



# Children's learning processes

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



UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND  
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# **Children's learning processes in two preschools**

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# Children's learning processes in two preschools

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## **Abstract**

This study is an enquiry into young children's learning processes as they participate in preschool groups. The aims of the study are two-fold: to explore the multiple factors affecting children's learning processes while participating in two different early childhood curricular contexts; and to give a detailed description of how children are learning in their daily lives. The two participating preschools both have built their practice on the Icelandic National Curriculum Guide, but adopt very different approaches in their day-to-day curriculum and pedagogy. One school works in the spirit of Reggio Emilia (Malaguzzi, 1998), with the main aims being for children to develop their ideas and hypotheses, to co-construct meaning both individually and in collaboration with others, and to support children in being creative when working on projects. The other preschool, Lava Ledge, uses the Hjalli approach, a relatively new Icelandic curricular approach where the main goals are to support children in learning to follow rules, engaging in positive thinking and independence, and actively cultivating attributes that are typically considered to be strengths in the opposite gender, an aim that is advanced by means of single-sex groups.

The underpinning theories of learning and teaching in this study are broadly sociocultural, emphasizing the importance of the social context with regard to children's learning, where learning is seen as the product of interaction between two main factors, the social context and individual personal qualities (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells & Claxton, 2002). Rogoff's (2003) account of participation in sociocultural milieus is referred to, and in order to provide a perspective that may help to focus on the various ways children learn within different cultural contexts, attention is specifically devoted to guided participation. Guided participation builds on the child being active in learning where adults' support can take many forms, such as explicit verbal and non-verbal guidance, as one example. Other main ideas supporting this study are influenced by 'sociology of childhood' focusing on children as competent learners and active agents (Mayall, 2003) in the creation of meaning through their interactions with adults and other children. Another idea influencing the study is related to children as participants in peer groups, producing their own cultural values which can be different from the preschool's cultural values (Corsaro, 2015).

Furthermore, pedagogy, play, and power relations between teachers and children are seen as being among the factors influencing children's learning processes (Bae, 2009; Bernstein, 1977).

The study uses a qualitative approach influenced by ethnography, describing cases in two preschools with the aim of capturing the complexity of children's learning processes within the preschool context. Ethical issues were connected to the study's approach, such as the need for the researcher to be as non-judgmental as possible through the data-generation process, and to be open to the different meanings, experiences, and emotions of the various participants. The method used had the aim to capture the complexity of children's learning processes within the preschools. The researcher constructed children's stories ("learning stories" in New Zealand) from a cumulative series of stories told by written narratives, photos, or videos of individual children participating in preschool activities. The analysis process included reflecting on the data-set when constructing children's stories (written by the researcher), and later to discuss children's participation in their preschool groups, and finally analyze children's participation in terms of learning dispositions. Children's participation is discussed in light of three dispositional lenses: communication and involvement; well-being and belonging; and contribution and taking responsibility.

The analysis of the data revealed in what ways the children's learning processes were supported, as well as what was similar and what was different in the pedagogy of the two preschools. Furthermore, the children's stories, constructed from the observations, gave a detailed description of how the children were learning in their daily lives in the preschool. The findings suggest that the two preschools demonstrate a different power balance between teachers and children in their pedagogies, as well as fostering different levels of participation, especially during group times. Despite these differences, the evidence of the children's participation and their learning dispositions is surprisingly similar in both preschools. Observations from both preschools reveal how the children collaborate in highly developed play, especially during their free time and in choice time, which involves planning, communicating, solving problems and negotiating peer relationships. In both preschools, the children were frequently provided with the freedom to play, interact, and find solutions within their peer groups, sometimes with the preschool teachers' intervention, but most of the time without. In both preschools, the peer culture played a large part in the pedagogy; children shared experiences, and often attempted to gain control in preschool groups. The power

balance within the peer groups reflected very different participation for children, within the different situations children's experiences could reveal friendship, togetherness, or belonging, but some children also faced social exclusion or marginalization.

The findings suggest that the children's daily experience in play-based activities within their peer groups may be more influential for their learning processes than the specific curricular strategies employed in each preschool. Implications from the study inform both global and Icelandic discussion on provisions for five-year-old children, and suggest that schooling for this age group might gain from providing children with ample opportunities to play and to express their ideas, interests, and views.



## Ágrip

Rannsókn þessari er ætlað að varpa ljósi á þátttöku barna í leikskóla. Markmið rannsóknarinnar er tvíþætt: að kanna ýmsa þætti sem hafa áhrif á námsferli ungra barna í tveimur ólíkum leikskólum; og að lýsa því af nákvæmni hvernig börn læra með þátttöku í daglegu lífi leikskóla síns. Litið er svo á að þegar börn og kennarar byggja upp þekkingu í sameiningu eigi sér stað námsferli þar sem börn öðlast kunnáttu og þróa skilning og félagslega færni. Þegar börn taka þátt í samskiptum í leikskóla eiga sér stað gagnvirk samskipti milli barns og umhverfis, sem birtist í námsferlum þar sem börn þroskast og læra (nám barna og þroski á sér stað/birtist) (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978).

Í rannsókninni tóku þátt börn og leikskólakennarar í tveimur leikskólum sem byggja starf sitt á aðalnámskrá leikskóla en jafnframt á ólíkum hugmyndum og aðferðum sem stuðst er við í daglegu starfi. Annar skólinn starfar í anda leikskóla í borginni Reggio Emilia á Ítalíu (Malaguzzi, 1998) en hinn styðst við nýlega íslenska leikskólustefnu, Hjallastefnuna. Meginmarkmið Seaside, Reggio Emilia-leikskólans, eru að börnin móti og þrói eigin hugmyndir og tilgátur og byggja upp sameiginlega þekkingu, bæði sem einstaklingar og í samvinnu við aðra. Jafnframt fer fram verkefnavinna þar sem stutt er við skapandi starf með börnum. Meginmarkmið Lava Ledge, Hjallastefnuleikskólans, eru að börn læri að fylgja reglum, tileinki sér jákvæða hugsun og sjálfstæði og samkvæmt kynjaðri námskrá þjálfu þau færni sem að öllu jöfnu er talin styrkleiki gagnstæðs kyns.

Byggt er á félagsmenningarkenningu, þar sem lögð er áhersla á mikilvægi félagslegslegra þátta í námi barna, og að nám fari fram með víxlverkan tveggja meginþátta, félagslegs samhengis og eiginleika einstaklingsins (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells & Claxton, 2002). Til að varpa ljósi á þann margbreytileika í námsferlum barna sem birtist í leikskólustarfi er stuðst við hugtak Rogoff, þátttaka (e. participation) í félagslegu umhverfi, með sérstaka áherslu á varðaða þátttöku (e. guided participation). Vörðuð þátttaka vísar til virkni barnsins í eigin námi þar sem stuðningur fullorðinna getur haft margar birtingarmyndir, svo sem tjáningu með eða án orða. Fræðilegur grunnur rannsóknarinnar er jafnframt undir áhrifum „félagsfræði barnæsku“ (e. sociology of childhood), en samkvæmt þeim hugmyndum er litið á börn sem virka einstaklinga sem eru hæfir til að beita áhrifamætti (e. agency) sínum (Mayall, 2003) þegar þau skapa merkingu í

samskiptum við fullorðna og önnur börn. Með þátttöku í félagahópum (e. peer groups) byggja börn upp eigin menningarleg gildi, sem geta verið önnur en þau gildi sem lögð er áhersla á í leikskólanum (Corsaro, 2015). Auk þess er litið svo á að uppeldis- og kennslufræði, leikur og valdatengsl milli leikskólakennara og barna séu meðal þeirra þátta sem hafi áhrif á námsferli barna (Bae, 2009; Bernstein, 1977).

Beitt er eiginlegri rannsóknaraðferð og leitað til aðferða þjóðfræði (e. ethnography), þar sem tilvikum (e. cases) úr tveimur leikskólum er lýst, með það að markmiði að fanga flókna þætti sem koma fram í námsferlum barna í leikskólum. Fjallað er um siðferðilega þætti sem tengjast rannsóknaraðferðinni, svo sem nauðsyn þess að rannsakandinn sé eins fordómalaus og mögulegt er meðan á rannsókninni stendur, og sé auk þess opinn fyrir ólíkum skilningi, reynslu og tilfinningum þátttakenda í rannsókninni. Fjölbreytt rannsóknargögn voru greind (sögur skráðar með skriflegri skráningu, ljósmyndum og myndbandsupptökum), með það að markmiði að fanga flókin námsferli barna. Með nákvæmri skoðun og greiningu gagnasafnsins byggði rannsakandi upp sögur einstakra barna (e. children's stories) og greindi þátttöku þeirra í barnahópnum. Í lok greiningarferlisins er þátttaka barnanna rædd út frá þremur sjónarhornum hneigð til náms (e. learning dispositions): samskiptum og þátttöku; vellíðan og að tilheyra; og að hafa áhrif og taka ábyrgð á aðstæðum.

Greining gagna leiddi í ljós hvernig stutt var við námsferli barnanna og hvernig kennsluaðferðir og nám barnanna birtist, í senn með líkum og ólíkum hætti, í leikskólunum tveimur. Í sögum barnanna (sem rannsakandi mótaði og byggði á athugunum) birtist nákvæm lýsing á því hvernig börnin læra í daglegu starfi leikskólans. Niðurstöður benda til þess að í leikskólunum tveimur séu valdatengsl í samskiptum leikskólakennara og barna ólík, auk þess að þátttaka barnanna sé á ólíku stigi, sérstaklega í hópatímum. Þrátt fyrir þennan mun sýna gögnin að þátttaka barnanna og hneigð þeirra til náms sé ótrúlega lík í leikskólunum. Í báðum leikskólunum sýna athuganir hvernig börnin vinna saman í afar þróuðum leik, sérstaklega á þeim tímum dagsins þegar þau geta valið viðfangsefni sín, sem felst í því að skipuleggja, eiga samskipti, finna lausnir og eiga samningaviðræður við önnur börn. Í báðum leikskólum kom fram að í barnahópnum fengu börnin næg tækifæri til að taka þátt í leik og samskiptum og finna lausnir í ýmsum aðstæðum, stundum með inngripi leikskólakennaranna en oftast án þeirra afskipta. Í báðum leikskólum hafði félagamenning barnanna (e. peer culture) mikil áhrif á nám og kennslu; börnin deildu reynslu sinni og reyndu að ná völdum innan barnahópsins. Þátttaka barnanna reyndist vera mjög ólík þegar valdatengsl félagahópsins voru skoðuð, reynsla þeirra birtist á

ólíkan hátt í mismundandi aðstæðum og gat endurspeglað annars vegar vináttu barna, samveru, og að þau virtust finna að þau tilheyrðu hópnum, eða hins vegar virtust börn stundum upplifa félagslega útilokun (e. exclusion) eða að vera jaðarsett í hópnum (e. marginalization).

Niðurstöður benda til þess að dagleg reynsla barnanna þar sem þau fá tækifæri til að leika sér í barnahópnum hafi meiri áhrif á nám þeirra en sértækar aðferðir sem tengjast ólíkum skólanámskrám leikskólanna. Nýta má niðurstöðurnar á íslenskum og alþjóðlegum vettvangi í umræðu um það hvernig skóli fyrir fimm ára börn ætti að vera. Draga má þá ályktun af rannsóknarniðurstöðunum að ákjósanlegt sé fyrir þennan aldurshóp að vera í skóla sem sér börnunum fyrir nægum tækifærum til að leika sér og þar sem jafnframt er beitt sérstökum aðferðum til að tryggja börnunum tækifæri til að tjá hugmyndir sínar og skoðanir.



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During the time I have been working on this thesis I have been involved with several projects in Icelandic preschools, primarily working with preschool teachers and other educators, where we have supported each other in developing a different assessment practice for preschools, mainly building on the Learning Story Approach. All these people have been an inspiration to me, and I have learned from our collaboration, not only with regard to our projects but I have also gained knowledge that has been informative and an encouragement to finish this thesis.

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# 1 Introduction

The aim of this study is to explore the multiple factors affecting young children's learning processes while they were participating in two different early childhood curricular contexts. Furthermore, I aim to give a detailed description of how children are learning in the daily lives as they participate in the respective preschools.

The study was prompted by recent debates in Iceland as to the appropriate form of provision for five-year-old children who are attending preschools. Historically, Icelandic children have attended a form of play-based day care, 'leikskóli' (play school), from infancy until starting primary school at the age of six. More recently, however, conflicting messages have arrived from policymakers and providers. On one hand, appearing in the current National Curriculum Guide (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011), prompting views that include planning learning where children are seen as participants in a democratic society. Where the emphasis is on children as active participants in their daily lives, who are supported to be critical and creative thinkers, understanding their own learning. At the same time, the policymakers have considered a shift to a more school-like provision for children in the year before compulsory schooling begins (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2014). One of the main issues detected in this document is the well-known international pressure of enhancing young children's reading ability with the long term aim of improving their later performance in school. A similar emphasis can be detected in the latest documents from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2011, 2015). Researchers and theoreticians known to be at the forefront of debating early education have contested the idea of a pre-school PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) (Moss, Dahlberg, Grieshaber, Mantovani, May, Pence, Rayan, Swadener, & Vandebroek, 2016) suggesting to assess five-year-olds' particular skills (such as oral language and emergent literacy, mathematics and numeracy). These contradictory views are the reason why I see it as relevant to look further into how children are learning and taking part in their preschool groups, the year before they start primary school.

