# Practicing Belonging in Kindergarten: Children's use of Places and Artefacts.

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## Introduction and background

This chapter investigates belonging as a concept within the social dimension of education for sustainability in Norwegian early childhood education. During the last decades, the Education for Sustainability, which is situated within environmental, social, cultural and economic contexts, has become a global movement (Davis & Elliott, 2014). There is consensus among todays researchers within the sustainability field, that in order to acknowledge all aspects of sustainability, the research and educational attention must expand from just focusing on nature and the environment towards a holistic perspective on sustainability that incorporates social, cultural and economic issues, and which encourages children's experiences related to international understanding, citizenship and social justice (Davis & Elliott, 2014; Eriksen, 2013; Hägglund & Johansson, 2014; Pramling Samuelsson & Park, 2017; Sageidet, 2015; Ärlemalm-Hagsér & Elliott, 2017).

Although international research within the field of education for sustainability has developed and increased during the last years, early childhood education as context for social aspects such as social justice and human rights, has received little attention (Hägglund & Johansson, 2014). In the Norwegian early childhood education context, the values and competencies related to education for sustainability as described by UNESCO, correspond well to the holistic process of development and learning outlined in the 2011[1] Norwegian curriculum document for kindergartens. Despite this, the social and cultural aspects of education for sustainability have not been recognised in the Norwegian research and education context (Eriksen, 2013, pp. 108-109). In Norway, as in Nordic and international research contexts, the research on education for sustainability in early childhood has been closely related to issues surrounding the environmental dimension, with an emphasis on the need to educate children to be environmentally responsible and to live sustainable lives (Boldermo & Ødegaard, 2019; Pramling Samuelsson & Park, 2017; Sageidet, 2014).

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[1] In the new 2017 Norwegian curriculum document for Kindergarten, the holistic process of development and learning has been continued, and the focus on sustainability has increased.

The social dimension of education for sustainability includes human rights, citizenship, social justice and equality, social participation and inclusion, and the building of stable and dynamic societies where basic human needs are fulfilled  (Dyment et al., 2013; Hammond, Hesterman, & Knaus, 2015; Hägglund & Johansson, 2014; Sageidet, 2015; Ärlemalm-Hagsér & Sundberg, 2016). In the space of the last decades, the diversity in the Norwegian as well as the Nordic and European population has increased as a result of globalization, increased mobility and forced migration. Within five years, from 2011 to 2016, the percentage of refugees residing in Europe has increased from 16% to 31% as result of an ongoing refugee crisis because of warfare in several parts of the world (Kraly & Abbasi Shavazi, 2018, p. 305). This makes immigration and diversity a global matter of sustainability which places issues of belonging highly on the agenda, as migrants' experiences of citizenship in their new communities may be related to their experiences of social identity and belonging to the new society (Craith, 2012; Dahlstedt, 2017). The importance of such experiences of belonging and of being socially included in a community, is becoming greater in an increasingly diverse society (Juutinen, 2018; Ødegaard E & Pramling Samuelsson, 2016).

As 'citizenship' is a concept that is frequently emphasized in todays context of education for sustainability (Reunamo & Suomela, 2013; Somerville & Williams, 2015; Ärlemalm-Hagsér & Davis, 2014), 'belonging' is closely related to the experiences of such citizenship (Juutinen, 2018; Nutbrown & Clough, 2009). However, migrant children may encounter challenges in experiencing belonging in early childhood education contexts, due to language differences, differences in interaction-patterns, and also different sociocultural values between home and kindergarten (Stratigos, Bradley, & Sumsion, 2014, p. 175). Children and youth with an immigrant background can long for belonging to a socially accepted and desired social identity, and they can strive to be accepted or included in peer groups of the majority culture (Kalkman & Clark, 2017; Skattebol, 2006; Steen-Olsen, 2013). Consciously or subconsciously, the migrant child can be aware of the risk of being stigmatised as the 'outsider' looking into a community to which they do not belong (Kalkman & Clark, 2017, p. 310). Such experiencing exclusion may lead to marginalisation and create foundation for inequality. To maintain a social sustainable society for all, migrant children's experiences of belonging is becoming increasingly important and thus needs to be investigated further (Boldermo & Ødegaard, 2019; Juutinen, 2018, pp. 17-25).

