

Article

Social Sustainability through Children's Expressions of Belonging in Peer Communities

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to explore the social dimension of sustainable development through children's expressions of belonging in peer communities in preschool. Social sustainability and sustainable communities emphasize practices, human activity, and interactions that are equitable, inclusive, and sustainable, and preschool provides children with experiences of participation in collective groups and networks. Belonging to a community is an existential need and belonging, itself, is a relational phenomenon. Belonging is connected to power; the notion of "us" sets boundaries and creates a "them". Based on Yuval-Davis' analytical concepts and using video observation of children's (aged 3–5) free play, this article explores children's belonging in peer communities. This study contributes new knowledge in the field of social sustainability by illuminating communities of belonging built on closeness, conflict/negotiations, and joyfulness. Together, these elements embody experiences of importance to children's belonging. A common thread running through these communities is the relationship between the individual and the community.



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1. Introduction

The aim of this study is to explore the social dimension of sustainable development through children's expressions of belonging in peer communities in preschool. The focus of this study is on the politics of belonging [1] and the processes and structures for creating, defending, and extending community and belonging among children in Norwegian preschools. In Norway, 92% of all children aged 1–5 attend preschools and it is a full-time offer for every child, combining education and care [2]. Regardless of public or private ownerships, preschools receive the same amount of funding and are regulated by the same law [3] and framework plan [4] founded in the UN Convention on the Right of the Child [5]. These directives address that the Norwegian preschool shall be based on fundamental values such as respect for human dignity, charity, care, forgiveness, equality and solidarity.

This study is part of a larger international project, "Politics of belonging", supported by NordForsk (no. 85644), exploring how belonging is formed in early childhood settings. This study includes research teams from Finland, Sweden, Iceland, the Netherlands, and Norway.

This study views preschool as a society that produces various approaches in addition to structures and conditions for social sustainability. Preschool in Norway is known for being child centered and play based, seeing the child as a competent being having a right to influence the pedagogical content [6]. Collaboration with parents is essential. Here, the concept of politics of belonging [1] works to illustrate everyday practices of inclusion and exclusion among members of different communities in preschool. In the Norwegian framework plan for preschools, belonging is described as a value and a dimension of human being. Belonging is also an institutional condition woven into the collective character of preschools [4]. Being part of a community is assumed to lead to or be built upon belonging.

Social cohesion, inclusion, belonging, and identity are concepts frequently used to illustrate social sustainability [7]. The social aspect of sustainability is often overlooked, as research and discussions on sustainable development often focus on its environmental or economic aspects. ‘Social sustainability occurs when the formal and informal processes; systems; structures; and relationships actively support the capacity of current and future generations to create healthy and liveable communities [8]. Contemporary societies appear to lack inclusive practices, as young children’s self-understanding and future expectations often appear to be influenced by inequality and exclusion rather than by experiences of belonging and feeling at home [6,7].

Preschool is an institution built on diversity, as children come from various language groups and are rooted in many cultural, social, and religious backgrounds [9]. All children are diverse in one way or another and, as such, they have a right to belong regardless of their backgrounds and needs [4].

Previous Research

Literature in the field of inclusion has focused on geographical, educational, psychological, and sociological concepts of belonging, most often the latter two. While researchers have used various concepts and theoretical frames, many have focused on the emotional element of belonging [10,11].

Educational studies viewing belonging as a political issue even for young children are rare. Some studies take the educator’s perspective and pedagogical intentions as a point of departure [12]. Others focus on children’s perspectives and their emotional bonding with other individuals and communities [13,14]. Some studies illuminate how belonging is often taken for granted as a positive emotion and how processes of belonging are more of an intuitive practice than the result of educators’ conscious intention [9,14,15].

The existing literature illustrates that belonging is an indispensable part of life built on human interdependency [10,16]. Belonging is described as a deeply rooted human desire to connect to a significant situation, place, or community where one feels safe and at home [17].

Singer and de Haan [13], Hännikainen [18], and Janson [19] use the word “togetherness” to describe a feeling that arises when people do things together. These authors highlight the many ways in which children express togetherness through verbal and physical closeness. Mortlock [20] explores mealtime rituals and the ways in which children communicate togetherness while marking their position as other in relation to adults (see also Emilson and Johansson [21] and Johansson and Berthelsen, [22]). Throughout these studies, experiences of belonging commonly connote positive emotions. How power structures and value preferences (beyond emotional preferences) also may influence children’s sense of belonging has not been at the forefront of the research [14].

More recent research, however, approaches belonging as a political issue connected to diversity and participation. Taylor [23] shows that educators and children struggle with diversity and difference when encountering processes of inclusion and exclusion in everyday practices.

Children in preschool, for example, negotiate belonging in complex ways, and they appear to be aware of the relationship between diversity, power and belonging as they partake in struggles of identity, difference, and belonging [23,24]. Children maintain their belonging in powerful social positions based on gender and ethnicity, for example. It has been shown how children use skin color and gender as arguments for inclusion and exclusion. Language barriers, different values, and different patterns of interaction between the home and kindergarten can all be challenges to migrant children’s belonging [25,26]. Disabled children may also experience a range of barriers to belonging in Early Childhood Education (ECE), despite educators’ beliefs that their practices are inclusive [27].