This study is the first to take a close look at the daily experiences of five-year-old children in Icelandic preschools, in a specific curricular context, including the environment, curricula, pedagogy, and peer culture using the

two most common approaches which are widely practiced in Iceland. It explores the ways in which the curriculum and pedagogy of each preschool supports children's learning processes as they participate in preschool groups. The focus is on how or if: they communicate and are involved in the preschool context; the child seems to sense well-being and belonging in the group; and the child contributes to the preschool context. These focuses are aligned with the overall goals and purposes identified in the Icelandic early years' curriculum, which prioritizes the holistic development of children rather than the attainment of specific cognitive targets. The two curricular contexts, which are examined in this study adopt very different approaches to meeting such goals.

In order to gain insight into the ways that five-year-old children experience the environment and activities offered by each context, lengthy ethnographic observations and consultations with both practitioners and children were undertaken in each of the settings. The data from these fieldwork visits help to make visible how children are learning during the preschool day, e.g., how they select activities and playmates, identify problems and seek solutions, and acquire a sense of themselves as learners. These experiences take place within the constraints of the National Curriculum Guide (itself influenced by global discourses of early childhood) as well as those of the local school curriculum each with its own rationale, aims, and principles. Furthermore, these experiences are influenced by the power relationships that exist between adults and children, and among the children themselves within each preschool. In presenting detailed observations of these experiences, the study sheds light on some of the factors that influence children's learning processes, and how they are learning in their last year in preschool, just before they make the transition from preschool into primary school.

### **1.1 The curricular context of the study**

In Iceland, early educational programs for children from one to six years old are referred to as 'leikskóli' which means playschool. The word 'playschool' is descriptive of the view that young children learn through play, and, by using this concept, early schooling is distinguished from formal elementary or primary schooling. However, in this research the term 'preschool' will be used for the Icelandic playschool, as it is a term that refers to all provisions for young children before they start primary school.

### **1.1.1 Policy for preschools in Iceland**

According to Icelandic law (Law on preschools, no. 78/1994, no. 90/2008), preschools are the first level of the educational system in Iceland, and in 2014, 86% of children in Iceland aged one to five attended preschool (Statistics Iceland, 2014). The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture formulates official educational policy and has published the National Curriculum Guide for Preschools (Ministry of Education, 1999) and The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Preschools (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011). The municipalities supervise the building and operation of most preschools and bear the majority of the expenses involved. Parental contributions cover roughly 18% of operating costs (Ágústsdóttir & Hinriksdóttir, 2013).

The former National Curriculum Guide in Iceland (Ministry of Education, 1999) was applicable 1999-2011, and, as the study was conducted before 2011, it is the document on which the preschools taking part in this study built their practice. The former National Curriculum Guide was a professional policy document on the educational role of the preschool. It reflected a certain tension between stating what is seen as important for children in general and also viewing the child as an individual. The following six learning areas were addressed: motor development, language development, artistic creation, music, nature and environment, and culture and society. In describing these learning areas, the emphasis was on children learning through play and on collaborating in a group of peers while at the same time building on each child's individual interests. The National Curriculum Guide from 1999 was not only built on developmental ideas, but contemporary ideas toward children and learning were also evident, such as equality and democracy, that have been further developed in the curriculum that has been used since 2011.

The current National Curriculum Guide for Preschools in Iceland (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011) maintains the emphasis on play as both an aim and a method. The preschool curriculum was published jointly with curricula for all school levels. Throughout these documents, there are six fundamental pillars common to all school levels: literacy, sustainable development, health and well-being, democracy and human rights, equality, and creativity. The four learning areas now specified for the preschool, literacy and communication, health and well-being, sustainability and science, and creativity and culture, are meant to be integrated into preschool activities that foster creativity where children are seen to learn through play. Among the main emphases in the present

curriculum are the importance of democracy, well-being, equality, and interpersonal relationships in preschool education.

### **1.1.2 Preschools and primary schools**

The general rule in Iceland is that children start primary school, which is compulsory, the autumn they become six-year-olds. For some time, there has been an ongoing debate in Iceland about when children should move between the two school levels. In Iceland, as in most Western countries, the curricular contexts, goals, content, teaching methods, and school environment in individual preschools and primary schools tend to vary a great deal (Einarsdóttir, 2007b; Peters, 2010). In addition, two qualitative studies in Icelandic pre- and primary schools (Einarsdóttir, 2003, 2004, 2007b) reveal a profound difference in the practices at the two different levels of schooling. The conclusions of the latter two studies indicate that the main difference in pre- and primary schoolteachers' practice is related to power relations in these contexts. In the preschools, children were given more power to decide what they wanted to do, and the preschool teachers were on the sidelines supporting them. In the primary schools, however, controlling the procedures was mainly in the hands of the teachers in the school environment (Einarsdóttir, 2007b). According to these studies, primary school practice in Iceland is characterized by organized time frames and by children remaining seated and working on assignments. In the preschools, by comparison, time frames are usually more flexible and teaching methods are more indirect; children primarily learn through play and are able to move freely around the room. In the primary schools, the teachers seem to foreground the aims of children gaining particular knowledge or skills, while the preschools still seem to foreground supporting children's social and emotional competence (Einarsdóttir, 2007a; Óskarsdóttir, 2012). As the preschool and primary school context and methods are so different, the present debate is about which kind of school context is appropriate for those in their last year of preschool, the five-year-old children. The debate involves how children at this age should learn and where their education should take place.

In research within Icelandic preschools concerning this age group, several studies are related to the issues addressed in the current study. Einarsdóttir (2007a) has explored children's views of their transition to primary school, while Hreinsdóttir (2009) has investigated the use of democratic methods in the preschools as well as children's views of their own learning. A third study explored children's participation in decision-

making in one Icelandic preschool, showing that even though the children's participation was prominent, the participation processes had not reached a stage where the decision-making process was initiated by the children (Harðardóttir & Kristjánsson, 2013). Finally, there is a study that sheds light on how cultural factors contribute to the construction of preschool children's cultural literacy in two preschools (Þórðardóttir, 2012). However, to date there has been no study of how different Icelandic school curricular contexts shape children's learning processes. This study, therefore, adds to the existing information related to five-year-old children in Iceland, who at the present time are the oldest children attending preschools. The study's findings may offer new insight into the details of children's participation in their preschools, and thus inform the debate on what type of learning is important for five-year-old children. Furthermore, the study may allow preschool teachers to reflect on which methods best give space for values emphasized in the Icelandic National Curriculum Guide (2011).

### **1.1.3 Child-centered curriculum and pedagogy**

There are many varied definitions of curriculum that build on different views and address different issues. These definitions have: been different through time, been reflected in different social contexts, and have depended on the various perspectives or theories framing curriculum and pedagogy in a particular school context. In this study curriculum is seen as the contexts in which children learn, which are influenced by policy, pedagogy, and children's experiences. Policy comes from official documents stating goals of education, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), Iceland's National Curriculum Guide (2011), and the school curriculum in each preschool. The pedagogy preschool teachers provide children with is understood here as the preschool teachers' methods and beliefs, including their views toward children and learning which affect how they plan the preschools social environment. Policy and pedagogy frame children's experiences, and always impact the environment where children take part and interact with others as their physical, emotional, and cognitive development evolves.

The curricula and pedagogy used in Icelandic preschools have been strongly inspired by, and are a part of, the Nordic tradition of child-centeredness (Einarsdóttir, 2006; Kristjánsson, 2006). The focus on child-centeredness is reflected in the Icelandic National Curriculum Guide, the school curricula in each preschool, and the preschool teachers' pedagogy where children's perspectives and interests are valued and children are

provided with play-based learning opportunities (Kristjánsson, 2006). In most preschools this means that preschool teachers provide children with opportunities, within the *peer group*, to be active, take initiative, play, and make friends. Preschool teachers have debated what is meant by 'play pedagogy', addressing the challenge to be found in the view that play has been seen as belonging to the children and pedagogy as belonging to the preschool teachers. However, what is often called 'play pedagogy' (Rogers & Evans, 2008) puts the two concepts together; preschool teachers adopting the concept and practice of 'play pedagogy' attend to the power balance between teachers and children by bringing their own agenda to their interactions with the children and at the same time listening to children's expressed interests and preserving the independence, creativity, and voluntary nature of play.

## **1.2 Views influencing the study**

As my views toward children and their early education and care influenced the entire research process, I see it as important to introduce my personal and professional background before outlining the study in more detail. Since childhood I have been supported by my mother's comments about me being "good with children"; she described me as always being very enthusiastic and willing to play with and look after my younger brothers. In my memories from this time I remember playing with my brothers and our friends in the unfinished large cellar in our house, while my mother was upstairs attending to other matters (probably household work). Another strong memory from my childhood is being outside and taking part in organized games in the street with many children from my neighborhood, without any adult's participation. I now see these memories from my childhood experiences as one of the threads directly leading to my views toward children's play being important in preschool. My views toward play are firmly grounded in seeing play as a purposeful act for the children themselves and, in addition, seeing play as creating a context for children's learning.

In my adult life I have brought up three children and at the time I am about to finish this thesis I play the role of grandmother to my seven grandchildren. These children are, of course, in my eyes wonderful but they are also very different individuals. Each of them has had to deal with different and challenging issues of a personal and social nature but, in my mind, all possess particular strengths. Seeing how these children are different has helped me to think about my views regarding the importance

of meeting each individual child, in relation to the child's interests and the child's family and school circumstances.

### **1.2.1 Forming my professional identity**

Throughout my adult life I have chosen jobs related to collaborating with young children and have seen myself as a professional in the field of early education since my graduation as a preschool teacher from the University in Gothenburg in 1979. In 1996, after the experience of having different roles within preschools, as a preschool teacher, being a support for children's special needs, and as a head teacher, I became a preschool teacher educator. Through this experience I have learned from children, preschool teachers, and those becoming preschool teachers, and have been influenced by a number of key theoretical perspectives. This experience is the ground for my understanding of children and their education and care, and is part of the lens I look through as a researcher.

I learned from children in the preschools I worked in that most of the time their *interest* was of great importance: if they were interested, they tended to forget everything other than what they were doing; they were active, tried things out, were imaginative, and enjoyed themselves. In 1984-5 I was working in a preschool that was among the first in Iceland to develop choice- time sessions with specific areas for the children to play in. Through this work I became acquainted with the High/Scope approach, which planned practice with the aim of supporting children in being active in constructing knowledge through choice and, with preschool teachers' support, in key experiences, such as creative activities, language and literacy, social relations, and mathematics (Hohmann & Weikart, 2002). When working with children toward this aim, it became clear to me that it was not always simple to support children in choosing what was of interest to them and that I was not the only teacher in the group; it was important for me and other preschool teachers to expect *children to learn from each other* and to seek each other's company. At that time, I learned about Kamii and DeVries who had developed a program for early education (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987; DeVries & Zan, 1994; Kamii & DeVries, 1980), first building on Piaget's theories (as did High/Scope), but developing a program that also addressed social-emotional aims and the importance of children having relationships with preschool teachers that were non-coercive. Kamii and DeVries advocated for preschool teachers supporting children's autonomy and social skills, which meant that children were encouraged to decide for

themselves but at the same time to consider others' understanding and feelings (DeVries, Reese-Learned, & Morgan, 1991).

During this time, we preschool teachers struggled to find ways of having conversations with children, of guiding discussions and making comments that would support children's autonomy and encourage them to find solutions. At the same time, I became more aware of the *unequal power balance* within the preschool. I was inspired by Bae (1996) who introduced the concept 'definition of power' to emphasize that in preschools the preschool teachers are the ones with most of the power, not only in terms of having knowledge and abilities but also making decisions explicitly, as in direct interactions with children, but also the less explicit decisions in relation to what children are provided with in their preschool environment. Bae's recommendations for practice were helpful to me, even though at first it involved just recognizing that the power balance was most of the time in the preschool teachers' favor. These views were strengthened and a new angle for my reflection was added when I got acquainted with the ideas developed in the city of Reggio Emilia in Italy where an image of the child as *strong and competent* was supported, and children were seen as collaborators and co-constructors of meaning and of society itself (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999; Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998). That is, children were seen as participants in and *contributors to a democratic society* (Rinaldi, 2005). Through exposure to these ideas I realized that I liked the notion of children needing not only to have their say, but that they also *had the right to take part* in decisions related to the preschool and even society as whole (United Nations, 1989).

Despite having developed these notions related to the preschool teachers' power, democracy, and focusing on children's strengths and their rights, I as a head teacher in preschool had been a part of planning preparation for the eldest children when moving on to primary school. The eldest children attended a specially planned group time where they sat at tables and, among other activities, learned to have the "right" grip holding a pencil, to write their names, and to fill in forms, activities that were quite different from the prevalent play-based, self-choice activities in this preschool. Furthermore, a list building on a developmental scale was used to find out what individual children "needed to learn" before they started primary school and these results were discussed with their parents. I remember giving the parents of a young boy who was neither interested in nor good at drawing the advice to encourage their son to draw and color at home so we together might prevent him from having problems when he started primary school. At this time this procedure of working with

children's transition from preschool to primary school felt awkward, and I would have wanted to support this boy and his family differently, for instance by discussing his transition in relation to his interests and strengths. As I saw this later I was taking part in performing what was commonly seen as important in the society, by preschool teachers and parents; we all wanted to facilitate the children's transitions. Nevertheless, I in particular found doing this preparation work to be in strong contrast with the ideas of building children's learning on their strengths and supporting democracy in schools.