On these premises, and in order to explore how children from different backgrounds and upbringings experience, negotiate and practice belonging in kindergarten, the following research question was formulated: How can children's use of places and artefacts in kindergarten, be understood as materially mediated manifestations of belonging? In order to answer this research question, a fieldwork in a multicultural kindergarten was conducted, and the findings were analyzed within a cultural-historical framework.

**Theoretical framework**

Research in early childhood education often focus strongly on children's social relations, but also the children's relations to materiality; artefacts, toys and places, could be investigated in order to widen the perspective on children`s negotiations and practices of belonging in kindergarten (Juutinen, 2018, p. 40). In this study, the operationalizations of the concept of belonging imply that belonging is regarded as a process that happens in places, and through the use of cultural artefacts. Place is conceptualised as relational and in constant motion, constituted through stories and narratives, and thus alternative narratives of who we are in our places can emerge (Duhn, 2012; Massey, 2005; Somerville, 2010).

The term artefact refers to cultural resources such as objects and tools, that are created and taken into use by humans, and by that is related to human activity and meaning making. The artefacts that are made available for the children in the kindergarten thus facilitates their cultural formation (Ødegaard E, 2012, pp. 94-95). The children's narratives and stories are in this study regarded as 'social artefacts' that tell as much about the society and culture, as they do about the individual child (Riessman, 2017, p. 256). A theoretical framework that corresponds with such a holistic and relational approach can be found in the cultural-historical framework as it takes social interaction, cultural and material conditions and historical development into consideration. Research with children within such a framework includes the children as individuals and as participants in societal collectives. To understand children's perspectives, the focus must be on their activities in their everyday lives, and as researcher one must separate between the various institutional activity settings in which the activities take place (Hedegaard, 2008a). The data constructions in this study were developed drawing on Mariane Hedegaard's interpretations and development of Vygotskij's perspectives on human development (Hedegaard, 2008a, 2009, 2011, 2012), Ditte Winther-Lindqvist's (2011) conceptualisations of motive development related to children's social identity and belonging

in peer groups, and Seth Chaiklin's (2011) holistic perspectives on the relationships among motives, development, action and societal practice.

**Method and analysis**

The basis for the study is eight weeks of fieldwork conducted during two periods, autumn and spring, in a large Norwegian multicultural kindergarten with 70-80 children and 20-22 employees; teachers and assistants. Many of the children in the kindergarten had parents with a history of migration for various reasons. The use of the term 'migrant child/children' in this study, implicates that one or both of the child's/children's parents were born and raised outside of Norway.

Initially, the researcher applied a strategy inspired by Gulløv and Højlund (2003), which implicated to follow the children as they moved between places and activity settings, and participated in various activities. Based on an understanding that children's activities always have a societal dimension (Chaiklin, 2011), the intention was to identify which places and artefacts that was actively taken into use by the children, and to interpret the use and the activity from a relational perspective within a societal dimension.

The research project was registered and approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data[2]. Children in Norwegian kindergartens have the right to participate according to their ages and abilities, and their views and proposals shall be recognised according to their age and maturity level (*Framework Plan for Kindergartens. Content and Tasks.*, 2017). This applies also when research is being conducted in kindergartens. As 29 children, aged between 2-5 years old, were registred as participants due to their parents' concent, the real participants in the study were the children who in addition to this, were attending the kindergarten on the days of the data collection, and who themselves wanted to participate on a day to day basis. In practice, this was accomplished by that the researcher only followed children that verbally or by body language or gestures invited her in, and by that photos and recordings of children were taken exclusively with their consent. Such strategy is associated with the approach called "Deep hanging out" (Powell & Somerville, 2018), which includes that the researcher in addition to being open and curious, is patiently awaiting something interesting to emerge. Following such approach, the researcher should know when to be involved and when to keep