The positions available to children, however, are negotiable, and children can develop tactics for resisting the ways in which they are positioned and excluded by their peers, thereby gradually gaining belonging and acceptance from the latter [24]. The role

of educators in such complex processes is essential. The education research literature, however, shows that educators lack for requisite knowledge and skills to identify the subtle processes of children's belonging, and, further, that they encounter challenges with small resources and unclear curricula and policies for inclusion [9,23,28]. The research addressing belonging and cultural diversity reveals that educators often attribute difference to culture as an inherent quality of it, and, they appear to be more aware of aspects of difference than of similarity in children's communities. Additionally, the educators seem unaware of the interplay of values and power relations in children's processes of belonging, as well as of their own roles in these processes [9,14,15,23,28]. This relational complexity needs to be taken into account by educators and researchers when understanding children's processes of belonging in preschool. Juutinen and Kess [28], for example, demonstrate that diversity and belonging are constructed in culturally diverse contexts, arguing that these issues must be approached from multiple perspectives, i.e., 'from personal to societal and from the past to the future. . . rooted in places, communities and cultures' [28] (p. 46 ellipses the authors' own).

This gap in the existing knowledge of the social, political, and cultural facets of belonging calls for approaches addressing belonging as a political question about borders and power. The present study answers this call: Based on Yuval-Davis' theory and analytical concepts and using video observations of children's (aged 3–5) play, it explores children's belonging in peer communities through the following research questions:

- How do children create and express peer communities during free play?
- What do the children gather around in these communities?
- How do these communities create boundaries, and what conditions do they set for children's belonging?

2. Theoretical Framework

Communities, belonging, and social sustainability are concepts of importance in this study. In the following, we present these concepts and how they are defined.

2.1. Social Sustainability

The term "social sustainability" refers to the social, cultural, and political issues affecting people's lives within and between nations and on Earth [29]. Sustainability, as Kemp [30] formulates it, is not only concerned with economic and ecological issues. Rather, it is, at its core, a moral and social matter, intricately connected to the values of justice and care and stretching into the future of humankind [30]. Political and social justice are, thus, interwoven in matters of global sustainability. The value perspective is taken up by Boldermo and Eriksen [7] who describe education for sustainability as 'a value-based approach for developing new understandings and practices that give better conditions for all children. By sustaining equity, future generations' ability to live together in diverse societies will be nourished' [7] (p. 1); see, also, [31–33].

The present study views social sustainability as related to practices [34] that offer all children, regardless of their social and cultural background and specific needs, various experiences of participation and belonging in communities and networks in preschool [7]. Social inclusion and sense of community and belonging constitute social sustainability [32]. Belonging is regarded as an existential need although expressed, negotiated, and interpreted differently in various times and contexts [1,35]. Education for sustainable development has often been based on normativity (the "right" things for children to learn) and harmony between human beings and the environment, rather than on a scrutiny of conflicts of values, power relations, and loss of privileges [32], see also [36–38]. It is important to uncover, explore, and challenge positions of power in researching belonging as part of social sustainability [32].

2.2. Communities

Communities refer to the constellations of which preschool children may be a part and in which they may experience varying degrees of familiarity and/or foreignness [39]. Communities are collective and often built on a shared sense of belonging, but can also involve struggles and exclusion. A community's norms and beliefs hold its members together. In the context of preschool, children's communities may be more or less durable and tight and have more or less explicit norms and values [40].

In preschool, communities are created, negotiated, changed, and dismissed in ongoing processes between children and adults. Social sustainability, structures, and space are crucial to defining communities and how people interact in them. Space is a combination of material and social factors which influence and are influenced by the members of a community [41].

The various communities created in preschool gather children around something, a kind of membership: the children act, relate, and own something together. Sometimes children struggle for membership, and power can be an influential condition for participation. They can gather around spontaneous projects with or without explicit goals or intentions as to how to perform. These communities can give children many occasions to participate in and experience various forms of belonging thereby offering opportunities for social sustainability. They can also bring about experiences of exclusion and alienation.

2.3. Belonging

Belonging is an important concept for social sustainability because it refers to social justice and children's right to be involved as members of various communities. Yuval-Davis [1] describes belonging in terms of feeling 'at home' (p. 10), referring to emotional bonds to places, contexts, practices, and communities where the individual feels safe and where there is space for identity development and hope for the future. However, people experience belonging differently and to different degrees of engagement [1]. Belonging is therefore not always a positive experience; it can also involve experiences such as shame, anger, and indignation.

In the context of preschool, this means that children (and educators) will have different experiences of belonging in relation to the diverse types of communities they are part of or are excluded from. Belonging can relate to places (physical and psychological) where children experience familiarity, safety, and hope, but can also bring about experiences of alienation. The kinds of belonging children might experience in close interactions in preschool are also contingent upon the social structures and power relations actualized at various levels of society.

Belonging is often taken for granted and becomes visible when questioned. Experiences of belonging are always related to inclusion or exclusion; either being inside or outside a community. Children's strategies to protect their communities often aim to assure them safety. Thus, while exclusion can be a strategy aiming for safety and stability, it can also undermine the children's experiences of the community as a safe place [42]. Processes of belonging are, however, not necessarily fixed in a certain pattern. Probyn [43] suggests that belonging is a constant movement—a never-ending human desire to belong which, in turn, places us outside, in a place of yearning. Belonging, therefore, is never a final destination.

2.4. Politics of Belonging

Some of the most difficult issues facing contemporary society involve questions and politics of belonging. Yuval-Davis's theory [1,42] serves as a point of departure for our understanding and analyses of the politics of belonging in preschool. This theory considers the emotional and structural aspects of belonging. It holds that belonging is a political phenomenon that works at the macro- and- micro-levels of society and unfolds in the intersections of social positions, emotional connections and value preferences, as well as in the spaces where power is at stake.