In my mind, at this point, to develop a more active role for children in preschool, preschool teachers needed to be able to see what children were good at instead of focusing on what was lacking according to a developmental scale. Here I started to see a conflicting interest between the tendencies toward educators' focusing on prescribed outcomes in children's development and developing democratic methods in which educators and children shared power more equally.

### **1.2.2 Seeking theoretical underpinnings**

When starting to plan this study I wanted to look into what happened in preschool contexts, in particular, children's social and emotional learning: how to be a part of a group and learn through interacting with other children and adults in their preschool setting. I did not want to be mainly focusing on the preschool teachers' methods, even though those needed to be included and described as the social situation children were a part of in their preschools. I saw the main aim of the study as exploring how the children were learning as they participated in play and other activities in the preschool.

To frame my research, I started by looking into ideas of a developmental nature, and to focus on young children's construction of social and emotional strengths (influenced by Kamii and DeVries). At the same time, I reflected on ideas valuing an image of the child as strong and competent, not only learning in collaboration in their preschool group, but also being competent of and having the right to influence and be a full participant in school as well as in society as a whole (e.g., Dahlberg et al., 1999; Mac Naughton, 2005; Mayall, 2003). At this point I asked myself if it was possible to use these seemingly contradictory ideas, building on different theories to support my research. What if the research frame built on ethical views valuing democratic methods and seeing children as competent but at the same time acknowledging insights from psychological research? Such a

frame could foreground children's strengths, rather than mapping what children are not able to do. This would mean, in this study, exploring what children are good at and interested in, and how they see themselves as learners. Might a frame like this help cast a light on the factors influencing children's learning processes when participating in preschool groups, and reveal how young children in preschools are learning?

I read Burman's (2008a) critical view toward developmental psychology. Burman, as a psychologist herself, criticizes the way developmental psychology makes claims to be scientific by using methods of classifying and stratifying individuals, groups, and populations, which in her view can end in generalizing about children, children being labeled, and the maintenance of class, gender, and racial oppression. Burman argues that neither the developmental paradigm nor the current attention to children's agency and participation, with the rise of the model of the child as "competent social actor," can be wished away. Her critique goes further by suggesting that researchers and educators should take more firmly into account how developmental psychology is used in education. In her view, to do so means not dispensing with attention to child development, but rather highlighting how people think about developmental psychology and how preschool teachers interpret and connect with it (Burman, 2008b, p. 43).

The aim of Burman's (2008b) critique was to support more informed, attuned, and just practice toward children and toward other marginalized and disadvantaged groups. Preschool teachers critical of the over-reliance of developmental psychology have made an attempt to think about children and development differently, with the aim being "...to open up more radical, equitable possibilities..." (Burman, 2008b, p. 277) for children and their families. Burman's critical view recommends that developmental psychology should include multiple actors and interpreters, and more often recognize development as situated, involving particular settings and location. For me, Burman's ideas were an indication that the theoretical underpinning for my research needed to include views emphasizing the reciprocal interaction of individual and socio-cultural factors in learning. This kind of a focus might reveal the child's individual qualities, including knowledge about the child's development, and the many different factors affecting a child's learning in a preschool context.

Thus, I started to read and reflect on theories of a socio-cultural nature, many deriving from Vygotsky's work. Among those were Rogoff's (2003) research and theories that derived first from developmental psychology; her more recent work builds on cultural psychology and ethnography,

focusing on the cultural nature of human development: how people engage in social activity with others and learn from those that are more knowledgeable. Rogoff sees society as a place for learning; by being involved in different activities, with different people, and in different places, children learn to be participants in their society. For example, at home when a child helps prepare a meal he/she might, together with the parent, grind vegetables, put them into the saucepan, and stir. In this kind of collaboration, the child is a participant in a social activity that can lead to being involved in problem solving at home. This kind of situated learning also takes place in activities that have been arranged for children, such as in preschools.

### **1.3 Theoretical context for the study**

The main theory underpinning this study is, then, Rogoff's cultural-historical approach (Rogoff, 2003). Rogoff, like many Vygotskian and post-Vygotskian theorists, emphasizes the importance of the social context with regard to children's learning, and views learning as the product of reciprocal interaction between two main factors: the social context and individual personal qualities. Through her research in different cultural contexts, mostly in indigenous communities with little formal schooling for children, Rogoff looked at various aspects of collaboration, specifically how the individual thinking processes relate to the cultural context. Children's *learning processes* are seen as the processes whereby children adopt skills and understanding, and develop social competence in co-construction of knowledge, together with peers and preschool teachers. Through their participation in a preschool context, children engage in reciprocal interaction with the environment (people and artifacts) which is believed, by those following socio-cultural theory, to be the means by which children develop and learn (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978).

Similarly, theoreticians studying children within the frame of 'sociology of childhood' argue for the social construction of childhood and children's learning to be acknowledged. Within the movement of sociology of childhood (e.g., Corsaro, 2015; Prout & James, 2015; Qvortrup, 2009) children's participation in communicative events is seen as a part of interpersonal relations and cultural patterns, and children and teachers reproduce them collectively; these relations and patterns appear in processes of appropriation, reinvention, and reproduction (Corsaro, 2015). This means, according to these views, that children and teachers negotiate, share, and create culture with each other. These ideas, of social

construction in education, have, by some, been referred to as 'learning for live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century' (e.g., Claxton & Carr, 2004; Wells & Claxton, 2002), where education for children in preschool, then, might focus on supporting their competence and confidence when facing complexities in today's society. Furthermore, to provide children with opportunities to play and present them with activities that are valuable for them; activities that serves their interest and support their engagement in a group of children and teachers.

Within the sociological framing discussed above, the links between sociological and rights agendas are considered, and children's and young peoples' *agency and rights* are recognized. This means that children are seen as competent learners and active agents (Mayall, 2003) in the creation of meaning through their interactions with adults and other children. Seeing children as agents with the right to express their views complies with what is stated in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989): that children have the right to be influential in their own lives. In order to explore children as competent agents the study seeks an understanding of how children express themselves (Prout & James, 2015.), how they are active and understand other children's perspectives, and what is of interest for them and others.

Further, from a sociological view, Corsaro explores *participation in peer groups*. Children's experience within the social environment is not only influenced by the pedagogy teachers provide them with but also by peer interactions in the group of children. When children spend time together on an everyday basis, Corsaro (2003, 2015) refers to this as the peer culture, where the children participate in activities and routines, share artifacts, and produce values as well as address concerns with each other. According to Corsaro, when children share an experience, they create and control the event, and the teacher has only a surface recognition of how significant the experience is for the children. Thus it is relevant to discuss how children create peer culture, as within peer groups children seek to gain control and negotiate that sense of control with each other. As the children create and control events, the positioning of individual children within each group varies (Corsaro, 2015; Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2006), with some children holding much of the power within the group while others are frequently on the periphery or even marginalized.

Theoreticians working within the 'sociology of childhood' frame see children as a minority group, subject to oppression by adults (Mayall, 2003; Prout, 2011). Thus, a part of this study is to explore *pedagogy, play, and*

*power relations* within preschool contexts. Pedagogy in this study is seen as the teacher's beliefs and methods, how teachers have planned the preschool environment. Research has confirmed a positive relation between children's play and their learning (Meyers & Berk, 2014), although the benefits of play are dependent on whether the children's ideas, interests, and their activity within the play are in focus (van Oers & Duijkers, 2013). This is why many preschool teachers have developed 'play pedagogy' by planning methods for children to learn through various play activities. Those who have advocated for and developed play pedagogy have had to address the power relations between preschool teachers and children. In the current study, these power relations are reflected on and analyzed, both interactions between teachers and children (Bernstein, 1977) and between children in peer groups (Lansdown, 2005).

In this study I explore what children do and how they do it, I seek an understanding of the pedagogy in two preschools and seek to explicate: how children express themselves; how they are active and understand others; what is of interest for children; and how or if they show specific competencies.

#### **1.4 Rationale for the method**

The current study explores the multiple factors affecting young children's learning processes as well as how they learn while they participate in two distinctively different preschools; thus, it was important to choose a method that would embrace and interlace these various factors. Therefore, I sought support from theoretical underpinnings about learning and teaching that are broadly sociocultural (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978; Wells & Claxton, 2002) and views from the 'sociology of childhood' (e.g., Corsaro, 2015; Prout & James, 2015; Qvortrup, 2009) (discussed above in section 1.3). These theoretical underpinnings align with the Learning Story Approach, developed in New Zealand in *Te Whāriki*, the first National Curriculum for preschools (Ministry of Education, 1996), which is strongly influenced by socio-cultural views. *Te Whāriki* means woven mat; the curriculum was built by weaving together the values of the white majority toward children's learning, which were influenced by developmental theory, and the indigenous Māori culture's valuing of social, ethical, and spiritual factors in children's learning. Based on observations made as children participate in everyday activities in the preschool, the preschool teachers develop children's learning stories through reflecting on the stories together with other preschool teachers and children. The learning

stories are designed to provide a cumulative series of stories told by written narratives, photos, or videos of individual children when participating in preschool activities (Carr, 2001). In this study, I was inspired by these methods and constructed children's stories, by carefully exploring the data by going through an analysis process. In the end of the analysis process I explored children's participation in a group in the light of the learning dispositions focused on in the *Te Whāriki* curriculum.

As the *Te Whāriki* assessment method was developed for use in preschool practice to set goals in early education (Carr, 2001), I reshaped the learning dispositional framework to more closely relate the concept of learning disposition to the theoretical underpinning of the study and by this facilitate the use of learning dispositions as a part of the research method. In addition, I hoped to further explain the complex concept of learning dispositions. In doing so, my aim was to more clearly reflect the reciprocal interaction between the social context and individual personal qualities in children's learning, and to focus on the interactive processes between the two. Thus, I reshaped the concept of learning dispositions, seen through three different and entwined lenses relevant in sociocultural research such as this one. Firstly, related to the *social context*, focusing on interaction with others: What is the child's communication and involvement like in the preschool context? Secondly, in relation to the *individual child's* way of exploring and persisting with difficulty: To what degree does the child seem to sense well-being and belonging in the group? Thirdly, in relation to the interactive *learning processes*, influenced by power relations and the role of the child as competent: How does the child influence what happens in the group and contribute to the preschool context? The three lenses are further explained in section 2.7.3 and are used as an analysis tool described in section 4.6.

Carr and Claxton (2002) discuss children's learning in current times as the development of capacities and confidence in children, and refer to positive learning dispositions as those dispositions that support the mediation of home and school culture, as well as the aims of policy documents and preschool teachers. Positive learning dispositions (Carr, Smith, Duncan, Jones, Lee, & Marshall, 2010) are developed in relation to the perceived affordances or opportunities in the environment and in relation to particular purposes, desires, and intentions by the individual child or the particular group of children. In the New Zealand early educational contexts the development of these positive learning dispositions is foregrounded, while the subject knowledge and skills (the specific learning areas) that are put forward in the national curriculum are

in the background. The purpose of exploring the positive learning dispositions, seen by focusing on children's competencies, was to make explicit the interactions taking place in the preschools and how children were learning as they participated in their preschool groups. Foregrounding positive learning dispositions also means seeing all children as competent or having competencies, and therefore their learning might start from competencies rather than finding faults that must be fixed.

Nevertheless, it needs to be acknowledged that the situations in preschools are complex, children are active in their own learning, and the reciprocal interaction between the child and the social context, what happens in what Carr et al. (2010) refer to as 'in the middle,' can never be fully known or foreseen. Thus, the children's different reactions, for example as when they interact with preschool teachers and other children, can lead to children not developing positive learning dispositions, but rather the opposite. This can be seen in situations such as where a child can't use the support given by a teacher (Carr, 2001), or the child's learning can be the reverse of what was aimed for in the positive learning dispositions. An example of this might be seen in a preschool where the aim is to support children in developing an understanding of each other's views and feelings and to develop an attitude of wanting to include rather than to exclude other children. The children might instead exclude a child or some children from the group. Thus, in the current study the observations reveal what might be seen by me and other adults as greater or lesser development of both positive and negative learning dispositions.

The data in this study consists of my field notes from children's participation in play and other activities. From these extensive observations I developed *children's stories* about each child by following a process similar to that used when children's learning stories are developed according to the New Zealand's *Te Whāriki* curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996; Carr, 2001) (see sections 5.4.2, 6.4.2 and 6.5.2). Learning Stories in *Te Whāriki* are made by preschool teachers in collaboration with children and other adults, by going through a process of observing using different means (such as written notes, photos or videos), reflecting on observations, and analyzing the information in relation to learning dispositions. The purpose of the *Te Whāriki* assessment is to make an informed judgment about the pedagogy, specifically how the preschool aims are put into practice, but also to assess children's ways of learning and their participation in the preschool community. Thus, given this last focus, using this assessment method as a tool for generating data seemed well-suited to answer the research questions in this study. In order to try out how the Learning Story

Approach could be used as a tool to develop and analyze observations in a research, I conducted a pilot study with a colleague (Karlisdóttir & Garðarsdóttir, 2010).

