly when she arrived in the morning.
The girls sought frequent contact by offering a book or a toy and wanting to sit in the researcher’s lap.

The girls’ communication and actions indicated that they experienced the researcher differently from the educators. They seemed to be exploring the role in an active and relational way by inviting the researcher to participate in their life-worlds. Their interest in building a relationship challenged the role of the researcher, who tried to respond to the girl’s actions and remain a researcher at the same time. Sometimes a situation like this involved putting the camera aside and reading a book to the children, and then trying to draw their attention towards other things or other children in the group and start video recording again. The close relational behaviour of the girls changed after a while and can be interpreted that the girls gradually began to understand the role of the researcher.

The educators in the group of the older children controlled various conditions for children’s play and created rules to follow, such as the number of children in each play area and how to use the environment and the toys. Some of the children were especially interested in exploring whether the researcher was upholding the rules and regulations put forward by the educators. In the next example two girls, Sara and Lena, and three boys, Adam, Ivar, and Gabriel, all three-years-old, were playing in one of the small playrooms. The researcher was the only adult in the room.

At the beginning Sara, Lena, and Gabriel were playing with cars and small figures on the floor. Adam and Ivar were walking around the room and started climbing up to a windowsill. They inspired the other children to participate, and after a while all except Lena, sat there. The children encouraged Lena to participate, and she accepted reluctantly. All of the children were now sitting in the windowsill, laughing and singing together. They moved along the sill and jumped down to the floor. They repeated these actions, alternating who was to be the first one in the row. The children once in a while glanced at the researcher, who continued the video recording. Adam asked if she wanted to join. She answered [with a questioning tone in her voice] that she would rather video record their actions. The children started to blow into the air, laughing while they continued their play.

Despite the educators’ rule about not sitting on the windowsills, the children challenged the rules with their actions. It seemed to be important for them to create an intersubjective space with all of the children in the playroom. At the same time the children seemed to be exploring the role of the researcher and tried, through playful expressions, to involve her in their play. The researcher responded by neither participating nor trying to bring the play to an end, which confirmed her position and role as interested and friendly but different from the other adults. The questioning tone in the researcher’s voice can be interpreted as her intention to give the children opportunity to dissent. The children seemed to acknowledge the response and expressed their enjoyment by laughing and blowing into the air and continuing the play. Thus, intersubjective processes were involved in the playful situation, and influenced and confirmed the children’s experience of the role of the researcher.

**Involving the researcher in play**

The children in both groups involved the researcher in their life-worlds when they seemed to experience that the educator’s responses were not in harmony with the children’s intentions or that their play lacked support. Play demands that children create a
mutual ground, which can be a complex task for young children. It could therefore be challenging to maintain the role of a researcher when children expressed that they needed an educator’s involvement in their play. The example below describes a situation where two boys were playing together and the responses of one of them when he seems to experience a threat from a peer who positions his body near and seems to want to enter the play.

Ari and Baldur, two years of age, are sitting near each other on the floor, playing with cars. Edward comes and leans down while he is looking at the boys. When Ari starts to gaze in a friendly way at Edward, Baldur hits Edward on the head. Both Baldur and Edward look at the researcher who is the nearest adult.

In this situation the researcher did not respond to the expression of the boys. According to the researcher’s perspective it did not seem appropriate to be involved in this play situation because an educator was in the playroom. She considered it as interfering in the pedagogical work and not in harmony with the intended role of the researcher in the study. It is controversial whether or not the response of the researcher in this situation was ethically ‘right’. However, children’s vulnerability is visible and indicates the importance of an adult’s closeness and support in play situations.

Challenging situations sometimes occurred in other instances where the researcher was alone with the children. Sometimes the children confronted the educators’ rules about the use of the toys and even tried ‘risky play’, as the example below illustrates.

Four girls, Hanna, Kristin, Johanna, and Linda, all two years of age, are playing in the home comer. Hanna is sitting at a small table playing with a computer. Linda is walking around in a dress and high heel shoes. Kristin sits in a doll pram and Johanna walks around with her. Kristin stands up and takes a doll bed, turns it down, and tries to use it as a slide. The girls gaze at Kristin, and Hanna says ‘This is not allowed.’ They walk towards Kristin, emphasising this perspective by putting their fists in a threatening way towards her face. Kristin gazes back into the girl’s faces, and then she climbs on the bed again and slides down. She happily encourages Johanna to join, and after a while Johanna tries to slide also. They rotate in their play, repeating when the other one is sliding ‘Take care not to fall down.’