The theory is founded upon questions of who is a ‘stranger’ and who ‘does not belong’ [1] (p. 2). The theory is concerned with borders and the political work of identifying who is inside or outside a community, who has the power to decide this, and on what grounds someone is included or excluded. The political matter of the inclusion or exclusion of particular people, categories or groupings affects children’s (and educators’) everyday lives as well as their communities and the senses of belonging these may open for. The politics of belonging call attention to borders in preschool communities. The formation of borders involves ongoing negotiations about the inclusion and exclusion of specific people, groups and social categories [1,16,28,44,45]: ‘Processes of bordering always differentiate between us and them, those who are in and those who are out, those who are allowed to cross the borders and those who are not’ [42] (p. 7).

The idea of situated intersectionality is central to Yuval-Davis’s theory [1,42]. Situated intersectionality underlines how varying ways of seeing the world are constructed in—and between—social structures and categories, individual emotions, and individual and collective value preferences. These are intersectional phenomena because they constitute and are constituted by one another. None can exist without the others, yet none can be reduced to any other.

Intersectional analyses examine the unequal distribution of power and other resources in society [1]. An understanding of the politics of belonging in preschool (i.e., how belonging is performed and experienced there) must address the situated interdependence of knowledge and worldviews. It is necessary to acknowledge how belonging is constructed through children’s and educators’ various communities in preschool; in the various social positions available to them, in their emotional attachments (individual and collective) and in the values children enact in their communities. The distribution of power, hierarchical positions and groupings are important to consider in such analyses.

2.5. Situated Intersectionality

The concept of situated intersectionality [1] alludes to the intertwined relationships of the conditions influencing how belonging is experienced and enacted. From the perspective of intersectionality, belonging in preschool is to be understood against the background of three interrelated spectra; the participants’ social positions, their identifications and emotional connections to various communities, and the ethical and political values to which they relate [42].

2.5.1. Social Positions

Human beings belong to various categories that allow their members different opportunities, resources, affordances, influences, and positions in a community. In certain historical periods and in people’s everyday lives, some social categories, such as gender and age, can be more significant, while other categories, being a teacher, for example, may be of more local importance.

Social categories influence children’s communities and the opportunities and circumstances for belonging that may be available to children. Contemporary preschools are characterized by diversity. Children belong to different social categories, i.e., nations, social classes, age groups, and gender. They speak various languages and connect to different cultural backgrounds. Social categories impact upon children’s possibilities for creating community and belonging. Social positions can have significant meaning for children’s belonging as they influence the conditions for children’s access (or lack thereof) to these communities and the resources, affordances, and influences available for them.

In the context of preschool, social categories of influence could be concerned with being a competent playmate, having a specific outlook, speaking a certain language, needing special support, being part of a certain group of peers, etc. Such categories can open for (and hinder) children’s opportunities to belong.

2.5.2. Identification with and Emotional Connection to Various Communities

Identification refers to narratives, addressing questions like “who am I?” and “who are we?” [1]. Narratives are the stories people tell themselves and others about who they are [1] (p.14). Narratives often connect to individual and collective experiences of what it means to be part of a specific community and one’s preferences for such memberships. Narratives are expressed verbally, physically, and through the structures of all activities and ongoing interactions; in pedagogical goals and regulations, through preschool content and teachers’ intentions, rules and priorities for behavior.

Many narratives are constructed among children (and adults) in the everyday life of preschool. As members of the preschool community, children create traditions, rituals, and routines for how to interact, how to play, and what to do. These narratives touch upon identities of belonging and inclusion but also upon alienation and exclusion. They may have different meanings and carry different emotional loads for different children. They can be more or less stable and accepted depending on the context [1]. In their communities, the children negotiate, develop and extend their personal and collective narratives about who they are.

2.5.3. Ethical and Political Values to Which Children Relate

Members of a community gather around value systems, i.e., what they experience as preferable, valuable, and important. Value systems influence goals, expectations and intentions of the community and where and how the borders should be drawn. Values, whether intentionally or not, are communicated in everyday practices, rules and norms in play and other activities, thereby creating conditions for the kinds of communities and belongings possible in preschool. Values express and embody power and social positions. They can be more or less explicit and more or less subject to change.

Preschool is a place where values are communicated by both adults and children [46]. General values of the preschool community are expressed in terms of policy, of goals and rules for the community, as well as of who has the right to determine these and why. Values are communicated in everyday activities and in structures and preschool organization. Children as well as adults express values in their various communities. Children do so in and through play and the other activities they find valuable’. Children’s social, cultural, and religious backgrounds influence what values they prioritize. The educational commitment of Norwegian preschools is to be grounded in democratic values; diversity is a precondition and children have a right to experience belonging in the community [4].

3. Materials and Methods

To identify and explore children’s communities and belonging, within the framework of the broader NordForsk study, we observed approximately 400 interactions among children aged 3–6 years during playtime in three Norwegian preschools. For this study, we analyzed 134 interactions from one preschool with groups of children aged 4–5 years, focusing on interactions characterized by conflicts, negotiations and expressed border work. The interactions lasted from three to 31 min and consisted of groups of two to ten children gathering around some kind of activity. The children could either play by themselves, i.e., without the educator’s involvement, or eventually with the educator’s involvement. In our fieldwork, we followed the ethical guidelines of the *Norwegian Centre for Research Data*, considering parents’ and children’s consent in participating and being observed. Before beginning to observe the children’s interactions, we asked them for permission and were attentive to whether they expressed uncertainty or unwillingness to participate. In a few situations in which we were uncertain about the children’s consent, we refrained from or ended observation.

