

She's the Lion King!

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Abstract

In this autobiographical narrative inquiry, which is framed within the three-dimensional space of temporality, sociality and place, the author takes us back to her earliest memories of being a child – and of being a teacher – in kindergarten. Parallel to retelling these memories, the author reflects on how the kindergarten as an institution has developed in Norway, and on what belonging to kindergarten can imply for children as well as for teachers.

Through the unpacking and analysis of critical events based on memories and turning points, the author focuses on the development of her own professional identity.

Keywords

narrative inquiry – kindergarten – professional identity – children – place

1 Introduction

I am a kindergarten teacher, a special needs teacher and a teacher educator. Through looking in retrospect at my years of working as a teacher in kindergarten, I have realized how a turning point early in my career played a role in my development of a professional identity as a teacher and educator.

This chapter is based on the unpacking and analysis of a personal story of being a teacher in kindergarten. Rather than 'research question', narrative researcher Jean Clandinin used the concept of 'research puzzle' (Clandinin, 2013), which indicates that the process of thinking narratively about one's own experiences is different, and thus offers different entrances to knowledge, from other methodologies.

My overall research puzzle is shaped by several stories of being teacher in kindergarten. I have chosen to tell and unpack one story to analyze how this experience contributed to developing my identity as a teacher and, later, a special needs teacher. Clandinin (2015) observed that a teacher's personal practical

knowledge is found in her previous experiences, in her body and mind, and in her future plans and actions. Given this, my early experiences as a kindergarten teacher contributed to shaping my personal practical knowledge, incorporating it into my body and mind as something that affected my thoughts and actions in future contexts (Clandinin, 2015; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996).

2 Narrative Beginnings: Being a Child and a Teacher in Kindergarten

As this autobiographical narrative inquiry of mine focuses on the development of my professional identity, I will start by looking into the past. Clandinin (2013) stated that a narrative inquirer must strive to engage in his or her own narrative beginnings to understand who he or she is (and is going to be) in relation to particular phenomena. The obvious pivotal phenomenon in my professional career is the kindergarten. All my education at higher levels – bachelor's, master's degree, and PhD – is connected either to children in kindergarten or to teaching in kindergarten. The same goes for almost all my years as an employee. Still, it had to start somewhere, and my first encounter with kindergarten as a place and as an institution was not as a teacher, but as a child.

As a child, I attended kindergarten on a regular basis when I was five to six years old. I was not at all happy to be in the kindergarten. I felt abandoned and misplaced. One memory stands out, and I do not know whether it was part of a routine or just a one-time happening: after lunch, we children were sent outdoors to play until our parents came to pick us up. Before we could enter the playground, the teacher gathered us on the stairs, where we were supposed to sit close together with folded hands, singing the farewell song “Ha takk o Gud for dagen” (Thank you, God, for this day). I strongly remember the anxious feeling in my chest and tummy while singing this song, waiting to be picked up and taken home to family and friends.

After leaving the kindergarten at the age of seven to start school and an educational course that would last for many years, I do not remember ever having thought about or reflected upon anything concerning kindergarten, neither as a place nor as an institution, until I somewhat randomly signed up for the education to become a kindergarten teacher. Originally, I wanted to be a librarian. However, at that time, the only possibility for me to attend the librarian study program required moving to the capital, 100 miles south of where I was born and raised. I really did not feel comfortable with that idea, especially since none of my friends were moving in that direction. Then, as a friend of mine told me that she would be moving some 70 miles north of home

to begin teacher education, I joined her. I did not actually reflect on 'becoming a teacher' until several months into the study. This hesitant and distancing attitude (as well as doubt) followed me throughout my years of study to become a teacher in kindergarten.

Later, when I was a young, newly qualified, and newly hired teacher in kindergarten, the responsibility, and the expectations that I should already assume an expert role felt rather uncomfortable. The kindergarten at which I worked was a large, urban, public kindergarten. Due to its central location, children from all parts of the city attended this kindergarten. Thus, there was a great diversity in the families' backgrounds and social conditions. Attending meetings with child welfare workers, youth psychiatrists, speech therapists and psychologists became part of the routine. It was time consuming and overwhelming.