In the current study, I made observations during the fieldwork and at that time included reflections from the children and the preschool teachers. Later, I continued by developing learning stories for each child. In this study I refer to the learning stories I made as ‘children’s’ stories, as the stories I wrote mainly included my own reflections, at least in the later steps of the analysis. The children’s stories, then, are my stories made from the observations, focusing on the children’s ways of being and acting. Writing the stories was a way of attempting to see what the children were doing, focusing on their individual characteristics when taking part in their preschool groups and at the same time focusing on their competencies. In Carr’s (2014) opinion, constructing children’s learning stories (and use as an assessment method) in preschool practice also is an attempt to “shift mindsets, and expectations from deficit positioning to an acknowledgement and nurturing of interests and learning identities” (p. 272). In this study, constructing children’s stories was, for me as a researcher, a way not to use the (default) developmental lens as observing children, but rather a way to value the complex issues what are a part of all socio-cultural contexts.

I shared some of the observations I recorded with the children and preschool teachers in the first part of the data generation; this step helped build trust between me and the children and preschool teachers in the preschools, as it allowed those taking part to gain insight into what the data I was generating looked like. Nevertheless, the children’s stories were made by me, as I thoroughly and repeatedly read through all transcripts and explored my field notes, examining the data-set in detail, and followed analysis steps reflecting on and analyzing the data. I finished by, in the last steps of analysis, exploring the data in terms of three lenses of learning dispositions, reorganized by me (see section 2.7.3).

## **1.5 The focus of the study and research questions**

The study discussed here builds on views toward children and learning where children are seen as social beings and active participants in a democratic society. This research supports a view of children as rich in potential, interacting in the preschool context and co-constructing meaning with each other and with preschool teachers. In this view, they not only need to be given space to have their say, but also their expression and thinking are seen as important contributions to the preschool community

and the wider society. In this study I want to engage with the details of children's lives in the social context of the preschool, which is seen as a meeting place for children and preschool teachers, as a physical space, a social space, and a cultural space (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005).

The research questions in this study are:

1. What are the multiple factors that influence children's learning processes when they participate in preschool groups?
2. How are the children learning?

The study seeks support from Rogoff's (2003) research and theories with the aim to understand the cultural organizations of learning traditions in the preschools (Rogoff et al., 2007) as well as to reflect on and analyze children as participants within cultural organization of everyday practices. Thus, Rogoff's ideas are well suited to the search for answers to my research questions. Firstly, the ideas can help me to reflect on and analyze children as participants in the everyday practices in their preschool groups. Secondly, Rogoff's mode of children learning through intent community participation aligns well with the main emphasis from the National Curriculum Guide in Iceland (2011), stating the importance of democracy, well-being, equality, and interpersonal relationships in preschool education. In contexts where learning through intent community participation is valued, the goal of educating is transformation of participation, which involves children learning to collaborate, to act responsibly and appropriately as well as gaining knowledge and skills, and to be responsible contributors belonging in the community. In light of these ideas, I believe it is informative to look at children's learning processes within the different pedagogies and how they relate to the National Curriculum Guide.

## **1.6 Methodology**

In order to explore the multiple factors affecting young children's learning processes while participating in two different curricular contexts, philosophical underpinnings and methodological techniques and practices need to be integrated. The literature briefly referred to above has been influential throughout the research process and is seen as supporting both the methods used in the study and the researcher's views toward children and their education. As views tend to evolve slowly, these theories and views are included to help me, the researcher, to look at children and the preschool practice through a contemporary lens.

The research method was inspired by ethnography, starting by my making lengthy observations in each preschool, attempting to be open-minded and non-judgmental. After this, I analyzed the data in several steps and related the data to theories and concepts in contemporary education. Going through the data-gathering process, subjective factors were included from children and preschool teachers taking part in the study, but first and foremost was my own subjective thinking. While in the field and later in the analyses process, I did not only see and observe objective incidents, but I also interpreted the complex factors affecting children's learning processes.

### **1.6.1 Locations and participants**

The study took place in two distinctively different preschools. The two preschools both built their practices on the Icelandic National Curriculum Guide (2011), thus having some similarities in the pedagogy. Nevertheless, each preschool adopted very different approaches in the stated school curricula, that led to the use of different day-to-day pedagogy.

One school works in the spirit of Reggio Emilia while the other adopts a relatively new Icelandic curriculum approach, the Hjalli approach. The pedagogy in *Seaside*, the Reggio Emilia-inspired preschool, derives from the work and ideology developed by Malaguzzi (1998) and his co-workers in the city of Reggio Emilia in northern Italy. According to *Seaside's* stated school curriculum the emphasis is on democracy and children are seen as strong and competent. The aims are to support children in creative activities, developing their ideas and hypotheses, and co-constructing meaning, both individually and in collaboration with others. The pedagogy in *Lava Ledge*, the Hjalli approach, builds on concern over gender discrimination, and seeks to address children's behavioral problems. Children are seen as needing protection, advice, and clear rules. In the Hjalli approach, it is believed that children should be supported in behaving according to rules, positive thinking, and developing independence. Furthermore, the aims are to support equality between girls and boys, an aim which has been advanced by means of primarily single-sex groups.

In both preschools, data generation occurred in a group of the oldest children, most of whom were five-years-old and would begin primary school the following year. Invited to be a part of this study were three preschool teachers and the oldest children in the group, one gender-mixed group in *Seaside* and two groups, one with boys and one with girls, in *Lava Ledge*.

Below is the overview of the data generation in the two preschools: Field notes included *observations from a total of 36 children*: 15 children, five girls and six boys in Seaside, and 21 children, eleven girls and ten boys in Lava Ledge. Through the final analyses, I developed *children's stories* (inspired by the Learning Story Approach) for a total of 24 children taking part in six small groups (described as episodes). The children's stories described the activities of five girls and six boys in Seaside and six girls and seven boys in Lava Ledge. Instead of abridging descriptions and creating a more general overview with an account of all 24 children, only half of the data is displayed in the thesis. Thus, included in the thesis, *children's stories from 12 children are discussed*. These write-ups are focused on two girls and three boys from Seaside and three girls and four boys from Lava Ledge. Since revealing more detailed descriptions of each child's ways of interacting within the preschool group was believed to have greater value than portraying a briefer, more general overview with an account of all children, the research was written up in the form of descriptive cases. Cases from the two preschools describe episodes from the schools, in detail I describe a short period where the children participate in their daily lives. I present the episodes in different phases and break those into numbered steps, to be able to refer back to later, when constructing children's stories and children's participation in their preschool groups. As the detailed description had become cumbersome and one episode from each preschool class would be enough to give insight into the children's daily lives, I chose to write about half of the cases, building on half of the episodes (see sections 5.4.1, 6.4.1. and 6.5.1) and the children taking part, one from the children in Seaside, and one from the girls' group and one from the boys' group in Lava Ledge. Describing these cases had the aim to explain children's lives (Graue & Walsh, 1998) without losing the richness of the children's participation in the preschools.

It has to be admitted that the aims and methods in the two pedagogies include issues which in different degrees are in accordance with my own views. The choice of theories of a socio-cultural nature as an ideological ground, focusing on children's competence and seeing children as co-constructing knowledge with other children and adults in their preschool group (see section 1.3), highly influences the research. This choice of underpinning views functions as a theoretical lens, supporting my views, but might favor one of the preschools in the study, the Reggio Emilia-inspired one, as socio-cultural views toward children and learning are closer to the ideas and methods developed in the city of Reggio Emilia than to the Hjalli pedagogy. Nevertheless, from the Hjalli pedagogy I believe in and

value many of the issues important in the aims, such as those found in the strong and practical main focus on what works in preschools, that in my mind need to be more recognized in preschools in general. Furthermore, related to one of the main aims of the Hjalld pedagogy, I support the goal of gender equity in preschool practice, most certainly an aim that needs to be addressed in all schools.

My views being in general closer to one of the preschools, the Reggio Emilia one, might cause a bias in the study, and has called for planning methods to work against the bias. I have mainly addressed this issue of bias by trying to be as open minded and non-judgmental as possible through the research process, the data gathering, analyses and writing up of the theses. Furthermore, by explaining my views (see section 1.2) and by planning a research approach where the data generation partly is differently planned, by choosing different situations in the two preschools, specific in relation to the aims in each school. Nevertheless, in order to bring some coherence into the data generation, the latter half of the analysis is followed up by the same analysis process (see section 4.5.2) building on the specific aims in each preschool context.

### **1.6.2 The research design**

The research design is portrayed in figure 1.A with three ovals, put on top of a square. I visualize these ovals as resembling a wedding cake in layers. I see figure 1.A as explaining the main focus of the study, and the methods and theories I used. The bottom two layers (1 and 2) are representing the foundation I have suggested in the research design; that is, the method and methodology of the study. I chose tools to generate the data, such as observations, an analysis process and theories supporting the analyses. I chose these tools in order to bridge between the reality I was exploring (3 and 4) and the theoretical underpinning of the study; the main ideas, that are close to my own.

The largest layer (1) is the foundation, the underpinning theories of the study, refer to learning as taking place in the reciprocal interaction between the social context and the individual child (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978), with a focus on children learning as participating in preschool groups (Rogoff, 2003). Children are seen as competent agents in their lives (Mayall, 2003; Dahlberg et al, 1999), and learning is seen as taking place in preschools when children participate in peer groups (Corsaro, 2015). Furthermore, pedagogy, play, and power relations between teachers and

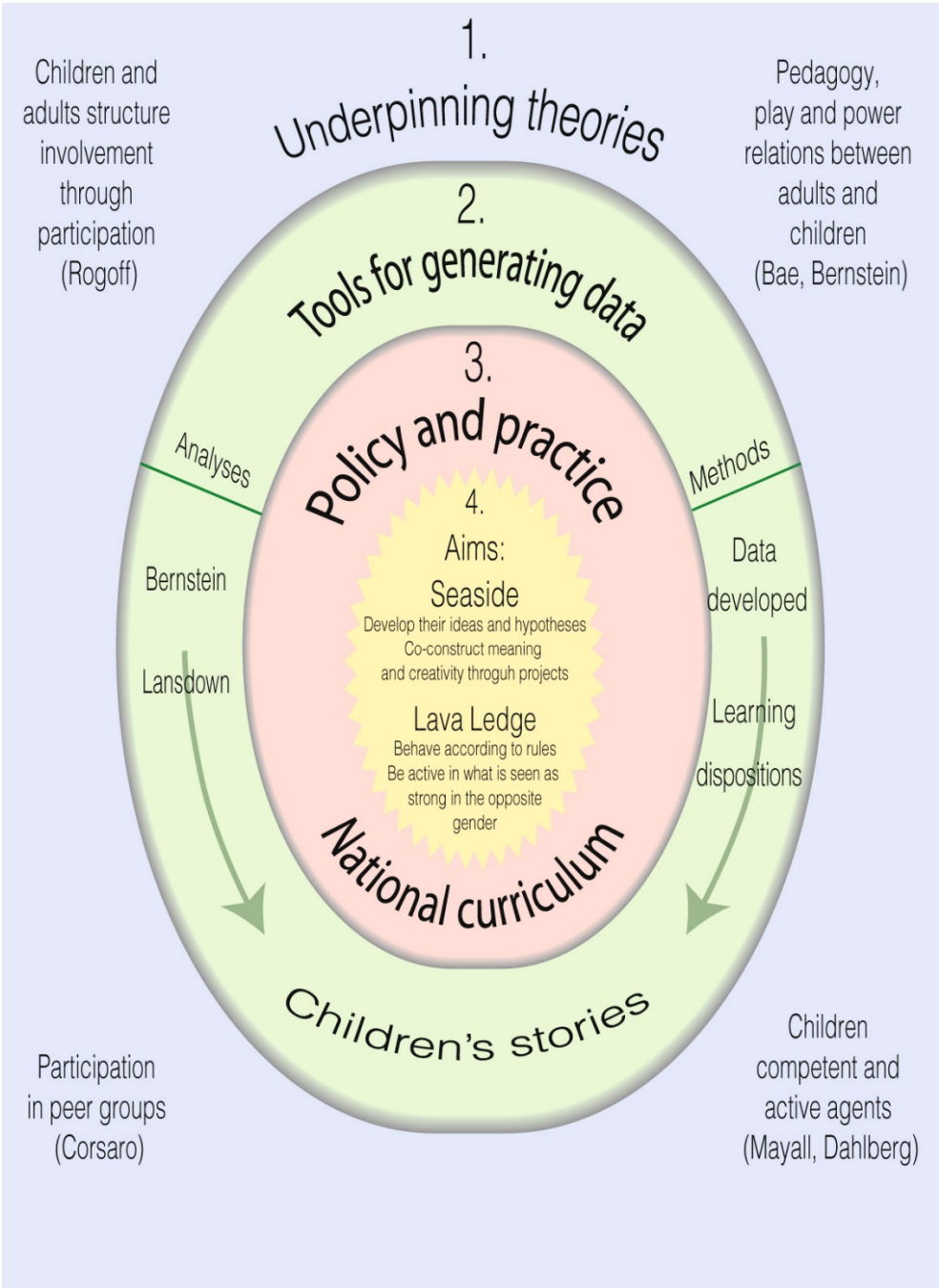
children are seen as being among the factors influencing children's learning processes (Bae, 2009; Bernstein, 1977) (see section 1.3).

The second layer (2), slightly smaller, identifies the choice of methods and tools for data generation well suited to the theories. The layer (2) shows how the children's stories I constructed from observations as children participated in their respective preschools were constructed, first by developing children's stories and later describing participation in the groups in relation to learning dispositions. On the right side are the methods of developing and analyzing the data in relation to theory. The left side of the second circle refers to the later steps of the analyses. These include Bernstein's (1977) concepts of strong or weak classification and framing that are used to identify how power is controlled and distributed within a pedagogic environment. Also included are Lansdown's three possible modes of children's participation in decision-making: in what ways children are consulted, how they are supported to participate, and if their participation includes children's initiated processes.