In our initial analyses, we aimed to determine the various communities in which the children were involved; the kinds of activities they were carrying out; and the goals they appeared to embrace. We addressed questions such as the following: What were the children doing, and what appeared to be important to them? Could we identify conflicts?

If so, what were they about? We tried to identify the border work, i.e., the prerequisites for the children to gain access (or not) to various communities, as well as the competencies, positions, values and norms that impacted or were used as strategies for membership. Who seemed to be inside or outside the community and why? What kind of negotiations took place in the children's interactions?

Our analyses employed a hermeneutic process, i.e., a "to and fro" reading of the data altering between data as a whole and its parts, between familiarity and analytic distance; and sought what was going on "between the lines" [47,48]. Our open reading of the data allowed themes related to children's communities to emerge. In a more detailed reading, we could identify qualitatively different communities according to the children's goals, activities and border work. In (re)reading our observations, we noted distinct communities that appeared to be built on different kinds of border work and varied aspects of the politics of belonging.

In order to deepen our analyses, we used Yuval-Davis's [1] concepts of intersectionality as tools for identifying communities and possibilities of belonging, as well as to frame a picture of the politics of belonging in the everyday practices of preschool. These concepts included social position, emotional preferences and identifications (narratives), and value preferences. We analyzed our data guided by questions such as, what kinds of positions appeared attractive to different children? Were there positions available to some children and not to others? What kind of identifications appeared in children's narratives around play and other activities and what values seemed desirable to them? Finally, we selected three of the communities we had identified to illustrate variations in the kinds of communities in which children are involved, along with the purposes of these communities and the conditions for belonging to them. The communities were defined by three themes: closeness, conflicts and joyfulness.

4. Results

Among others, we identified three communities constituted of different interests, histories, positions, identifications, and border work; and the conditions for belonging to these communities.

4.1. Emotionally Tight Communities

Central to emotionally tight communities is that they are stable; extend beyond time and space; consist of shared focus and tight relationships; and are built on values of trust, equality, care, and playfulness.

The School Game

The following text illustrates an emotionally tight community between two children, Mari and Geir.

In the middle of the room is a large sofa. A lot of activities are going on in the large room in the preschool department. Mari and Geir are sitting on the sofa. The adults sit at different tables spread out across the room. Several groupings of children are spread out across the room, playing. The children move back and forth between the tables and other activities. In between the two children on the sofa there is a backpack, some books, and a teddy bear. The children are focusing on each other; they talk, they look at each other, they mirror each other's initiatives playing with the sack. The other children approach them, sometimes taking a seat on the sofa, sometimes just stopping and watching them, and then leave to play elsewhere. Mari and Geir seem not to register the other children. They are totally absorbed in each other, building up their play, eagerly chatting with each other (inaudibly).

After a while, Mari initiates putting the toys in the sack. 'I can pack', she says. Quickly, she puts the teddy bear and some books in the bag. 'Yes, these are your homework', confirms Geir, with a supporting tone of voice, while he also put books in the backpack. Geir looks at the sack. 'I can help you to put it on', he says. He lifts the backpack and

places it on Mari's back. Then he crawls down from the sofa, sits close beside her, and fastens a strap around her body. 'I can accompany you to school', he says, friendly. 'Yes', says Mari and smiles. Together they walk across the room. Eventually they stop to adjust the backpack and the straps, helping each other.

Now Mari closes her eyes and turns her face towards the ceiling (acting as though she cannot see). 'I can accompany you, so you don't have to walk (alone?)' says Geir. He grabs a strap of the backpack and leads her across the floor. Mari takes his hand. They walk hand in hand into the locker room. There is no one there. Playfully, they tease each other, throwing drawing papers, holding and pulling each other while laughing.

The above illustrates how the children are totally absorbed in their community, fully concentrated on building up their play. A strong and distinct “we” appears as a sign for this community. The children share an understanding of what to do in the play and how to do it. They follow, support, and extend each other's expressions and actions. They express shared joy and fun. When Mari describes what she intends to do (*'I can pack'*), Geir supports and extends her idea: *'Yes, these are your homework'*. This mode of communication continues throughout the play.

The children also defend their community against peers and educators:

When another child Judith enters the locker room and asks if she can join, Mari quickly turns around towards her, saying firmly, 'no, we are playing the school game', and quickly turns back towards Geir. Judith quickly leaves the locker room. After a while, Mari says: 'Let's go home'. 'Yes', Geir responds. 'School has ended now', he continues. The children continue to playfully pull each other and laugh while moving out of the locker room. Entering the large room, they are encountered by an educator asking them if they denied Judith joining in their play. 'We said yes', Mari and Geir respond quickly. 'You did not listen to us', continues Geir, looking at Judith. Now the educator offers some suggestions for playing together, but the children do not accept these. 'We are playing the school game', says Geir in a low tone of voice, looking down at the floor. Mari and Geir stand still and quiet for a while. Then they walk close together, away from the sofa. Judith remains sitting on the sofa looking in a book.

Our interpretation of this interaction is that Mari and Geir take for granted their position as the owners of the play and the community. From this follows their right to determine the community's borders and its conditions for joining. It appears that they do not expect others to join. Judith is given (and takes) a position as an outsider with no right to join. She asks for permission to enter but is refused. The content of playing at going to school also restrict possibilities for Judith to be part of the community.

The community offers Mari and Geir many possibilities for shared identification: they acknowledge each other through the play and share meaning about what is going on. They both use bodily expressions to emphasize their closeness: they hold each other and remain physically close to one another. Through dialogic communication and continuous encounters, together they create a narrative about identification, their community, and their belonging.