3 Wondering about My Beginnings

The kindergarten as an institution and as a place has been (and still is) the common denominator associated with my professional life. When I attended kindergarten as a child at the age of five, this was quite unusual; in 1975, only about 2.8% of Norwegian children attended kindergarten (Statistics Norway, 2022). Historically, the Norwegian kindergarten's main idea was based on Fröbel's thinking about raising young children in freedom and democracy, and where play should have a fundamental role. In 1975 came the first kindergarten act, and the purpose of this law was to ensure children's opportunities for development and activity in close understanding and cooperation with the children's homes. Further, this law required that leaders of staff should be educated as preschool teachers.

During my first years of working as a teacher, several political changes impacted the kindergarten as an institution, including getting its own curriculum in 1996. In the early 1990s, when I started working as a kindergarten teacher, about 35% of all children under school age attended kindergarten; this increased to almost 60% in 1995 (Statistics Norway, 2022). I was still working in the kindergarten as a special needs teacher in 2006, which was the year when the Norwegian kindergarten as an institution was politically transferred from the Ministry of Children and Family Affairs to the Ministry of Education. This transfer implied that the kindergarten as an institution became part of the Norwegian educational system. During the last two years before I left the kindergarten as a workplace, two additional important changes took place within the sector. One change was that, from 2009, attending kindergarten became a statutory right. The second change

occurred the following year, when a new mission statement, based on the same values as those of primary school, was adopted for kindergartens in 2010 (NOU, 2010, p. 8).

Today it has been 13 years since I left teaching in kindergarten, and the kindergarten as a place and institution has changed and developed since then. During my first years of working as a kindergarten teacher, the kindergarten's mandate, according to the 1996 curriculum, was to safeguard children under the age of compulsory education and provide good opportunities for development within close cooperation with the children's parents. Furthermore, the kindergarten should help raise the children in accordance with basic Christian values. According to the current 2017 curriculum, the kindergarten's mandate has totally changed. The 2017 curriculum's core values state that childhood, in itself, has intrinsic value. Further, this curriculum states that kindergarten should work in partnership and agreement with children's homes to meet children's needs for care and play, and to promote learning and formative development as a basis for all-round development.

The verb *to raise*, which was employed several times in both the 1996 curriculum and the 2011 curriculum, is completely gone in the 2017 curriculum. Thus, expectations of the role of kindergarten teachers have undergone major changes.

4 **Becoming a Teacher**

My narrative beginnings reveal tensions in the forms of doubt, reluctance and lack of wellbeing connected both to being a child, student, and teacher in the kindergarten as an institution. Mello, Murphy and Clandinin (2016) see tensions as spaces with the potential for inquiry and as opportunities to explore 'what is happening here?' Presenting stories of her own narrative beginnings shaped into four temporal sections, Clandinin shares fragments from each section, and, in the section on her period of becoming a teacher, Clandinin writes: "Becoming a teacher. Teachers belong in schools. Leaving one world. Entering another" (Mello et al., 2016, p. 570).

To me, this fragment is perfectly meaningful, because it conveys something fundamental concerning human wellbeing in the process of transitions and taking on new roles. Drawing on this fragment of Clandinin (Mello et al., 2016, p. 570), it is relevant to explore what belonging to the kindergarten implies both for teachers and for the children who belong there. According to the Oxford Lexico UK Dictionary, the verb *to belong* can be defined as to "be the property of", "be a member of" or "be rightly placed in a specified position"

(Oxford Lexico UK Dictionary, n.d.). As the concept of belonging is manifold and has been examined thoroughly by several kindergarten researchers (Boldermo, 2018, 2019, 2020; Juutinen, 2018; Sadownik, 2018), the many various perceptions and interpretations of the concept of belonging are not the issue here. Rather, the dictionary's definition – to be a member of, or to be rightly placed in a specified position – is interesting to ponder.