The third layer (3) refers to the social context the research is framed by: Icelandic education and the National Curriculum Guide. This layer is to represent that the research is situated within a cultural context, the children's preschools are a part of a particular society within which policy for the preschools is framed, and should be a part of the factors influencing children's daily lives.

The fourth layer (4), on top, is describing the aims from the school curricula in the two different preschools where the observations in this study were made. What is found in the top layer (4) are the aims and practices for children in the two preschools, and this is where the main attention is: attempting to understand what happens as these children take part in their preschools. This is where the data originated: from the children's reality in their daily lives.

Additionally, figure 1.A has the purpose of acknowledging that this study is a qualitative one, where the situations would never be the same, and the tools and the underpinning theories and views I chose are probably unique for the current study, thus it can't be repeated expecting the same results. Instead, the purpose of this design is to give a view into the particularities of children's lives and, by this, to communicate an understanding in the hope of helping to build a vision for children's lives.



**Figure 1.A Theories, methods, policy and situation**

### 1.6.3 Generating and analyzing the data

Data was generated in preschools and simultaneously analyzed, with occasional contributions from the preschool teachers and children involved. After this the field notes were developed through an analysis process, where in the later steps of analysis, the process was inspired by the use of the learning dispositional features from the Learning Story approach developed in New Zealand's *Te Whāriki* Curriculum. As noted in section 1.4.

#### *Observations made with an open mind*

Throughout the data-generation process, I tried to be open minded, avoid being judgmental, and remain open to children's multiple meanings by listening to their voices. I generated data by writing research notes, and taking photos and videos. After this I rewrote notes building on the data generation, and repeatedly read and started to sort the research notes, seeking emergent themes.

#### *Episodes from groups*

To give the reader a view into the background material, episodes from children interacting in play and creative activities were chosen to "paint a picture of" the situations the children's stories (made later in the analysis process) built on. The episodes were from two groups in Seaside and four groups in Lava Ledge, and describe examples of the situations from which the children's stories I constructed build on. First, I analyzed initial data, by carefully reading the research notes, seeking themes by exploring children's different means of expression. I organized the data into four themes; (1) what the children did; (2) the support and reactions they got from the environment; (3) the ideas or hypotheses that the children expressed; and (4) how or if children's ideas were listened to. Building on these themes, and individual themes for each child, I later wrote individual children's stories (discussed below under children's stories made by the researcher).

#### *The writing up*

In the writing up, I chose for display three of the episodes, one from Seaside and two from Lava Ledge, (followed by half of the children's stories I constructed). I had described and analyzed observations from two episodes in each classroom (one in Seaside and two in Lava Ledge), and the children's stories for children appearing in the episodes. In these episodes I saw similarities, and thus chose one for display to give the reader an inside into the particularities in the preschools. I did this to be able to make explicit, in more detail, each child's ways of interacting within the preschool group. A further purpose was to give the reader opportunity to gain an in-

depth knowledge of a child or a group by showing more clearly the actions that occur within the preschool contexts and make the ongoing learning processes explicit.

#### *Children's stories made by the researcher*

After this, I wrote children's stories, in a form similar to the learning stories developed in New Zealand.

Building on the research notes I developed and analyzed narratives, I refer to as children's stories; stories that were my stories about what the children did and how they interacted in their preschool groups, also attempting to reveal what I saw as the child perspective, and to describe the children's individual characteristics. Finally, I describe children's participation in a group, by analyzing the children's stories in terms of learning dispositions, that I organized from the perspective of three lenses by connecting theories relevant in socio-cultural research: (1) Communication and involvement, (2) Well-being and belonging, and (3) Contribution and taking responsibility. Further explained below in section 2.7.3.

## **1.7 Key concepts**

*Pedagogy* is seen as the support offered to children by preschool teachers. Pedagogy refers to the teacher's beliefs and methods and how teachers have planned the preschool environment, where the importance of play has a central role; play being valued as a means for children to learn (Ailwood, 2003).

*Play and pedagogy* are seen as integrated rather than as separate activities and play pedagogy is used in preschools as a way of teaching, with the aim for children to learn social, interactional, and verbal skills through play. According to these views, teachers and children co-construct meaning, and teachers seek, in their interaction with children, equal power balance (Bae, 2009; Brooker, 2010; Wood & Attfield, 2005).

*Learning processes* are seen as the processes where children develop skills and understanding, and develop social competence in co-construction of knowledge, together with peers and preschool teachers (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978).

*Participation* is understood as children's engagement in the cultural practices and circumstances of communities (in this study preschools), where children observe and begin to participate in more mature

community activities. This participation is seen as an opportunity for children to learn (Rogoff, 2003).

*Guided participation* is described as children and adults finding ways to understand each other's perspectives and jointly support each other's involvement, as they participate in and are guided by the values and practices of the communities (Rogoff, 2003).

*Twenty-first century skills* are seen as evolving in process-oriented learning such as problem solving where children are encouraged to 'learn to learn' and children are active taking part in what is of interest for them. This approach to learning builds on socio-cultural views valuing skills such as collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and self-knowledge. Such learning processes are open to interpretation and controversy rather than fixed knowledge and one right answer (Wells & Claxton, 2002).

*Learning dispositions* can be defined as the child's inclination to act in a certain way, i.e., what children do and how they go about doing it, and aim to give insight into the thoughts, ideas, and values leading them to act in a certain way. This means that learning dispositions are not just what children know but also how they use that knowledge (Carr, 2001). The *Te Whāriki* puts forward five features of learning dispositions, as a support for the preschool teachers to read into signs of how the child seems to be interested, involved exploring possibilities, expressing ideas or feelings, and taking responsibility for self and others (Carr, 2001).

*Power* is seen as a force that influences people differently in different circumstances. In preschools it needs to be acknowledged that the power balance is in favor of the preschool teachers (Bae, 2009). Power relations in this study include Bernstein's (1977) concepts of strong or weak classification and framing that are used to identify how power is controlled and distributed within a pedagogic environment. Also included are Lansdown's (2005) three possible modes of children's participation in decision-making: in what ways children are consulted, how they are supported to participate, and if their participation includes child initiated processes.

*Children as competent and active agents*, means seeing children as citizens and learners, having the right to be active participants in matters that affect them (United Nations, 1989). It also means seeing children as competent; as being able to express and form their own views and interests and as participants who find solutions and answers valuable for society (Mayall, 2003).

*Peer cultures* are referred to when a group of children spend time together on an everyday basis (such as in preschool) and share experiences, such as a stable set of activities, routine artifacts, or values and concerns, and through this participation produce their own cultural values (Corsaro, 2015).

## **1.8 Summary and structure of the thesis**

The theories of learning and teaching underpinning this study are largely socio-cultural and seeking support from the sociology of childhood. The main questions guiding the study are focused on the exploration of the multiple factors that influence children's learning processes when they participate in preschool groups, and how the children are learning in two different preschool contexts. To be able to explore and seek answers to these questions, the focus is on how children interact in their preschool groups, how they play and take part in other activities, and how/if they are able to use the support they are provided with.

This chapter presented the main aims and purposes of the thesis, along with contextual information on preschools in Iceland, the policies that impacts those preschools, and the ongoing debate around young children's education as they prepare to enter primary school. Further, the framework of the study and a few basic concepts has been briefly set out. Chapter 2 reviews a number of theoretical approaches and ideas related to understanding young children's learning. Chapter 3 discusses the cultural context in Iceland, describing the policies and practices in Icelandic preschools and the pedagogy of the two preschools taking part in this study. Chapter 4 presents the approach and methodology as well as the design of the study and the methods employed for data generation and analysis. Chapter 5 describes children's participation and interaction with peers and preschool teachers in the Seaside preschool, working in the spirit of Reggio Emilia. Chapter 6 describes children's participation and interaction with peers and preschool teachers in Lava Ledge, a preschool operating within the Hjalli pedagogy. Chapter 7 discusses the main findings from the two preschools in relation to the literature, while chapter 8 is a concluding chapter, which presents the implications of the study for practice, policy, and future research.

## **2 A sociocultural approach to children's learning in preschool**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter introduces recent approaches to understanding young children's learning, that derive from a view of children as strong and competent agents who can construct knowledge with the support of others, including their peers and adults. These approaches mostly all stem from Vygotsky's (1978) theories, which have been taken in various directions by subsequent sociocultural theorists (e.g., Carr; Dahlberg et al.; Rogoff; Wells & Claxton). All these theorists and researchers see development and learning as a process of interaction between children and the 'social situation' provided in their home and school environments, each of which conveys its own cultural values and routines. The theories and ideas in this study are framed by sociocultural ideas, and particularly seek support from what has been referred to as the 'sociology of childhood' (Prout & James, 2015; Qvortrup, 2009). These ideas emerged over 20 years ago having the aim of adding to the prevailing psychological ideas at that time and addressing the social construction of childhood (Prout, 2011). According to this social construction, there is not one childhood, but instead there are 'childhoods,' and the child is seen as having status of a person (Prout & James, 2015). The focus is on children's rights as agents in their lives, not only attending to children's needs but also children's right to be heard. At the same time, children are seen as a minority group, subject to oppression by adults. Power relations between preschool teachers and children thus need to be reflected on and analyzed when attending to pedagogy and play in preschools (Bae, 2009; Bernstein, 1977). Furthermore, children's experience within the preschool context is seen not only to be influenced by the pedagogy teachers provide them with but also by peer interactions in the group of children. Children's peer cultures refer to their participation in activities and routines, as sharing artefacts, and as producing values as well as addressing concerns with each other. Children in preschool groups create and control their participation in peer groups, and the teacher has only a surface recognition of how significant the experience is for the children (Corsaro, 2003, 2015). The children tend to gain control and negotiate that sense of control with each other and the positioning of individual children within each group varies, with some

children holding much of the power within the group while others might frequently be on the periphery or even marginalized (Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2006).

As the aim of this study was to explore the multiple factors affecting young children's learning processes and to give a detailed description of how children are learning in the daily lives while participating in two different early childhood curricular contexts, the theories discussed present the main ideas about children and learning in preschool education that support the current study. Four main ideas are seen as important, each influenced by issues relevant in sociology of childhood and each coming from different ideas although mostly influenced by Vygotsky's ideas.

This chapter starts by explaining children's learning processes as framed by sociocultural views. The main ideas further discussed in this chapter are focusing on how or if: (1) children and adults structure involvement through participation in the preschool context; (2) children are seen as competent agents, creating meaning through interaction; (3) children participate in peer groups in their preschools; and (4) pedagogy, play, and power relations influence children's learning processes. The final section discusses several main concepts explaining how dispositions have been understood and ending with sections explaining how the concept has been used in assessing children's learning in the social context of a preschool in the New Zealand curriculum *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996).

## **2.2 Children's learning processes in preschool**

This section addresses the sociocultural approach to learning, which draws on many disciplines and discourses (such as sociocultural studies, cultural psychology, sociology and anthropology) but derives mainly from seminal work by Vygotsky. The core of Vygotsky's theory is the notion that human activities take place in cultural contexts, are mediated by language and other symbolic systems that influence the development of thought, and can be best understood when investigated in a historical perspective (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978). His theories combined views from anthropological and sociological studies of his time and suggested mechanisms by which culture becomes a part of each individual, including not only the history of culture and society but also the history of the individual.

Vygotsky's theory (1978) envisions learning and development differently from Piaget's and others' developmental theories, which assume that children's maturation is the prerequisite for learning but never the result of

learning. In contrast, Vygotsky's theory unites *external learning processes* and internal developmental processes; as children interact in a social context, they gain external knowledge that becomes internalized. In education, according to Vygotsky's theory, the external learning processes and internal developmental processes are not the same and do not coincide. External learning processes come first, such as when a child understands the meaning of a word or finds a solution to a problem. The internal developmental processes come a moment later and entail the development of a variety of highly complex internal processes in the individual's thinking. This means that everything is being learned twice, once on the social plane and once on the individual plane. Although the relationships between these processes are complex and cannot be fully detected in reality, these processes, which Vygotsky referred to as internalization (of culturally produced sign systems), might lead to a transformation in what individuals do. Vygotsky (1978) saw understanding people's mental processes as a way to establish treatment for mental disorder, which is a view that can be projected to education. Understanding children's mental processes might inform learning and teaching in schools, by exploring and gaining a deeper understanding of children's various kinds of experiences, when they interact in their preschool.

In order to explain the innovative and creative processes taking place when children participate in society, Corsaro refers to the concept of *interpretive reproduction*. Children and their childhoods are affected by the societies and cultures of which they are members; they not simply internalize society and culture, but actively contribute to cultural production and change. This means that socialization is not only a matter of individual adaptation and internalization but also a process of appropriation, reinvention, and reproduction, where children are active participants in a group of peers (Corsaro's conception of peer culture is discussed in section 2.5) and preschool teachers (Corsaro, 2015, 2012). This means that exploring the collective interactions in preschool contexts by focusing on the way children negotiate, share, and create culture with adults and each other (Löfdahl, 2014) might offer new insights into what happens when children take part in preschool activities.