The borders that Geir and Mari create for their community are not only based on their playing “school”, but also on their relational history; they are relatives. Their community is rooted in their strong relationship and a common lived experience of togetherness. This history/bond is visible in the trust and safety they express towards each other in other situations, as well, and it creates a community in which it can be difficult for any other child to be included.

The values communicated relate to safeguarding Mari and Geir's community and supporting each other within it. They express (ethical) values like trust, equality, and care for one another as fundamental to their community. Mari and Geir's power lies in this solid/closed border, which creates a distinct division between “us” and “you/them”. This ethical border is defined when Judith asks to enter/play with them.

4.2. Communities Based on Norms and Power Struggles

Communities based on norms and power struggles are centered on sticking to the children's intentions and follow rules and norms for activities. This often results in conflict, power struggles, and strong emotions. These communities can appear when children gather for a spontaneous activity, and they are often short in duration. The associated values relate to order, individual justice, and physical competence.

Jumping from the Wall Bar

The next example portrays a community gathered around jumping activities and partly initiated by adults.

It is playtime in preschool. Iselin is standing in the middle of the room looking at the activities going on between the children. An educator asks Iselin if she wants to join her in the sports room (a large room with cushions, mattresses, and climbing walls). Iselin nods, confirming. She smiles a little. When the door is opened by the educator, all the children quickly spread out. Some children run to some large mattresses and a climbing house. Dimitri is first to the house and he fetches a large cushion, looking (surprised) at the other children running towards him. Other children join; some enter the house, others search for cushions. Dimitri picks up the cushion, walks over to the educator, and lies down beside her, observing the other children enthusiastically building a house.

Now the educator initiates a jumping activity from a wall bar, which immediately catches the attention of several children. The educator informs the children when to jump and that they need to queue in a line. She encourages them: 'You are indeed skillful'. The play is intense and there is a lot of noise, screaming, and laughter in the room.

Iselin is standing still on the floor, watching. Now the educator invites Iselin to join. Iselin takes a position at the end of the queue of eight children. She stands quietly waiting for her turn. There is noise and distress in the queue. The children do not agree on how to play, they push each other, blame each other for "sneaking" into the queue, they hit each other. Iselin looks gently over her shoulder. She climbs a few steps up the bar and then down again; thereafter she jumps down on the mattress. She walks away from the bar and stops, looking at the children in the queue. Conflicts still appear around how to jump, and some of the children leave the queue and return to building the house. Iselin jumps a little by herself on a small mattress beside her. Later, she sits down on the educator's knee. Dimitri is lying on a cushion beside the educators. Iselin and Dimitri look at the other children jumping. After a while Dimitri leaves the sports room. /.../ After 30 min the educator says that it is cleaning up time.

The community described above is bound by jumping from the wall bar and through the norms and rules for how to play the game. The educator takes the position as the owner of the play/activity in the beginning, but she soon hands it over to the children, who seem to struggle for their individual positions in the play. The community is defended through children's individual references to rules and norms for the activity, but also to more explicit utterances of power.

Possibilities for emotional identification within this community do not appear very clear. Communication in this community stems from individual narratives about belonging and participation, but also from narratives of alienation and exclusion. The common "we" is diffuse. Even though the common interest of this community is in building and jumping, the children do not to agree with the aim of the activity, how to act, or what is going on. Conflicts arise when children express different opinions, and some children leave the community.

Iselin and Dimitri express interest in being part of the community, yet they remain in the position of observer. There are many children and a high level of noise in the sports room, thus the community could be experienced as somewhat frightening. Dimitri withdraws through observing from a site close to the educator. The educator encourages Iselin to participate, but Iselin expresses a feeling of being unsafe and withdraws by

engaging in her own jumping activity close to the educator. Over time, Iselin and Dimitri establish their positions as observers. On one hand, they do not express a strong wish to participate, and on the other hand they maintain their focus on the ongoing play.

Other positions are related to rules and power. Rules and norms are negotiated through verbal and physical strength and references to maintaining the order of the queue. In this community, the children require some skills (climbing and jumping, knowledge about rules) and willingness to accomplish the activity, but first and foremost they interact and engage in an ongoing power struggle of positions and rule enforcement. In order to gain an influential position, there is a need for a strong voice.

Nevertheless, the borders appear open, and the children step in and out of the community as they wish. The activity of jumping the skills it requires are important, but physically expressed norms and values for order also stand out as important and are a driving force for conflict and expressions of power.

In sum, the community is characterized by a mixture of instability, conflict, strong emotions, rapid changes and regulations, and power appears to be an important condition and strategy for safeguarding the community.

4.3. Communities of Open Borders and Joyfulness

The community described here is characterized by fluidity, joyful shared experiences, and open borders. The associated values relate to joyfulness, equality, and shared influence. This community creates conditions for both shared and individual senses of belonging.

No Walking in the Lava

Dimitri, Stefan, and Mina are in the sports room with an adult. Mina runs around, jumping on the mattresses. Stefan and Dimitri are building a tower with cushions, following the educator's initiative. After a while, Mari and Geir enter the room. Dimitri observes them, silent, and then lies down on a mattress.

Geir starts to walk around on the mattresses, which are spread out on the floor in a circle. Mari quickly follows and says, smiling, 'shall we play don't step on the lava, Geir?' Geir says 'yes' with a happy tone of voice. He starts running on the mattresses, trying to avoid touching the floor. Mari follows, laughing. After a while, Stefan, Jon, and Dimitri run around on the mattresses following the same pattern. Mina and Charlotte are now in the room and they join the activity. Now and then, Mari and Geir instruct their peers on how to run and how the mattresses should be ordered. Now, all the children in the sports room join the activity. Eventually they stop, sit down for a while, and then start running again.