Clearly, my narrative beginnings reveal both a lack of the experience or feeling of be[ing] a member of (as a five-year-old in kindergarten) and a lack of the feeling of [being] rightly placed in a current position (as a teacher in kindergarten). Today, 97% of all children three to five years old in Norway attend kindergarten (Statistics Norway, 2022), and are thus members of a kindergarten community. The Norwegian 2017 curriculum highlights the kindergarten's obligation to safeguard children's needs for, among other things, care, security and belonging and to promote values such as democracy and diversity. This curriculum also emphasizes the significance of children's belonging to their local communities. Despite this, it is impossible to say anything about whether children truly experience belonging to the kindergarten as a feeling or an experiential state (Boldermo, 2020; Sumsion et al., 2018).

As for today's kindergarten teachers, Gulbrandsen (2018) examined Norwegian kindergarten teachers' drop-out rates from the profession from a historical perspective. He found that the trend has changed from a relatively high drop-out rate up to 10–15 years ago to a surplus of teachers.¹ According to Gulbrandsen (2018), one main reason for this change – from escape from the profession to a surfeit of teachers – is that today's kindergarten teachers stay longer in the profession than they did before. This is caused by the fact that, among other reasons, kindergarten teachers have in recent years received far better salaries in addition to an increased recognition as compared to previously (Gulbrandsen, 2018). Thus, one might assume that today's Norwegian kindergarten teachers, in general, can experience a stronger feeling of 'be[ing] rightly placed' in their current position than perhaps kindergarten teachers did at the time when I started my career in the early 1990s.

Still, for my own sake, I didn't leave the kindergarten until after a total of 17 years of practice as a teacher and as a special needs teacher. Thus, I stayed in my profession for many years, through big changes in tasks and mandate and despite my beginnings as an unhappy kindergarten child, uncommitted student, and reluctant teacher. What happened?

Below, I tell a story from my early years as a teacher that I recognize, in retrospect, may have been a turning point for the development of my professional identity as a teacher.

5 The Story of Line

Line was five years old when I got to know her. She had no friends in the kindergarten and, specifically, the other girls her age steered away from her as best they could. Every daily routine – such as meals, going to the toilet, getting dressed, participating in circle time, or reading books – was troublesome in one way or another, and the noise and sounds as Line's intentions and wishes went against the intention of the situation caused stress and frustration for everyone taking part, and for Line in particular. The other girls seemed to misinterpret Line's intentions; they feared of her, they didn't include her in their role-play and they often complained and signaled discomfort in her presence.

Line was also an incredibly sweet, creative, playful, and physically active girl. She oriented herself towards where play, laughter and fun went on. When there was snowy weather, Line would be the first child to bring her ski equipment to kindergarten, exceedingly enthusiastic. It appeared as if sad episodes on the one day were completely forgotten the next. Line attended the kindergarten with an expectant smile, and she would eagerly shout out the names of the children and staff she met in the dressing area when she arrived. She absolutely loved everything that had something to do with music, movies, theatre, hats and costumes, fairy tales and stories. Although she was unable to sit still or physically near the other children when listening to stories or fairy tales, there was no doubt of her commitment and interest, even if she participated while rolling on the floor or jumping up and down on the mat or just sitting with her back to the group, laughing, looking at her own fingers and making joyful mumbling sounds.

One day, Line came to the kindergarten with a big smile, making sounds and singing something that I did not understand. It was as though she was acting something, and she made dramatic gestures and sounds. A little boy shouted: "She's the Lion King!" Thrilled, Line nodded eagerly and continued her acting. Her mother confirmed that they had been to the cinema and seen the movie several times, as Line was completely fascinated by it, all of it – the music, the dramatic events, and the lions. I had seen the movie myself, and, as I watched Line play out one scene from the movie after another, I realized that she had probably memorized the whole movie, even though she could not express it verbally or in 'normal' interaction with others. She just played it.

6 Unpacking and Analyzing the Story of Line

Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding and thinking with experience. Clandinin (2013) explains narrative inquiry as beginning and ending in the

midst of experience, and as people in relation studying people in relation. Further, she draws attention to the fact that the told stories of remembered experiences shift over time, place, and audience.