None of the girls directed their attention towards the researcher; they all seemed to believe that they were competent to manage both their play as well as their disagreement. Another explanation could also be that they recognised the researcher role was not the same as the educators, and therefore did not expect any involvement. Kristin seemed to be determined to try out the doll bed as a slide despite her peers’ statements about the rules. Johanna desired to participate in Kristin’s play, regardless of the rules she defended at the beginning. Kristin and Johanna showed their awareness of the risk and were concerned about each other’s safety by emphasising this during their play. The girl’s actions resulted in the researcher’s ‘here and now’ decision about whether or not it was appropriate to interfere in their actions, knowing the risk of the play. In this situation the decision involved not stopping the play or the video recording, but instead to move the body closer towards the girls to be able to help if necessary.

Summary and discussion

This article focuses on the relationship between the researcher and preschool children and gives insights into the challenges that emerged during a research project. The study
was inspired by the phenomenological approach of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962), which emphasises the human bodily existence in the world. Children are considered to be active, bodily subjects engaged in the process of creating meaning within the physical and social world of the preschool. In this context the researcher is considered a part of and intertwined with the children’s life-worlds.

Data were mainly constructed by video recordings in two groups of one to three year old children, and the focus was on their communication and expression in play situations. Field notes were additionally written during the research project.

Although the focus in the research project was on the communication between the children, the video recordings made it possible to observe and re-observe children’s actions directed towards the researcher holding the camera. Thus, it became possible to explore the children’s expression and the communication between the children and the researcher. This is supported by other studies that emphasise the mutual relationship that occurs between the person who is looking and the person who is looked upon (Johansson and Lokken 2013; Pink 2009).

The findings reveal that the children’s intentions of directing their attention towards the researcher appeared in various ways and in different circumstances. In order to capture children’s perspectives the findings showed the importance of being physically and emotionally close to the children when video recording. Hence, the lived body was a central factor by which the children as well as the researcher appeared bodily in the situations that were under study, and thus their perspectives became visible.

Three main themes emerged during the research project and offered insights into the relations between the researcher and the children. The first theme involved children’s assent. The second comprised children’s exploration of the role of the researcher, and the third dealt with involving the researcher in the children’s play. The challenges that the researcher faced during the study involved decisions and reflections concerning the participation in the children’s life-world, and thus the construction of the role of the researcher became a lived reciprocal process.

Some of the participating children were active in creating relationships with the researcher, while other children expressed their disapproval of her presence. This is consistent with arguments in studies highlighting the bodily existence of the researcher and the importance of paying attention to children’s bodily expression in order to interpret their assent or dissent (Dockett et al. 2012; Lokken 2012). Children’s consent was therefore an important relational and ethical aspect during the study.

The researcher’s engagement and sensitivity in the children’s actions created various premises for the interactions and relations. The involvement in the children’s life-worlds in the play situations appeared to be a continual ethical encounter. The findings in the study agree with studies that have illustrated the importance of being close to children’s perspective and sensitive to their expression; thus, the video camera and the researcher are intertwined (Fleer 2014; Johansson and Lokken 2013; Pink 2009). Consequently, the knowledge is co-constructed at all stages of the research process.

The study situations where the children tried to involve the researcher in their play were often when they did not get sufficient support from the educators in their play. The ambiguity in the children’s life-worlds might appear as their being competent in expressing their intentions and desires, but at the same time their vulnerability emerged when their perspectives were not taken into account. According to the theory of Merleau-Ponty (1962), children engage with the environment and thus try to understand and make meaning out of their lived experiences. Other studies have also pointed out the importance of being aware of children’s vulnerability and their competence (Johansson
2011a; Kjørholt 2005), as well as whose voices are presented in the study (White 2011). Subsequently, the findings in the study reveal that the process of intersubjectivity, which in Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) theory is used to describe the ability of a human being to participate in another’s life-worlds, was an important aspect of the research and influenced all phases of the study.

The intention of this study is to describe the encounters between the children and the researcher, and acquire an understanding of the children’s perspectives on their lived experiences during a research process. The insights gained indicate that children’s participation in research and their influences are connected to the notion of adult participation in children’s life-worlds. The researcher’s horizon, including the researcher’s knowledge, experience, personality, and ideological stance, influences how the children’s expressions are listened to and interpreted. Hence, the construction of the child in research is connected to a theoretical perspective, including the methodology and philosophy upon which the study is based, as other scholars have argued (Redding-Jones 2005; Veresov 2014). Merleau-Ponty (1962) asserts that the experience and interpretation of others and others’ perception of us is always ambiguous, and this notion is an important indication when conducting research with young children. Moreover, it is essential to recognize that video recordings or any other research methods do not present the truth about children’s life-worlds in preschool, but they can offer important insights into their worlds, and the researcher is part of and influences that world.

Exploring the bodily communication of young preschool children calls for critical discussion of the concept of children’s perspectives, as well as the researcher’s role and participation in studies involving young children. Limitations of the study are therefore embedded in the methodology, including the interpretation of the children’s communication, which is, at the same time, intended to approach their expression and speak on their behalf.

References