From the CD player, one can hear music (A song "The Rescue Boat Elias"). After a few running rounds, Jon stops by the CD player and skips to another song, which results in a loud sound. Jon and the children look at each other and they all start to laugh. Jon continues to play; he runs, stops by the CD player, and turns up the sound. The children look at each other, laughing. Jon repeats the play. Sometimes he turns up the volume. Other times, he skips to another song. The children look at him and laugh. The adult tries many times to make Jon stop, but he ignores her. After a while, she turns off the CD player. The children continue running on the mattresses, eagerly trying not to step in the "lava". After 10 min, the play is interrupted by some children running into the room with paper airplanes in their hands.

When Mari and Geir initiate the activity "don't step in lava", they immediately inspire the other children to join in running on the mattresses without touching the floor. Together, the children create a fluid community with loose borders and loose instructions on how to execute the activity. This does not mean that there is a lack of norms and rules, but these are negotiable and subject to change. This is expressed through a variety of ways of running.

This community generates conditions for shared identification and a collective narrative of shared joy. The children look at each other and they laugh. It seems that they

gather more around the experience of joyfulness than the activity itself or the rules for how to execute it. It is easy to join, and children are clear about what to do and how. Even though Mari and Geir initially take positions as the owners of the activity, the latter's content, along with the joy built into the community, opens the activity to shifting positions of leadership and development. Jon, for example, takes the position of leading the lava game and he extends the ways to play. He also extends the community's narrative to include resistance of the educator. The educator tries in vain to stop Jon from turning up the volume of the CD player. The other children laugh heartily; perhaps Jon's resistance adds an extra dimension of joy to the community.

Strategies for defending the community appear unnecessary, as the children collectively own the community. Loose borders are apparent in the core group's openness to other children joining, and in the possibility of pausing without hindering the ongoing running over the "lava." The activity is akin to a merry-go-round, i.e., the children can go on or off without disturbing the joy experienced by its participants.

Together, the children create a community and a pattern that can be easy to identify with and to follow. This community create conditions for both shared and individual senses of belonging.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate the complexity of children's communities and their conditions for children's belonging. We identified three different communities generating various conditions for belonging: *emotionally tight communities*; *communities based on norms and power struggles*; and *communities of open borders and joyfulness*.

These communities are not to be seen as hierarchal or exclusive of one another; rather, they exemplify the ways in which different types of communities create different conditions for children's belonging. In keeping with Yuval-Davis's theory [1], we suggest that it is at the intersections of three spectra, i.e., social positions, emotional identification, and preferred values, that the politics of belonging are enacted. Border work, which separates "us" from "them", is a necessity for communities, and belonging and power are part of the relevant processes.

5.1. Communities of Closeness, Conflicts, and Joyfulness

The communities drawn from the data represent various values, social positions, and identifications expressed by children in preschool. Some significant aspects of these communities are described below.

5.1.1. Communities of Closeness

The community developed around the activity "playing school" is characterized by a distinct "we" built on emotional closeness; solid and closed borders; and values of support, trust, equality, and care. Borders and positions of power are both strong and taken for granted. The children inside the community define its borders and own the leading positions, and this is not questioned by other children.

The distinct "we" and strong borders safeguard the children inside the community, their individuality, and their relationship. The borders appear to be both visible and well known by children outside the community. The children inside the community use different strategies to protect it [42]. They leave to establish their play somewhere else (ignorance); they verbally reject others wishing to join; and they support each other, denying their rejection and placing the responsibility on peers outside the community. Their experience of borders is connected to social positions, identification and attachment, and values [1].

In this emotionally close community, the children safeguard themselves and each other as individuals and as a community. Mari and Geir share a biography of doing things and being together as a family (e.g., Tjora, [17]). This could strengthen their community and their sense of belonging [1]. Close relationships in preschool, however, can be just as

much connected to encounters over time, equality, and an expressed desire to be together across activities [49–51].

Through continuous encounters, Mari and Geir create a narrative which identifies and confirms their community and their intersubjective attachment. This narrative influences and is influenced by their expressions of values like trust and care for each other. This creates space for an ethical bond that allows for independency in relation to others and separates “us” from “them”. The borders, being open to the children inside the community but closed for others, can not only make it difficult for others to enter, but also difficult for those inside the community to leave.

5.1.2. Communities of Conflict

The community established around the activity “jumping from a wall-bar” is characterized by an unclear “we” and a mixture of instability, strong emotions, power, and regulations, along with values relating to order, individual justice, and physical competence. The borders appear open, but are conditional upon the members’ acceptance of and participation in a style of negotiation very much built on power. The children’s border work involves using different strategies to safeguard their community, and verbal, emotional, and physical instructions dominate. Power appears to be an important condition and strategy for safeguarding the community.

The children express an unclear “we” and struggle for a position of leadership and control of the community. From this, there flows a narrative about individual power struggles. The community resides around this activity without any relational bond [1], interactions, or shared beliefs, norms, or narratives to hold it together; the conditions for belonging appear unclear and difficult to overcome.