Drawing upon Vygotsky's (1978) idea of the external learning processes and Corsaro's concept of interpretive reproduction, in the current study children's learning processes in preschools are seen as supported by these two different ideas. Firstly, children's learning processes are being developed and happen in the social plane, seeing children as learning and changing as learners (Vygotsky, 1978). Secondly, children, not only

internalize the values and norms of society and culture, but also actively contribute to cultural production and change as they take part in their preschool group, as well as contributing to their preschool context. As focusing on children's learning processes, through careful observation, researchers inspired by Vygotsky and Corsaro can gain new insights into what happens when children take part in preschool activities.

In preschools that build their practice on sociocultural views, the teacher might try to understand the child's perspective in the process of learning. According to Claxton and Carr (2004), when preschool teachers want to understand how preschool contexts support children's learning processes, it is useful to explore the learning opportunities within the learning environments. These include what the teachers do; how they support children's learning processes (e.g., explain, orchestrate, comment on, model, and assess learning); how they encourage children to be active participants; and how they enable families to be a part of these processes (Claxton & Carr, 2004). When teachers are able to follow children's learning processes they might build a more thorough understanding of what children think and how they arrive at what they believe.

Many theorists (e.g., John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Rogoff, 2003; Wells & Claxton, 2002) who support socio-cultural views have been in the forefront of developing theories, research, and practice that build on these ideas. These theorists believe that planning activities for learning and teaching valuing socio-cultural views (e.g., focusing on and understanding children's learning processes) can bring about change in children's education. This kind of learning has been referred to by Wells and Claxton, in collaboration with others (Carr & Claxton, 2002), as 'learning to learn,' which is, in their view, the most important skill a child needs for the twenty-first century. This means to plan learning and teaching that are more process-oriented rather than foregrounding outcomes for children related to subject-matter knowledge. According to these theoreticians, the socio-cultural perspective in education can provide a deeper understanding of the possibilities for educational reform (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). In preschools this would mean that children would learn through being active in projects that are of interest for them and teachers would support the learning processes taking place through co-construction. Socio-cultural views might then be useful for providing insights into the learning processes of children in preschool contexts and for examining contextual factors such as teachers' methods in order to understand the child's perspective, what children think, and how they arrive at what they believe. Furthermore, insights into these learning

processes might contribute to the current search for appropriate education and care for five-year-old children.

The current study uses a specific theoretical lens building on views of a socio-cultural nature, as children's learning processes were observed, analyzed, and related to the social context of these preschool settings, including each teacher's methods and each child's perspective. In order to gain another socio-cultural perspective on learning processes in preschool contexts, Rogoff's notion of participation, will be discussed in the next section.

### **2.3 Participation in a social cultural milieu – Rogoff**

While Vygotsky's theory focuses on mental- and social processes, that is, the learning processes that take place in the social plane and the internal developmental processes of the individual, Rogoff focuses on cognitive development but mostly within community contexts. This means that Rogoff's account of how learning takes place describes people's participation in their cultural communities and learning is seen as interactional processes that are involved in studying the various ways individuals learn as they participate in and are guided by the values and practices of these communities. Learning, from this perspective, is seen as a process of participation in cultural activities within communities and between people or, where children are concerned, between adults and children (Rogoff, 2003).

Like Vygotsky and many of the socio-cultural ideas developed from his theories, Rogoff stresses the role of culture in the process of human development. She distinguishes between communities in terms of the opportunities they provide for children to engage either in mature activities in their community or in specialized, child-focused activities. She discusses childrearing from a cross-cultural perspective, emphasizing variations in social relations, children's autonomy, and gender roles (Rogoff, 2003). In Rogoff's view, people's performances depend mostly on the circumstances that are routine in their communities and on the cultural practices to which they are accustomed. What they do depends on the cultural meaning that is given to events and on the support for learning that is provided in the social and institutional planes in their communities (Rogoff, 2003). In this study these ideas were related to children as taking part in preschool activities; the environment; and the materials, routines, and interactions within the preschool community, in order to explore the multiple factors influencing children's learning processes.

Rogoff addresses the relationship between culture and biology and argues that they are, in reality, inseparable. She rejects ideas that look at similarities in behaviors across cultures as being explained by biology while differences are ascribed to culture (Rogoff, 2003). She also discusses people's involvement and creation of individual and cultural processes in communities. Rogoff explains guided participation as a mode of learning; a process of taking on new roles and responsibilities in which learning is seen as a process of changing participation in community activities. In this understanding, both adults and children have active roles as they take part in forming individual and cultural processes and creating cultural traditions in preschool communities.

Guided participation (Rogoff, 2003, 1990) provides a perspective that may help parents and other adults to focus on the various ways children learn within different cultural contexts. Guided participation does not refer to a particular method of support for learning; rather, it builds on the child being active in learning where adults' support can take many forms, such as explicit verbal and non-verbal guidance and other interactions with the environment; the arrangement of materials, routines, and practices of the social community; and engagement in more-didactic experiences. For example, one form of guided participation is explanation; another is teasing and shaming, when adults and peers point out children's foibles and mistakes by holding their behavior up to social valuation sometimes with humor and goodwill, and sometimes not. Guided participation is not limited to learning skills that are seen as acceptable in the cultural context. It may include, for instance, unacceptable skills, such as the use of violence to handle interpersonal problems. In addition, guided participation might include efforts made by children themselves or their peers and even to avoid some kinds of learning. The term "guided" in this concept is thus meant broadly to not only include but also go beyond interactions that are intended to be instructional (Rogoff, 2003, p. 284). Thus, in preschools, guided participation might be about the child's interactions within the context, which includes artifacts and other people, and gradually becoming a part of developing the culture in the preschool.

As the child gets older or more familiar with the situation, he or she gradually takes on new roles and responsibilities, with support from the adults; such support might take different forms in different settings (Rogoff, 2003). Within a preschool, this might be explained with the following example. In one particular school, the kitchen staff takes care of the cooking, and in that context, there is no tradition of children being included in planning, preparing, or purchasing food. One child demonstrates a

specific interest in food and the kitchen, and may want to know more about the topic and take part in cooking in the kitchen. The child's interests appear in different situations when playing or taking part in other activities. In conversations with the teacher, the child asks many questions in relation to food and the kitchen, such as: What is for dinner? Who does the cooking? Do you know the cook? What is her name? Who goes to the store to buy food? The teacher discusses these questions and encourages the child to find answers; she sees the child's interest as an opportunity to support his or her learning and responds by inviting the child into the kitchen to explore and ask the cook all these questions. One thing leads to another; the child and the teacher visit the kitchen, and eventually other children start to join them. This gradually becomes one of the traditions in this preschool and part of the preschool culture.

The interests of this particular child lead to reactions from adults and, in turn, their actions lead to a process of change. The child's interests in food and the kitchen lead to questions and he finds answers as he is introduced to a new situation. He might get information about where the food comes from, how the food is prepared, and who is responsible for deciding what they will eat. Involved in this process could be further discussions around food, such as which foods are healthy or unhealthy for growing children. In this way, the child becomes an active participant in structuring his own learning, and his interests influence other children's learning, not only those taking part in "his" activities but also others who have an opportunity to be a part of the kitchen project.

Rogoff describes this interaction as two basic processes of guided participation. The first, the mutual bridging of meanings, involves children, their peers, and the preschool teachers attempting to bridge their different perspectives using culturally available tools such as words and gestures, and referencing each other's actions and reactions. The second, the mutual structuring of participation, describes how individuals structure each other's involvement to facilitate engagement in shared efforts (Rogoff, 2003). In preschools, this might be described as children and adults finding ways to understand each other's perspectives (bridging their different perspectives) and jointly supporting each other's involvement (mutual structuring), including when children and their peers support each other's shared endeavors by attempting to bridge their different perspectives.

The mutual bridging of meanings describes ways in which partners seek a common perspective or language through which to communicate their ideas in order to coordinate their efforts. Mutual understanding occurs

between people in interaction; it is not the effort of one person but rather an understanding achieved within a group. The modification of each participant's perspective is necessary to accomplish things together. The modifications are a process of development; as the participants adjust or communicate and coordinate, their new perspectives involve greater understanding (Rogoff, 2003). Rogoff refers to social referencing as one way in which meaning can be conveyed, as well as a very powerful way to gain and give information when individuals want to know how to interpret ambiguous situations from the physical expressions of others (Rogoff, 2003). One example of how toddlers read their parents' expressions is when a child is about to receive a vaccination and knows beforehand that it will be an unpleasant occurrence. Another example derives from Rogoff's research in a Mayan society, interacting with a Mayan boy of 20 months and his mother. By looking in her direction, the toddler sought information from his mother, about whether or not Play-Doh was edible. Frequently, similar interactions happen in preschools, such as when a child looks at the preschool teacher to see if it is okay to have another piece of fruit at snack time or to get permission to use a new toy or material. This can also be seen when an older child is outside in natural environment and a peer is climbing higher toward the top of a hill. The child looks in the teacher's direction to see if it is acceptable to climb this far or may even call out to the teacher, asking if it would be wise to climb farther.

In relation to the mutual structuring of participation, Rogoff describes a process whereby individuals and cultural communities change by mutually creating and re-creating each other. In Western societies, the structuring occurs through the choice of which activities children are able to observe and engage in, as well as through shared endeavors between people, including conversations, recounting of narratives, and engagement in routines and play (Rogoff, 2003). In most preschools, like in other cultural communities, children and adults together structure the situations in which children are involved. The preschool teacher plans the time and chooses artifacts, activities, and materials that are accessible to the children and through the resulting interaction follows up on the children's involvement within the preschool setting.

The child who was interested in cooking might have been playing in the home corner (which is set up by the teacher) and may have had long discussions with the teacher where they considered the child's idea and curiosity about cooking in the preschool. The same could have happened as other children started to show their interest in what happened in the kitchen; they would come up with suggestions, new knowledge, or ideas

and might have developed a mutual understanding about the issue and what to do. Thus, the children and their teacher structured their own and each other's participation. In this way, young children are active in their own socialization with the assistance of other people, e.g., preschool teachers and children, being active participants in supporting their increased understanding.

Within cultures in societies, young children learn largely from keen observation of their elders. However, as previously noted, a part of these socialization processes is influenced by other 'tacit arrangements' such as the resources in the environment; however, 'cultural tutoring' takes place even when no adult is present. This might be explained by different processes, such as learning from the built environment and resources with or without direct adult involvement (Rogoff, 2003). In addition to the preschool teachers being responsible for organizing the environment, for what materials are available to the children, and when and how they can be used, in all cultures, teachers use words, gestures, and facial expressions to communicate with the children (Rogoff, 2003). Even in situations where children are playing 'freely' in their preschools without the teacher's involvement, teachers communicate all sorts of tacit messages. A common example of this is when a teacher approaches an area where children are playing and looks at what is going on; a look alone can give children many different signals, such as in their body language gestures and facial expression, including whether the teacher approves or disapproves of the play that he or she observes.

The theories and ideas discussed in this section have focused on the preschool as being situated in a socio-cultural context. The next section discusses issues related to policy in most countries, particularly Western countries, that suggest a view of children as competent and active agents in preschools.

## **2.4 Children as active agents**

In this section, views of *children as active agents* (e.g., Dahlberg et al., 1999; Mayall, 2013; Prout & James, 2015) will be discussed, as one of the main theoretical resources located in 'sociology of childhood' arguing a view seeing children as social agents who are competent, able, and resilient (Mac Naughton et al., 2010; Mayall, 2003; Prout, 2011).

### 2.4.1 Children's agency

The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989), that has been endorsed by most of the world's nations, refers not only to children's needs but also their rights to agency. Article 12 of the Convention states:

States parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. (United Nations, 1989)

Therefore, in the daily lives of children, they are not only seen to have the right to participate in matters concerning them but also to express their views, to be heard, and to be seen as able to contribute to all matters affecting them. It is important to bear in mind what Lansdown (2005) stresses: "...the Convention does not give children full adult rights. Rather, it gives children the right to be heard and to gradually take increasing responsibility for decisions as their competence evolves" (Lansdown, 2005, p. 8).

In accordance with these views, in preschools, children might be provided with opportunities to express their views and be active in a wide range of relationships with other children and preschool teachers (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Mayall, 2003). In these situations, it is not enough to facilitate children's self-expression, they also need to be listened to (Malaguzzi, 1998; Rinaldi, 2005) in order for their perspectives to be understood by preschool teachers and other adults in their lives. This means that children need to be supported in expressing themselves and contributing to matters concerning them and the society they are a part of. Thus preschool teachers and researchers valuing the child's perspective need to work with children so that mutually empowering relationships and opportunities for participation and influence are built (Bae, 2009; Rinaldi, 2005). In addition, this idea of children's right and agency can be related to whether the child is seen as competent and having his/her own intentions in interacting with peers and preschool teachers. That is, if preschool teachers and researchers seek to understand the child's conceptions of a particular situation or a question in focus and if the child is supported to be influential contributor in the preschool context.

### 2.4.2 The competent child

The term competence has been defined and used differently. In psychological terminology, the term is often used to refer to performance or accomplishment at a particular time, often resulting in a focus on abilities that have yet to emerge or are not yet fully developed. Competencies are directly observable by what the child does and how the child displays skills in external actions or behavior (Sommer et al., 2010). In practice, these views have had a tendency to focus on what the child is not able to do rather than seeing competencies.