I have told the story of Line many times before to colleagues and to students. The way the story has been told by me has varied with time, place and audience as stated by Clandinin (2013). Very many years have passed since I was Line's teacher, and her whereabouts today I do not know. I suppose my perception of Line and her story has changed over the years, influenced by my own changing points of view, and depending on time and place. Estefan, Caine and Clandinin (2016) argued that, in a narrative inquiry, the stories of experience are understood within a context of place, temporality and sociality. A story of experience always happens *somewhere*. It is temporal in the way that it happens in the present, yet the experience influences the future: what is to come and how the experience is understood in retrospect. And, finally, experience is social, as it involves exchanges between a person's inner thoughts and feelings and his or her social interactions (Estefan et al., 2016).

In the process of unpacking and making sense of my story about Line – and this process includes making sense of my own narrative beginnings – it is natural to conceptualize it within the three-dimensional space (temporality, sociality, and place) described and outlined by Clandinin (2013), and Estefan, Caine and Clandinin (2016). The aspects of temporality, sociality, and place frame my narrative beginnings as well as the story of Line. In particular, the aspects of temporality and place are obvious. My narrative beginnings belong to the past, to another time and to other places, places that don't exist anymore. Taking into consideration the aspect of place – the specific, concrete, physical and topological boundaries of where the events took place (Clandinin, 2013, p. 41): both the kindergarten I attended as a five-year-old, and the kindergarten where I worked as a newly educated teacher and where Line's story unfolded, are forever gone and replaced with other surroundings. They have become new places, distant in time and place from me and my current presence.

The concept of place itself is part of the way we see, research, and write (Cresswell, 2015). What do my narrative beginnings and Line's story together tell us about the kindergarten as the place where Line's story unfolded, other than it was large and had an urban location and that this concrete urban location enabled close monitoring by school psychology services and such, as well as offering the possibility of enjoying outdoor activities, such as skiing? Cresswell suggests that, instead of asking what a place is like, one could, within a phenomenological approach, ask what makes the place a *place* (Cresswell, 2015, p. 38). Now, this is an autobiographical narrative inquiry, not a phenomenological study; however, such a suggestion opens new possibilities. As the

concept of place can be understood and constituted through various persons' different stories (Boldermo, 2019), alternative narratives of happenings (and of happenings told as narratives) can make one's perception of the place where the narrative happened also change in retrospect.

In retrospect, Line's story carried with it an opening, a turning point, a glimpse of something else that also happened.

When rereading the story and thereby revisiting the time and the place, trying to analyze 'what happened', the chronological order of the story told is worth pondering, as it reveals something about the narrator's perception of the kindergarten. The story as it has been told by me, the narrator, consists of three parts and has a chronological structure; first, the two parts presenting Line and her situation in the kindergarten and then the turning point starting with 'One day ...'.

In the story told, Line is presented in a way that first and foremost, describes the challenges, the difficulties, and the shortcomings. Line's incredible sweetness, creativity and playfulness come secondly. Rereading these parts of the story critically, one could get an impression of the kindergarten as the teacher's (and narrator's) institution rather than the teacher's and the child's common *place*.

Then, the story continues, 'one day' something unexpected happened in the kindergarten. Ødegaard and Økland (2015, p. 36) explain stories of 'turning points' as stories about unexpected happenings that challenge your preconceptions or make you think twice about a phenomenon. Further, Ødegaard and Økland (2015) state that such an experience of a 'turning point' also may inspire a wish to tell about it.

As mentioned earlier, I have already told the story of Line several times before. Although the story has been told by me in various ways, I have had the perception that the 'turning point' had something to do with Line and the movie "The Lion King". And it is true that, from that day, Line's playful enthusiasm for The Lion King inspired playful activities among the children in the group, resulting in recurring moments of community and fun in which the point of departure was the movie's intriguing storyline and fascinating characters. And this emerging community included Line. Her everyday life in kindergarten changed.