Belonging, in this kind of community, appears to be conditioned by individual power struggles. In keeping with Yuval-Davis et al. [42], while the children may very well be aiming to create safety around the activity, their efforts at doing so fail. Their community is centered on fighting for individual rights and on individual assumptions about how to carry out the activity. On one hand, these conflicts seem to create a loose border allowing children to join and leave the community without affecting it, as there is nothing common to protect. On the other hand, even if the borders are open, the community seems to represent strong borders and difficult conditions from the perspectives of the children outside it (Dimitri and Iselin, who withdraw and stay close to the educator, taking positions as observers). One could argue that this vague content, lack of leadership, or lack of a relational bond creates a community that does not safeguard individuals.

Probyn [43] suggests that the politics of belonging are in constant motion and built on a recurring desire to belong, which places individuals on the “outside”. Belonging is not always a “feel-good” experience [1]. This appears to be evident for Iselin and Dimitri in our study, as they express interest in being part of the community but hesitate and remain in the position of observer. The community in the sports room could be experienced as chaotic and somewhat frightening, perhaps causing feelings of alienation rather than a sense of belonging. Thus, the two children remain in their desire to belong, thereby remaining outsiders (see Probyn [43]). Nagel [52] describes belonging as something that ‘excludes as much as it includes, and... disciplines as much as it sustains and nurtures’ (p. 120). Boundaries and borders are constructed and reconstructed, which involves disciplining those on the inside while keeping others out. Belonging may be meaningless unless there are some who do not belong [52]. The children inside the “wall jumping” community are eager to negotiate borders but unable to reach a common agreement; instead, they maintain their individual struggles without guidance from the educator. This shows the importance of both the relational and individual dimensions of belonging, but also the necessity of educators being active in such processes.

Taylor and Richardson [24] argue that positions are negotiable, and children can develop tactics to resist the ways in which they are positioned by their peers, thereby gradually gaining peer acceptance and a sense of belonging. In the sports room, Iselin and

Dimitri do not express any efforts to gain acceptance into its community. We do not know the reason for this, but educator's invitations to them to join do not seem to help children identifying new tactics to gain entrance in the community.

5.1.3. Communities of Joyfulness

Several children join in the community established around the activity "don't step in the lava", thereby signifying open borders and possibilities for participating and influencing the content. The participants gather around a distinct "we"; the experience of shared joy; and the values of joyfulness, equality, and shared influence and power. Positions are available to children's various initiatives. Such a community converges around the joyful experience more or less independently of the relationships among participants.

In this community, the activity is initiated by two children (Mari and Geir). They both take leading positions, instructing others on how to carry out the activity. Following this, social positions based on values of joy are open. Jon, for example, takes the leading position as he extends the ways of playing and incites the community to resist the educator. In this way, the children create a collective narrative around the activity. This allows for shared identification. The children express the importance of the shared experience and define their community through gazes, smiles, and laughter. This collective identification, however, is also open to individual narratives and preferences for having fun. It is a distinct "we", a community of experience that safeguards and fulfils individuals' experiences of joy.

In this community, the children express shared power, and the power balance shifts from the individual participants to their collective experience, where joyfulness is of the utmost importance.

The community offers a shared experience and, at the same time, individual freedom in leading initiatives; regulating bodily movement in an activity that does not demand a lot of verbal skills or strong negotiation capacities; leaving; and joining. These borders also seem to be open to Dimitri. Previous research has emphasized similar findings wherein children with a minority language background tend to be more included and take leading positions in more psychical activities [26].

5.2. Social Sustainability: Safeguarding the Individual and the Community

Social sustainability implies inclusive practices for all children [7]. Based on the findings of our study, we can conclude that a sense of belonging and feeling at home is not achieved in all situations or by all children. It is likely that children periodically experience exclusion. There are many barriers to children's belonging that can sometimes be difficult to overcome. We suggest, however, that the communities identified in this study can be rich instances for children's learning about their own sense of belonging and that of others. Belonging in preschool is a complex enterprise, and the experiences of being both excluded and included can be productive for children's belonging and forging of communities. It is important to note that educators are essential to this kind of learning [14]. It is, however, crucial that children feel at home in their preschool in general and experience belong amidst their peer groups and educators.

A distinct "we" and sense of belonging could be supported by the fact that the participants in a community safeguard individual rights and preferences. It is a matter of shared opportunities to participate and to influence the play. Both the children's relationships and their activities (play) are important. For example, when Mari and Geir, in playing "going to school", engage in a dialogue and express equal positions in their community; they share the initiative and seem open and responsive to each other's expressions and actions. These factors of open social positions create conditions for collective identification and a distinct "we" that characterizes their relationship and not just the activity. This is also the case in the game "don't walk on the lava", where the collective activity allows for different individual initiatives and positions. It is not the case, however, with the activity of jumping from the bar, where the children strive for individual positions.

Selby et al. [53] demonstrated how children express collective responsibility, confidence, and trust, and describe these as micro-expressions of belonging. Our study supports these findings, but we also propose that individual responsibility and rights are as important in creating conditions for belonging (see also [46]). Our study illuminates how identifications of individual and collective character are interrelated dimensions of belonging in preschool.

6. Conclusions and Implications

This article addresses children's communities and belonging as a dimension of social sustainability [7] and contributes theoretical and empirical knowledge about the processes of belonging in preschool practice. Theoretically, this study contributes to the field of social sustainability and its understanding of inclusive practices when using the politics of belonging as a guiding theory. This theory offers novel perspectives on inclusion and exclusion in the early years of childhood, as it steers the focus towards belonging as a political issue even for the youngest participants in the education system. The theory offers an intersectional approach to exploring conditions for belonging, combining micro- and macro-levels of society. Additionally, the three analytic spectra (positions, identifications, and values) enrich possibilities for complex analyses and understanding of children's communities in preschool.