In Mayall's (2003) opinion, the construction of children as incompetent (immature, morally suspect pupils) has been a hindrance, to children's learning in the education system. Building on the collection of data with children, and by children, Mayall's recommendation to researchers is to recognize that children are knowledgeable and constructively critical social agents who are competent, able to cope, and resilient (Mayall, 2003). In this sense, researchers and those planning education for children might gain from seeing them as active learners and citizens in their daily lives and for the future, in compliance with the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989). Nevertheless, even if children are seen as active and competent agents with the right to freely express views that are taken into account by others, adults need to have concern for their well-being and protection (Mayall, 2003). This respect for young children's agency emphasizes the need for teachers not only to reconsider their ideas about children, and to put the main focus children's abilities to engage actively and contribute to the society, but also to develop learning and teaching methods that are supportive of such learning processes.

As discussed above, listening to children's views is strongly related to the notion of the competent child, which, in the Nordic tradition, has been represented as being not only different from other countries but also partly explained by a long history of child-centeredness. Child-centeredness is a concept deriving from Key (1909) whose writing on children's rights in the beginning of the twentieth century had a great influence on how children were seen in Nordic countries. At this time, Key wished for "...a more child-centered pedagogy, and an upbringing where the children's own perspectives and interests were to be guideposts for children's education" (Kristjánsson, 2006, p. 17). Hence, there is a long tradition in the Nordic countries where children's contributions are valued and the child is seen as an agent and citizen at the present time and for the future (Mayall, 2003). Even though Icelandic preschool practice has been influenced by many

eclectic theories and practices, such as child choice in High-Scope and, in the last 25 years, ideas from the preschools in Reggio Emilia, Icelandic preschools retain characteristically Nordic qualities. For example, preschool practice in Iceland has been influenced by a long history of giving children freedom to play and explore freely in their daily activities, even though preschool teachers have tended to ask themselves if they are leaving the children with too little supervision (Einarsdóttir, 2006). In recent years, as in other countries, there has been a growing emphasis on empowering children in research and practice in order to elicit their perspectives (e.g., Bae, 2009; Einarsdóttir, 2014b).

As does Mayall (2003), Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) represent the young child as being an active participant in a wide range of relationships both within the home and outside and with other children and adults (Dahlberg et al., 1999). In a further development, Dahlberg and Moss (2005) argue that, rather than supporting general principles of the image of the child, we should engage with particularities in each social context and with the emotions of those who are a part of it. These authors (Dahlberg et al. and Mayall) propose the concept of 'minor politics' as comprising the small details of the everyday lives of children, families, and preschools. They argue that many issues and decisions are to be recognized and taken into account and should not to be taken for granted if active ethical practices are to be built. Minor politics requires a reflective attitude on the part of adults and involves constant critique, questioning assumptions, and confronting issues. This means seeing many possible views, methods, or solutions rather than believing in one right answer or method; that is, valuing multiplicity or diversity rather than totality or unity. In minor politics, 'experts' do not always know what is best for everyone; they are just participants like everyone else (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). In this understanding, preschools are places characterized by the complex interactions of people, where different views and placements are highly influenced by the power relations within the preschool context.

The notion of the competent child has also been critiqued as being another form of normalization (Kampmann, 2004). Recent theoreticians (e.g., Cannella, 2005; Dahlberg et al., 1999; Prout, 2011) have criticized the impact of views, such as seeing children as normal or not normal and expecting children to meet standards or specific levels of development, on pedagogy and practice in the classroom. In response to this critique, some early childhood educators and researchers in the international community (Cannella, 2005; Dahlberg et al., 1999) have engaged in deconstructions of dominant notions of the child. These deconstructions might, in preschools,

support children's participation where the image of the strong and competent child is valued.

In contrast, Kampmann (2004) criticizes the notion of the competent child, as this idea might result in the individual child being responsible for his or her own learning. The child might be expected to be able to control his or her participation by "...on its own initiative and according to its own impulse, be rational, sensible and, on the whole, 'unchildish'" (Kampmann, 2004, p. 145). This means risking leaving the child with too much responsibility, suffering from lack of support from teachers as they take part in preschool activities. Kampmann's understanding, is in line with Bernstein's (1990) idea of an invisible pedagogy where the demands on and requirements of the child are not explicit, and the child is left to figure out the aims the teacher has in mind (further discussed in section 2.6.7). As Kampmann puts it: "The demand is thus not only that the individual child is expected to control itself, but also, it is expected to control itself without being explicitly told to do so. In other words, the child, as part of the normalization demand, must be able to 'break the code' to get the feeling of what is expected" (Kampmann, 2004, p.145). Kampmann (2004) explains that these expectations might lead to a new form of normalization where some children cannot make choices and initiated his/her own actions and thus may not be able to meet the new demands and even be excluded or marginalized.

Sommer et al., (2010) agree with Mayall's notion of children as competent and having their own intentions in interacting with peers and adults. These authors also agree with Mayall's emphasis on how the adults' views and interaction with children can be influenced by how or if they see children's competences and what learning means for this age group. Nevertheless, their main emphasis is on children's perspectives, they see it as important for teachers to make observations and recommend using videos of their interactions with children in order to explore the child's conception of a particular situation or a question (Sommer et al., 2010). These authors, put forward the idea of the interpretive approach, which: "...would start by exploring what would be the child's conception of the question and the situation" (Sommer et al., 2010, p. 121).

To be able to focus on children's views, Sommer and his co-authors (Sommer et al., 2010) express the need for preschool teachers to use knowledge deriving from research in both psychology and sociology. These authors use two conceptions as a theoretical and practical framework that is meant to support early years' practices: the child perspective and the

children's perspectives. Both perspectives have as their aim for teachers as well as researchers to try to understand the world from the child's point of view. The child perspective comes from preschool teachers and researchers' methods as they study the child from the outside and focus on the individual child, often using knowledge from sociology or contextual psychology. The children's perspectives come from the view of the child from the inside out, starting from children's experiences, perceptions, and understanding, and how the child understands her own perspectives (Sommer et al., 2010).

These authors' views (Sommer et al., 2010) are both different from and similar to Dahlberg and colleagues, postmodern ideas. Sommer and colleagues, see similarities in the Scandinavian views and those of the preschool practices in the province of Reggio Emilia, as is in Dahlberg's (Dahlberg et al., 1999) description. In the view of Sommer et al., the similarities can be seen as building on a democratic tradition, seeing children as active participants in their preschools and having dialogs with children to be able to analyze what children say in order to understand their perspectives or creation of meaning. Thus, exploring children's participation in preschools might be helpful for preschool teachers as well as researchers and policy makers.

### **2.4.3 Children as participants in preschool context**

Increasing awareness of the role of children as participants in their preschool community, preschool teachers continue to plan the preschool pedagogy, even though the children's participation is very differently framed depending on the preschool. Some theoreticians and researchers have defended the use of organized frames to describe children's participation in preschools (e.g., Hart, 1997; Lansdown, 2005). Lansdown (2005) discusses children's participation in decision-making and puts forward three possible types of participation: consultation processes, participatory processes, and self-initiated processes. The first, *consultation processes*, are managed and initiated by adults, and children have no influence on the final decision. These methods are often used when making policy decisions, where children's views are heard but not necessarily listened to in the final decision. The second, *participatory processes*, can be initiated by adults, but children are empowered within a partnership between themselves and the adults; children can influence or challenge both the processes and outcomes and are actively involved throughout the process's development. These methods are often used when projects or

programs are evaluated through research or in activities involving decision-making at different levels in matters that concern the children. The third, *self-initiated processes*, are those in which children themselves are empowered to take action and decide the issues of concern and control the process, while adults facilitate rather than lead. These methods create real partnerships between adults and children, and through such partnerships children can be advisers in a context where adults respect their capacity to define their own concerns and priorities (Lansdown, 2005).

In conclusion, a common theme of the authors cited above is that it is important for researchers and preschool teachers to value an image of the child as competent; as Mayall (2003) emphasizes, if adults see children as able instead of focusing on incompetence, they will at least sociologically support children, even though there might be physical or mental factors that influence the power balance between adults and children. In order to work against child normalization and avoid generalizations about children, children's perspectives and their involvement in the contexts must be considered and taken into account. As preschool education and research in preschools involve many complex issues, some of which have been discussed above, the idea is to put forth an aim not as a fixed factor to produce results but rather as a frame of reference that can be helpful to visualize what is really happening in preschools. Therefore, I planned an exploration of communication where teaching and learning in preschool involves collaborative engagement and trust in children to take initiative. In order to do so there is a need to look further into children's participation in peer groups.

## **2.5 Participation in peer groups**

Teachers and researchers may need to recognize the different situations, where children as individuals take part in groups in the social context of the preschool. Where children, both as individuals and as participants in a group share experience with each other. Children's experience within the social environment is influenced by peer interactions, how or if they belong and have fun or even if they are being marginalized in the group. Thus it is relevant to discuss how children create peer culture.

### **2.5.1 Peer cultures in preschool**

Corsaro (2003) discusses the emotional satisfaction children gain from sharing and doing things in a group of their peers, wherein the participants in a peer culture are defined as a group of children who spend time

together on an everyday basis (Corsaro, 2015). Corsaro defines children's peer cultures as "a stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers" (Corsaro, 2015, p. 19). In a study conducted in a preschool, Corsaro repeatedly saw children share an experience that involved the sharing of a routine (such as always greeting each other in the same way) that emerged and reached a climax at a predictable moment. The children went through the same excitement and joy together, prompted by an event that the children created and controlled, and the significance of which adults had only a surface recognition (Corsaro, 2003).

Corsaro found two basic themes in preschool children's peer culture. First, when children are able or given space to do things together on their own without adult aid or direction, they attempt to gain control of their lives and to share that sense of control with one another (Corsaro, 2015). He observed that children were very frustrated by certain conventional or organizational rules that they saw as arbitrary and restrictive. Thus, the second theme he found was that children often employed secondary adjustments, that involve children using legitimate resources to get around rules, which enable children to gain a certain amount of control over their lives in these settings (Corsaro, 2015). For example, they reacted to rules forbidding bringing toys from home to the preschool by bringing in small toys that fit in their pockets. The children's ways of getting around the rules can lead to the development over a long period of time of an 'underlife', "a set of behaviors or activities that contradict, challenge, or violate the official norms or rules of a specific social organization or institution" (Corsaro, 2015, p. 177). His findings further suggest that those in a peer culture behave or react differently depending on the preschool teachers' presence or lack thereof.

Children in peer groups make their own sets of rules, which may differ from the preschool community's and of which preschool teachers may be unaware. Thus, Corsaro describes the importance of children's production of and participation in their own peer cultures to their evolving membership in society. He refers to the concept as interpretive reproduction, whereby young children engaged in sociodramatic play use a wide range of communication skills in order to collectively participate in and extend peer culture, while simultaneously appropriating features of and developing an orientation to the wider adult culture (Corsaro, 2015).

Broström (1998) also argues that children's abilities to develop social skills and to collaborate with people outside their families are supported by

collaboration with peers, and that preschools have a responsibility to promote children's friendships (Broström, 1998). A preference for particular peers emerges as early as the second year of life, and recent research has confirmed the complexity and enduring quality of early friendships (Greve, 2009; Hay, Payne, & Chadwick, 2004). Greve's research on the friendships of two-year-old children reveals a number of concepts: togetherness/the collective we ("et felles vi"), the meeting/to meet each other ("mötet"), the creation of meaning together ("at skape mening sammen") and humor ("humor"). Togetherness describes the friendship relations between children when they express an experience of having something in common. The experience of being together is some kind of 'collective we', and is a reciprocal phenomenon (Greve, 2009). However, togetherness can manifest differently for individual children in different situations.

### **2.5.2 Belonging and having fun**

Greve (2009) says that children, like adults, like to have fun together: they can have a history as well as pleasant common memories. For instance, it can be impossible for those who do not belong to a group to understand what is so funny. This is why it is difficult to exchange adults or children within a group. The humorous play is something that those taking part 'own' together; it is 'we' who understand what is funny. Such events can express and strengthen friendship. The expressions that can become a humorous event for some children may be a simple word or movement: for example, one child says 'atishoo' and another child laughs. This may seem funny to other children as well, irrespective of prior friendship. To support this result, Greve tells a story of two two-year-old boys who are playing a game. One of the boys says to the other that he has won, but his friend who was actually the winner immediately understands that this is a joke. In a similar situation with a different child, the other child would likely object to such statement (Greve, 2009).

Greve explains further with another example of how humor can become a private joke. Two children, a girl (Kari) and a boy (Ivar), are playing. Nils, another boy, is not playing with them; he approaches and starts a game of peek-a-boo with Ivar. The preschool teacher had observed Ivar and Nils playing this game a couple of times previously. On both occasions they had been deeply preoccupied by the game and laughing together. Initially, Kari tries to get Ivar to continue playing the game they had been playing, but in the end she gives up. She then tries to take part in the boys' game, but as the play is theirs, it becomes impossible for Kari to join in, probably because

she was not involved when the boys first 'invented' the game. Nils and Ivar are having fun, and Nils expresses the view that it is inappropriate for others to take part in their game. For Nils, and others, the participants involved in the collective joy are important (Greve, 2009). Greve finally discusses that her research demonstrated that two-year-old children have many ways to express friendship and that children build up their friendship over a long period of time with many meetings and experiences of togetherness, or by having a common 'we' (Greve, 2009).