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[2] This means that the data collection and retention, as well as the participants' anonymity, have been safeguarded in accordance with the applicable regulations. The Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences, Humanities, Law and Theology (*Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences, Humanities, Law and Theology*, 2016) states that researchers who involve children in their research have a particular responsibility to protect the participants in the study.

distance, to wait to be invited, and to know when she has been included or excluded by the children (Powell & Somerville, 2018, p. 12). As a consequense of conducting the fieldwork within such approach, the number of participating children, and photos and recordings of children, were limited.

The fieldwork were conducted two or three days a week, inside and outdoors, during children's free play, or during the children's participation in activity settings and activities, lead by the educators, or initiated by the children themselves. Such activities varied from nature excursions, digging for worms, carpentring, football-playing and bicycle-riding outdoors, to inside circle-time, physics experiments, seasonal projects, playing hide and seek, drawing, listening and dancing to music, and storytelling. The collected amount of data comprised photographs, videorecordings and the researcher's handwritten fieldnotes which included unstructured observations, children's utterances and stories, and the researcher's own common sense interpretations (Hedegaard, 2008b).

The analysis was conducted in steps. First, the photos and recordings were reviewed and systematisized and the content were interpreted on a common sense level. Secondly, the handwritten fieldnotes were re-written as documents on the computer. In the third step, in order to interprete the data on a situated practice level, the photos and recordings and the approximately 50 pages of re-written fieldnotes were explored, with an aim to search for conceptual patterns (Hedegaard, 2008b, pp. 58-60). In order to try to recognize the children's motives, descriptions of how the children approached and participated in the activity settings, and their attitudes like engagement, disengagement, enthusiasm or resentment were especially looked into (Winther-Lindqvist, 2011). The reading of Skattebol (2006)'s descriptions of children's embodiment into roles, and Winther-Lindqvist (2011); (2013)'s theorising of how children's wanting for belonging can be expressed in group settings influenced the interpretations in this step of the analysis.

Over 300 photos were taken during the fieldwork. A large proportion were of places and artefacts. As it turned out, six children appeared more often on the photos, and were referred to in the fieldnotes, than other children. These were children that had showed great interest in spending time together with the researcher during the fieldwork. As a forth step of the analysis, the fieldnotes and the photos[3] that included these six children and also their places,

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[3] The video recordings were not analyzed in Nvivo, due to technical issues

activity settings and artefacts, were analyzed by using Nvivo, a computer program for analyzing qualitative data. To capture manifestations of belonging, 24 different categories were compiled, inspired by Wastell and Degotardi (2017, pp. 42-44)'s components of belonging. The 24 categories included among other 'inclusion' and 'exclusion', 'being suitable', 'shared interests', children's relationships with peers and educators, and children's places, artefacts and belongings. A total of 81 photos were analyzed, together with the fieldnotes.

Four of the six children often seemed to be on the outside of the peer community, in various ways. One girl seemed to actively choose to play by herself, while another girl were more openly excluded by her desired playmates. Three of these four children had migrant background, including a young boy 'Mike', whose real name is not disclosed. 'Mike' caught the researcher's interest already during the first days of the fieldwork. He was new in the kindergarten, and the researcher interpreted his claim of not having any friends there, as an expression of not experiencing belonging there. Perhaps as a consequense of this, 'Mike' seemed interested to spending time together with the researcher. During the data analysis, it turned out that the amount of data related to 'Mike' was more consistent over both periods of the fieldwork, than the data related to the other five children, probably because he spent more time together with the researcher. Because of his background as new in the kindergarten and in Norway, his case and his voice was perceived as especially interesting in order to investigate the project's research question.