We propose that educators in the field of practice make use of the theory of politics of belonging. The complexity of the different communities that children create and what they represent can be analyzed and understood through Yuval-Davis's [1] three spectra. Our study also shows how children enact politics and border work at the crossroads between individuals and communities. The three kinds of communities identified in this study are built on significant dimensions (closeness, conflicts, and joyfulness) that add new knowledge to this field. (see Figure 1 below).

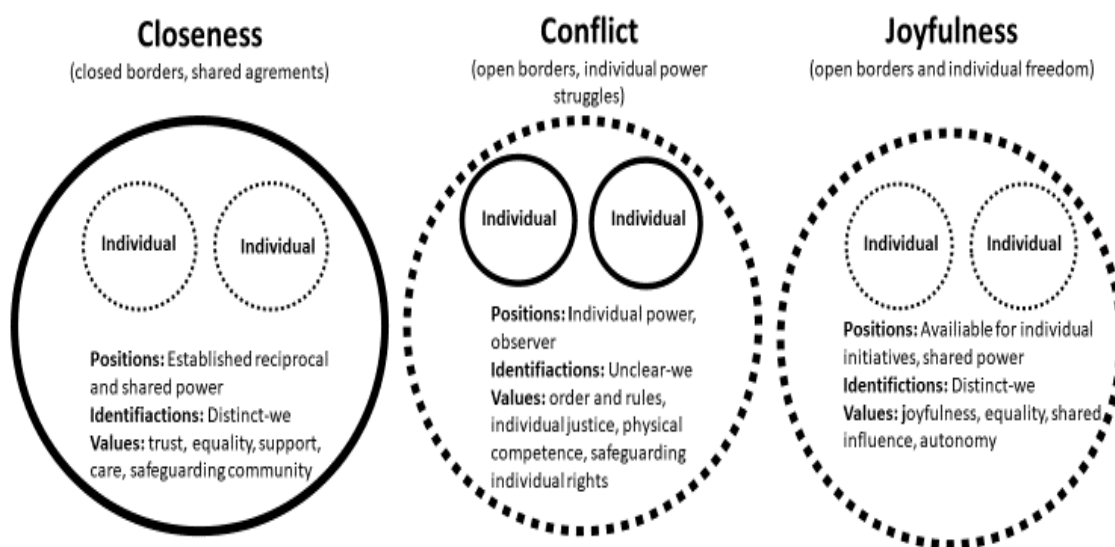


Figure 1. Children's Preschool Communities. This figure shows what characterized the different communities in terms of positions, identifications and values. The solid and broken lines illustrate closed and open borders, respectively, as well as individual children's openness to others within the community.

Empirically, this study shows that children's belonging in preschool should not be taken for granted simply because they are a part of a peer group/preschool group. The challenge for educators is to create and support communities which give children rich and diverse experiences of belonging. The literature underlines that belonging is often taken for granted as a positive emotion, and that educators approaches to belonging often are based on intuitive practices [9,14,54]. It is often taken for granted that children's being part of a

community leads to or is built on belonging [9,14,15]. This study demonstrated that this is not always the case. Children create multitudes of communities based on the dynamic between individual and collective needs, and the kind of possibilities the setting provides in terms of space, objects, structure/organization, and support from adults. Sometimes children's belonging appears strong and stable; other times, a sense of feeling at home is absent. This calls for practices that consider belonging a significant pedagogical issue in preschool and demand professional knowledge. This pedagogical work needs to consider the balance between the individual and the collective [53]; what the children safeguard; the conditions (barriers and opportunities) for belonging, and the children's expressions of belonging or not belonging. Figure 1, Children's Preschool Communities above shows what characterized the different communities in terms of positions, identifications and values. This framework can serve as inspiration for educators when analyzing children's communities in their everyday practice.

Being in a community of closeness, children could experience care and trust; a feeling of being home; and the possibility of carrying out their own initiatives and learning to listen to, adjust to, and engage with others. At the same time, these kinds of communities can be exclusive and hinder children from participating in other communities. This addresses the importance of educators' knowledge about how children create different communities, what they safeguard, and how they perform exclusion. The challenge is to support children's close communities while also supporting the participation and belonging of all children.

Being in a community based on power struggles offers children experiences of negotiation and self-assertion, which is an important capacity in different relationships and in living in a democratic society. Conflicts can offer children opportunities to express themselves and to learn from others' perspectives [55–57]. One condition for these kinds of communities, however, is the presence of an educator taking a leading position to support and problematize the situation, opening the way for children's various perspectives and capacities to negotiate.

A community centered on the experience of joy seems to provide children with the experience of belonging to a community where they can participate based on their own and diverse terms. This is an inclusive community with shared power and open positions that can provide a sense of belonging. These kinds of communities, where the experience is central, could also be the start to inclusion and participation in more relational communities or some of the other communities that children create.

In terms of social sustainability, this study reveals how preschools provide children with manifold experiences of community, which, in turn, can create both barriers to and opportunities for belonging. Some of these experiences are constructive and others may cause alienation rather than familiarity and safety. For belonging to be actualized as the fulfilment of an existential need [1,35], the educator's professional gaze, knowledge, and awareness are crucial. Of equal importance is to learn from children how belonging is communicated, constructed, and reconstructed in preschool. This study contributes new knowledge in the field of social sustainability by illuminating communities of belonging built on closeness, conflict/negotiations, and joyfulness and flow. Together, these elements create a totality embodying experiences of importance to children's belonging. A common thread running through these communities is the relationship between the individual and the community.

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