However, in this process of rereading and unpacking the story, I have realized that perhaps the unexpected happening was not caused directly by neither Line nor the movie. Rather, the unexpected was sparked by the attentive little boy who immediately *recognized* Line, shouting "She's the Lion King!"

In retrospect, trying once again to retell this story, I can see how the little boy's recognition allowed Line, the creative and playful child, to become visible

in my perception of her. Probably, this did not imply an immediate change or some sort of revelation. But it was an eye-opener, and this experience stayed with me, and it made my perception and understanding of the kindergarten as *a place* different than before it happened.

Obviously, Line was a child who received special aid due to the challenges she experienced, which were related to her (future) diagnosis. In retrospect, pondering this experience and my narrative beginnings, Clandinin's (2016) fragments emerge as relevant once again: "Becoming a teacher. ... Entering another world" (Mello et al., 2016, p. 570). Thinking within the dimension of sociality about my own thoughts and expectations and what I perceived as the expectations of colleagues, parents, and special educators in the process of entering the world of the kindergarten, the reality of becoming a teacher became quite different from what my three years of study had prepared me for. What I perceived as Line's shortcomings and difficulties overshadowed my ability to recognize Line as a playful and creative child in my care. Instead, still in retrospect, I wonder if I rather viewed her as a case. As these shortcomings and difficulties became a large part of what my and my colleagues discussions revolved around; finding solutions or effective measures to solve them unconsciously became part of what I perceived as my role as a teacher. Consequently, entering the kindergarten as another world (Mello et al., 2016, p. 570) became, for me, entering the kindergarten as an institution. Not as a common place, shared between the children and staff who belonged there. Norwegian kindergartens are, of course, institutions. But, for the children who attend and inhabit them, kindergartens are important and significant places that convey experiences of social relations and play, which again may generate senses of group belonging and community (Boldermo, 2020). To think with Cresswell (2015, p. 38); that is what make the kindergarten *a place*. Line was no exception; she, too, was a child entering the kindergarten every day with enthusiasm, eagerness and great expectations of play and community. Perhaps the change that the little boy shouting 'She's the Lion King!' triggered did not have much to do with Line. Rather, it caused a new understanding in me and thus of my professional development in becoming a teacher. The little boy's obvious recognition made me, too, recognize Line as what she was all about: not difficulties and shortcomings, but, like every other child, playing, having fun, and seeking community. And, for the children that were in my care to be able to do just that: play, have fun, and experience belonging and community; my perception of the kindergarten as *a place* had to be revisited and rethought. Such a rethinking did not happen all at once; the change in my mindset developed over years after this turning point early in my career. It led my professional interest in the direction of taking a master's degree in special

needs education, eventually becoming a special needs teacher in kindergarten. To return, once again, to Clandinin's fragment on becoming teacher and entering another world (Mello et al., 2016, p. 570), my entering the kindergarten as a special needs teacher many years later, thus differed considerably from my beginnings as the newly qualified teacher who met Line for the first time. Truly understanding that children, no matter what kinds of follow-up needs they may have, are first and foremost *children*, with the same fundamental need for experiencing belonging and community, as well as engaging in play and having fun as all children, has thus become the most important pillar of my present professional identity as a teacher educator as well as a researcher.

Currently, Norwegian kindergartens are exposed to an increasing demand to prepare children for school, to map children's skills and shortcomings, and to scrutinize potential defects in their development. It is probably done with the best of intentions, and I do not have the answers as to whether it is the right thing to do or not. I worry, however, that such practices come at the expense of the kindergarten as *a place*, which according to the value base described in the curriculum of 2017 should emphasize diversity and community and assert the intrinsic value of childhood and play.

As a teacher educator, and a researcher, I am concerned that the framework of what is considered normality in kindergarten should be as broad and as well-examined as possible and that, in our search for shortcomings, we do not lose sight of the creative, playful Lion King that exists within each individual child regardless of how he or she is located within or beyond the spectrum of 'normality'.

Note

- 1 In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, this situation has seemingly changed. The number of applicants for teacher education has decreased, and several kindergarten teachers have left the profession.

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