When describing an individual child as a single case, the researcher's focus is directed on the aspects of the child that are relevant to the research questions posed in the study (Yin, 2014). Garvis, Ødegaard, and Lemon (2015, pp. 22-24) referred to a 'narrative way of knowing', which is about the researcher trying to capture the variety of local practices and experiences, and contextualize the situations in which the children live and their identities are shaped. Drawing on Garvis et al. (2015) and such a 'narrative way of knowing', the case 'Mike' was created within a narrative approach. In order to re-tell the content of the data concerning 'Mike', the researcher narrated selected parts of it into written small stories (Georgakopoulou, 2006). The small stories were created on the basis of the photos, and of the fieldnotes which included unstructured observations, dialogues, and 'Mike's utterances and stories. His stories were perceived as shared cultural tools rather than just originated from within himself (May, 2013, pp. 101-102), and when analyzing them, the researcher focused on interpreting the

content and the intra- and interpersonal function of the story (Engel, 2005, pp. 213-214). Such kind of narrativization of the data, which is the researcher's way to construct and thus bring the data come to life, assumes some point of view, and the interpretations of the data material depend on the researcher who are interpreting it (Juutinen, 2018; Riessman, 1993). The narrativization of the data in this study are thus the researcher's voice, based on the selection of parts of the data that appeared as especially relevant in order to create 'Mike's case, and to answer the research question.

**Mike**

> *Mike comes to the kindergarten together with his mother, and he does not want her to go. After he has spent a long time on his mother's lap in the wardrobe, a teacher helps him to say goodbye to his mother and let her leave.*
> *Mike tells me that he has no friends in the kindergarten. Inside the music room, he plays hip hop music on the CD player and begins to jump and dance to the rhythm, all by himself.*

Mike was quite new to the kindergarten. As the youngest in his family, with two older brothers, he was born on the run, fleeing from acts of war and conflict in South Asia. The researcher's observations during the first period of the fieldwork confirmed the content Mike's utterance: the kindergarten seemed to be a place in which Mike did not have any friends. Even if there were no observations of Mike being actively excluded, Mike was often observed being by himself. He wandered from one activity setting to another with a non-smiling, almost sad facial expression. Occasionally, he would be busy with some kind of toy or artefact just briefly. The one thing by which Mike seemed to be motivated during the first period of the fieldwork was the CD player in the music room. He often asked to listen to hip hop music, and he would dance and jump to the rhythm.

On one occasion while he was listening and dancing to the music, several other children came in and started to dance as well, demanding different songs. Mike stopped his dancing and began to operate the CD-player, changing the music, finding new songs to play and adjusting the sound level, however he did not join the other children in their dancing and laughing around.

In the next period of the fieldwork some months later, the situation seemed to have changed. Although Mike still occasionally wandered around alone between activity settings, his

reluctance to attend the kindergarten seemed to have subsided. He was no longer sitting on his mother's lap in the mornings, and when his parents left, everything seemed to go smoothly. On several occasions, he was observed participating enthusiastically together with his peers in the activities that were provided within the kindergarten's practices such as circle time, playing hide-and-seek, or carpentering with hammer and nails. On other occasions, he played alone by himself, constructing with bricks or taking a role as "shop owner" writing receipts and lists. Outdoors, Mike spent a lot of time on the football pitch. The children in the kindergarten often brought their own belongings to the kindergarten, such as stuffed animals, books or toys. Mike brought his football.

> *Mike often brings his football to the kindergarten. He is familiar with the names of several famous football players. Ronaldo is not the best, Neymar is, according to Mike, and he tells me with shiny eyes that he has seen both Manchester United and Arsenal in real life. When he gets a bit older, Mike explains, he will start playing football for the local football team, which plays in the elite series and of which he is a big fan.*

Mike gave the impression of being very motivated to play football and to talk about football playing and football players. He strongly disagreed with the researcher favouring Ronaldo as the world's best football player. If someone was playing football at the pitch, he would be there, especially if some of the teachers or assistants were participating. He often asked whether he could wear his football shorts not only when he was inside, but also when he was outdoors. He was happy to be allowed to wear them over his pants and even over his rain trousers or winter clothes if it was raining or cold outside. Mike played football in a manner that was a bit different from that of the other children, he was initiative and he seemed to have talent as well. He was fast on the pitch, and he tried to dribble and trick with the ball. He somewhat embodied the role of 'football player' in the way he moved and turned quickly, dribbled and tricked, and gesticulated on the pitch.

In conversations, Mike often spoke about his brothers. They were older than him and had already started school, and Mike would often refere to what they had said or done, or about their football aspirations and what kind of mobile phones or camera they had. When Mike was explaining his knowledge of football and football-playing, or other things, e.g., technical details related to the use of the CD player, the tablet or the action camera, or arguing about

something about which he knew the facts, he would often emphasize his knowledge using his brothers as truth witnesses.

> *Mike and Lea are discussing what it might be like to be in prison. Mike tells Lea that according to his older brother, a person could get a real beating in prison. Mike illustrates it to Lea by holding his hands in front of his throat with a dramatic expression on his face. Lea gives him a sceptical glance, saying that she does not believe it. But Mike argues eagerly and definitely that this is true because it is what his big brother told him. He further said that if someone were really unlucky, that person could end up in prison for the rest of his life.*

Mike showed great interest in the researcher's action camera and tablet that were used in the fieldwork. He often asked to use or to borrow the action camera in particular, which he favoured. He liked to take photographs, but he was not that interested in discussing the content of the photographs: neither the ones he himself had taken nor those made by the researcher. What was noticeable in an analysis of the photographs after the fieldwork had ended was Mike`s clothing. The outfits he wore most often seemed to include caps or other headgear regardless of whether he was inside or outdoors. He also frequently wore football shorts and T-shirts or sweaters with football logos or the surnames or numbers of well-known football players.

> *One of the last days of the fieldwork, Mike passes me in the wardrobe, running barefoot and wearing T-shirt and football shorts. As he passes me he smiles over his shoulder, saying: Look! Ronaldo!*
> *Before I can ask what he means, he runs towards the play rooms and out of my sight.*
> *It doesn`t hit me until weeks later, as I explore the photos from this day and realize that the T-shirt he was wearing had number 7 on his back; Cristiano Ronaldo's number.*

**Discussion**

Drawing on Riessman (2017), Mike's claim during the first period of the fieldwork that he did not have any friends in the kindergarten is understood as an utterance that expressed his current (at the time) experience of not belonging in the kindergarten (pp. 256-257). When children start to attend institutions like kindergarten, this can be their first experience of 'living across institutions' and of being part of a community outside their families (Hedegaard, 2009, p. 77). Starting such 'living across institutions', an important task for many

children is to find their place in the new social environment, and to belong to a social group (Winther-Lindqvist, 2011, p. 128). The social circumstances of Mike's being 'new' in kindergarten and his seeming lack of motivation with respect to the material and physical surroundings as he wandered alone between places and activity settings confirmed the researcher's impression that he had not found his place in the social environment, and he did not belong.

One major development in Mike's everyday life in the kindergarten that was changed between the first and the second period of the fieldwork, was his way of attending the kindergarten. Children's motivation can be identified through their attitudes such as enthusiasm, engagement, resentment and disengagement when approaching and participating in activities (Winther-Lindqvist, 2011, p. 121). Mike's attitudes during the first period of the fieldwork is described as being characterised by disengagement because of his reluctance to be left in the kindergarten, his frequent wandering alone between activity settings instead of participating actively, and his sad facial expression. His motivation for participating in the activities facilitated by the kindergarten seemed changed in the next period of the fieldwork, when his attitude to a larger extent was characterised by enthusiasm and engagement as he came up with suggestions and ideas in playing, in carpentring with hammer and nails, and on the football pitch. How his social relationships with the other children in the kindergarten had developed between the first and second periods of the fieldwork was difficult to discern though. He still wandered alone between activity settings, or played shop alone as "shop-owner". However he was also observed laughing and running and being together with the other children both inside and outdoors, and his initiative and engagement on the football pitch was something that was different from the earlier period.

When 'living across institutions' like home and kindergarten, the child not only adjusts to the possibilities and demands of the institutions (home and kindergarten) but he also contributes to and influences the same possibilities and demands (Hedegaard, 2011, p. 132). Mike's motives for playing football, his embodiment of a football player through his clothing and movements on the football pitch, and his frequent references to his older brothers could be understood as related to his competencies and experiences, and to the possibilities for his realising his motives, thus influencing the frame of institutional practices in the kindergarten.

Mike's stories of having seen both Manchester United and Arsenal 'in real life', and about being a future football player on the local football team, could be explained as related to the

social and cultural context he was embedded in at that time (May, 2013, p. 103). In Norway, football playing and discussions and predictions about how the local football teams will perform in the elite series permeate the local culture discourse during spring and summer, perhaps especially in communities in which football teams are located and matches are played. The fact that the kindergarten's outdoor materiality included a football pitch, seemed to motivate Mike, in particular, to the activity of playing football. The football pitch, here perceived as Mike's place, is interpreted as important to his stories of being a future football player, thus who he could be, on that particular place.

The use of material artefacts, like Mike's football, and also his football clothes, can help signify an identity (May, 2013, pp. 145-146). Allowing the children to bring their own belongings, the kindergarten's materiality included Mike's football, and his action of bringing the football to the kindergarten is understood as part of a meaningful practice and as an activity within a societal dimension (Chaiklin, 2011, p. 215). From a societal perspective, the football is an artefact that conveys relation and access to a local as well as a global community of football players and supporters. Mike's bringing the football and the initiating of football playing, his way of dressing and his techniques of embodiment on the football pitch can be perceived as his tools for practicing belonging and framing himself as being suitable and compatible within the local identity discourse. Such issues of embodiment and performance related to negotiations of belonging and being suitable have been discussed both in the Australian early childhood context by Skattebol (2006), who showed how a migrant boy, 'Kyle', used techniques of embodiment as tools to negotiate belonging to a specific desired community, and also in the Norwegian early childhood context by Kalkman and Clark (2017), who has actualized the issue of migrant children's awareness of being unsuitable because of appearance, clothes and ways of behaving. Mike's practice of framing himself as a proper football player and supporter through his stories, his football and football clothes, and his embodiment on the football pitch, is interpreted as him being motivated by a wanting for a specific social identity and a making of claim for belonging to a local and global football community.

**Concluding remarks**

In this study, belonging as a relational phenomenon was investigated in order to explore and widen the perspective on how children's use of places and artefacts in kindergarten, could be understood as materially mediated manifestations of belonging within the context of early

childhood education for sustainability. Through analysis and discussion, the migrant child Mike's use of the football and the football pitch was interpreted as being his tools to negotiate a desired social identity as a proper football player and supporter, and thus to practice his claim for belonging to a local and global football community.

The chapter was introduced by emphasizing the importance of developing new knowledge related to the social dimension of education for sustainability in early childhood education, and migrant children's experiences of social identity and belonging. As outlined in the introduction, experiencing belonging is closely related to concepts that are emphasized in todays context of education for social sustainability, namely 'citizenship' and 'global citizenship'. In order to perceive oneself as a significant member and citizen in the kindergarten community, or in the local society, or even in the global society worldwide, the experience of belonging and of being socially included is crucial.

The process of researching children's use of places and cultural artefacts has shown that there is a need for more knowledge of migrant children's social and cultural belonging. Answering the research question, the chapter aims to contribute to a body of research within early childhood education for sustainability that acknowledges how migrant children's wanting for social identity and belonging can be facilitated in early childhood education. As children's social worlds can be made sustainable through the experiences of having significance in social communities (Ødegaard E & Pramling Samuelsson, 2016, p. 60) children's practices of belonging and negotiations to be suitable and compatible within the majority culture, are important issues to be further investigated within the frame of education for sustainability.

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