### **2.5.3 Children being marginalized**

Children can be socially excluded or ignored by other children in play; they can be marginalized and prevented from participating. Löfdahl and Hägglund (2006) conducted a study in a Swedish preschool to explore how children communicate and act in relation to participation and power in the play context. They adopted Corsaro's (2003) theoretical idea that children initiate and maintain peer cultures in preschool. It is evident that the social distribution of power and participation in play allows decisions about who can join and who cannot. A strong component in this decision is age, as the social meaning of age within the group might imply that younger children have less value. In Swedish preschools, there is an official rule that says that anyone can join in play. Although this rule is maintained, exceptions are allowed, including acts of social exclusion (Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2006). Löfdahl and Hägglund report about Maja, who was between three and four years old at the time of the study and one of the youngest girls in the group. Maja was often excluded from play activities, and the researchers, told stories of her exclusion to encourage analysis of acts of social exclusion by examining apparently harmless or even unnoticed incidents over a period of time (Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2006). In retrospect, the researchers discovered that after Maja's older sister entered a preschool class in another setting, Maja no longer had access to the older girls' play. In this new situation, Maja was often observed lying on the floor outside the doll corner, crying, screaming, and complaining about being excluded from the older girls' play.

Löfdahl and Hägglund confirmed Maja's exclusion by re-analyzing stories from the setting and describing examples of the strategies with which other girls excluded her. These strategies were embedded in the children's daily interactions and make visible their agreements and their familiarity with their shared culture. Their strategies confirmed that Maja's social position was peripheral; she was offered marginal roles in the play or allowed to join

only on the other children's conditions. For instance, she was admitted to the older girls' play in a role where she was notified that she would soon die. Furthermore, rules were changed when it was her turn or when she was involved in a decision. One example was when children were in line waiting for their turn to jump on the trampoline. When it was Maja's turn to jump, one of the older girls changed the rules of waiting and started to single out who would be next by saying 'ole-dole-doff' ('Eeny-meeny-miny-moe'), a way to choose the next jumper randomly, so Maja had to continue waiting.

It is important to recognize that Maja did participate in other group's play activities and that her exclusion became apparent when she wanted to join in the older girls' group. Maja's exclusion happened less frequently as time went by, possibly because she had accepted her exclusion from the play. Four months later, Maja's exclusion had finally become a normalized group behavior. She and the other children shared knowledge of her peripheral position. It is important to note that the children did not only know about Maja's position, but that they also shared ideas of how children in peripheral positions might be treated. A child in the same position as Maja has few if any possibilities to argue for her rights for inclusion and to participation on the same conditions as others. Being marginalized in this way seems to be risky from the perspective of the individual it concerns, but also more broadly in terms of the children's on-going construction of representations and images of the marginalized as someone who cannot claim her rights (Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2006).

#### **2.5.4 Cultural diversity in preschool**

Brooker's (2008) study of the ways in which four-year-old children from two different cultural backgrounds, but both living in the UK, learn and are taught both at home and in their Reception class exemplifies the tension between home and school cultures. The research explores the different cultural belief systems of families living within a single neighborhood. Half of the children belonged to UK ("Anglo") families and half to families from Bangladesh. Brooker's work illustrates how family beliefs and practices influence the children's home experiences, their orientation toward play, and their participation and achievements in school. In discussions with the mothers, it appeared that the Bangladeshi children were brought up to show respect for adults, including teachers, and were expected to be obedient and co-operative in all aspects of their lives. The Bangladeshi parents instructed their children to listen to the teacher, to learn, and not

to play, while the Anglo mothers valued children's play and encouraged outgoing, active, and chatty behavior. Most of the Anglo families had prepared their children for a pedagogic practice where children were encouraged to play, have fun, and try things out. Thus it can be said that children from these two different cultural backgrounds were differently prepared to adapt to the culture of the school, with the Anglo families supporting views closer to the school's values than the Bangladeshi families did (Brooker, 2002, 2008).

Brooker's findings problematize cultural assumptions about educational systems. If child development is understood as concerned with the relationship between the child and society or an institution, then we must look closely at preschool practice and at how preschools respond to young children's multicultural backgrounds (Brooker, 2008; Fler, 2008). Conclusions drawn from these studies can provide a closer understanding of young children's cultural context and call for a re-evaluation of preschool teachers' practice.

The next section discusses the relationships between pedagogies, play, and aspects of power relations between preschool teachers and children.

## **2.6 Pedagogy, play and power relations**

In this section, views of children and childhood will be discussed in relation to pedagogy and play. Further, the importance of play in early education, different modes of 'play pedagogy' and concepts and theories related to power will be touched upon.

### **2.6.1 The pedagogies employed in different curricula**

Pedagogy in this study is seen as the teacher's beliefs and methods and how teachers have planned the preschool environment. Through the changing discourse in early years' pedagogy, the importance of play has continued to have a central role (Ailwood, 2003, 2010). Lately, in early education, there has been an emphasis on process rather than product in children's learning (Jordan, 2010) and in some contexts the gap that used to be between play and learning has been getting narrower, resulting in attention to characteristics of 'play pedagogy.' In order to highlight the multiple factors influencing these processes, this study aims to explore children's learning processes as children participate in preschool groups. Furthermore, I aim to reveal to what degree the learning processes are related to the pedagogy used and how children are learning. Thus, this section first offers a short account of pedagogy in the early years and how it

relates to play before discussing the importance of play in children's learning. After this, different modes of educational play are discussed. This is followed by a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of play-based pedagogy.

### **2.6.2 Pedagogy and how it is related to play**

Discussing pedagogy and play as a unit can be problematic, as these concepts have traditionally been understood as distinctively different. Pedagogy has been about the teacher's agenda and what children are meant to learn, while play has been more or less been 'owned' by the children.

Play has been defined many times, especially by developmental psychologists (e.g., Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg, 1983), and for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, play was seen as a spontaneous activity, led by children and their interests. Thus, it was believed that children needed to be allowed to play freely, as they were working with emotions from within (as described by Freud). Play was also seen as a reflection of children's developmental stages (Piaget, 1932/1965). As children constructed a private reality, play was seen as a necessary stage in the development of symbolic activity, and preschool teachers' intervention in children's play was seen as unnecessary (Rubin et al., 1983).

For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, pedagogy was defined in relation to the same views as curriculum and play in general, but in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century pedagogy was strongly influenced by the understanding of developmental theories (such as in the High/Scope model). These definitions mostly built on a child-centered curriculum, a concept that Dewey (1956) emphasized, and meant that learning should begin with experience and curriculum should relate to children's interests (Dewey, 1956). In spite of good intentions, child-centered pedagogy has, among other things, been criticized for having the role of the preschool teacher as its starting point and for being "heavily developmentally laden" (Yelland & Kilderry, 2005, p. 4).

In child-centered pedagogy, play and learning were seen as separate activities, where learning was either about adult-led transmission of knowledge or a play-based, child-led acquisition that is spontaneous, exploratory, voluntary, and not seen as instructional (Brooker, 2010). In the light of more contemporary views seen in post-Vygotskian research and theorizing, teachers have been developing play pedagogy wherein social, interactional, and verbal skills are seen to be developed through play. No

longer mainly focusing on the role of the preschool teachers (as in the child-centered pedagogy), now the emphasis is on seeing the interaction between teachers and children as a co-constructive process seeking more equal power balance between the two.

Theorizing that seeks to establish common ground between play and pedagogy frequently draws on Vygotsky's account of socio-cultural processes and emphasizes the interaction between peers and preschool teachers in creating meaning (Wood & Attfield, 2005). Methods building on those views see preschool teachers working on joint problem-solving activities with children in the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD); that is, not a free activity or a structured teacher-led activity, but an activity wherein a child can, with the help of a more capable peer or preschool teacher, find solutions to problems (Vygotsky, 1933/1967). Pedagogy of this kind sees preschool teachers as teaching through children's engagement in play (Wood & Attfield, 2005); in preschools children's play would be the vehicle for children's learning and the teachers' role to support the ongoing processes.

### **2.6.3 The importance of play in children's learning**

Ample research (e.g., Johnson, Celik, & Al-Mansour, 2013; Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006) has shown the value of play as a means for children to learn; apart from socioemotional aspects and traditional school subjects related to literacy and numeracy, play has been shown to support the development of other diverse areas such as self-regulation and imaginative pretense. Children's self-regulation, their ability to manage disruptive emotions and impulses and to think before they react, has shown to be related to cooperativeness and helpfulness. Furthermore, children who engage in make-believe play also exhibit more complex and imaginative pretense, which has shown to be associated with perspective-taking skills. That is, children's ability to differentiate between their own mental representations and what happens in the context they are moving within, including gaining insight into other's perspectives (Meyers & Berk, 2014). More recently, Howe (2016) explored children's perspectives towards being offered restricted opportunities for play and self-initiated activities, and a more content-oriented one. Instead her findings are in alignment with views from other educational research (e.g., Wood, 2010); that is, the children value opportunities to take part in play or other self-initiated activities, as they find they can pursue their own interests and autonomy, in addition to developing relationships with other children,

relaxing and having fun. Nevertheless, how play is valued depends on the preschool teachers' goals; in preschool practice where the goals are academic, it may be hard to argue for play's benefits. Furthermore, the value of play as a means for children to learn has been seen to depend on the play's thematic content as well as its degree of complexity, which is in line with the socio-cultural views supporting my study.

Studies on the methods preschool teachers use when supporting children's learning through play suggests that teachers facilitate pretend play most effectively by supporting and extending but not controlling children's play themes and choices (van Oers & Duijkers, 2013). Research shows that a positive relation between play and learning reveal that the causal relation is subject to whether the children's ideas, interests, and activities within the play are "in focus" (van Oers & Duijkers, 2013); that is, the children need to be controlling their play for learning to take place. Research also reveals that adults' encouragement, emotional support, and scaffolding during play predict increased effort and more successful performance when children attempt challenging tasks (Berk, Mann, & Ogan, 2006). In Whitebread's 2010 study, children demonstrated more problem-solving strategies, higher levels of involvement, and less distraction in playful situations than when in a formal situation. Furthermore, Whitebread's research emphasizes the importance of a teacher showing children emotional warmth, providing security, supporting children's initiatives and feelings of control, and finally, providing children with achievable challenges (Whitebread, 2010). In contrast, Löfdahl (2014) saw in her study that teachers tended to stay in the background, when children were playing, rather than being actively engaged with the children. Furthermore, even though adults formulated rules about the rights of each child to belong to the group, on a daily basis children were marginalized by their peers (Löfdahl, 2014). These studies imply not only the value of play in preschool practice but also that for children's learning to take place in play, teachers should facilitate play and be attentive to children's marginalization or exclusion.

Even if it is the case that teachers should facilitate play, more information on how children themselves see play and learning would be valuable. This is important if we accept that children learn through making their own meaning (Pellegrini & Boyd, 1993), which means that play pedagogy itself needs to build on children's interests (Goouch, 2008). If children are seen to acquire conceptual knowledge through participation in play-based pedagogies, children and teachers will benefit from extended,

shared interactions that focus on the conceptual content embedded in play-based experiences (Cutter-Mackenzie, Edwards, & Fleer, 2009).

These research results still leave us with unanswered questions with regard to play and pedagogy in preschools. Some advocate a 'play pedagogy' where play and learning are intertwined and the preschool teacher's role is to stimulate, support, and co-operate with children in their own engagement in play (e.g., van Oers, 2010). There are also studies suggesting that children develop social and interactional skills through their own efforts in the company of more able peers rather than in the company of adults seeking to support their development (Broadhead, 2001). 'Ownership' of play reflects the power relations within the preschool, and much recent research advocates for greater support of children's participation in decision-making in their preschools and for practices that include children's perspectives (Docket, 2008; Einarsdóttir, 2014a; Kjörholt, Moss, & Clark, 2005; Warming, 2005).

#### **2.6.4 Different modes of educational play**

In order to understand the relationship between play and pedagogy, Wood (2014) discusses three modes of educational play and "how play is positioned in relation to, and as a form of, pedagogy" (Wood, 2014, p. 145). The three modes of play she discusses are *child-initiated*, *adult-guided*, and *technicist versions of educational play*, all of which may support children's learning in preschools.

*Child-initiated play* can refer to several slightly different forms of play, such as free play, role-play, or sociodramatic play. Children use their own ideas and interests to initiate and develop the play. Nevertheless, the participation in play, children in preschools are allowed relies on the teachers' beliefs and values (Wood, 2014). Even in a relatively democratic preschool context, the preschool teachers most of the time define what choices are available and what degree of freedom the children are allowed. During children's play, the preschool teacher's role is to be emotionally present, supportive, and responsive (Wood, 2014). When teachers observe child-initiated play, their observations may reveal children's interests, needs, and dispositions.

Vygotsky (1933/1967) argues that all play situations, including free play, contain implicit behavioral rules important to children. When children are pretending, they use their imagination and may pretend that they are playing the part of someone else, for example. They can see themselves as the mother and their doll as the 'mother's' child. In this play situation,

children must obey certain behavioral rules: the rules of maternal behavior. These imaginary situations are in one sense free, but contain covert rules that are not openly acknowledged or formulated in advance. Vygotsky argues that the rules in pretend play stem from the imaginary situation, which means that the children feel free even though it is an illusory freedom in a sense, and thus, they are able to push themselves to do things they would not be able to do in other situations (Vygotsky, 1933/1967). For example, a child pretending to be a mother needs to be able to do things that mothers usually do, and children in such circumstances might place themselves within the zone of proximal development (ZPD) when striving to do what they in other situations would not be able to do. ZPD is one of Vygotsky's terms preschool teachers use to support socio-cultural approaches in working with children. In the ZPD, a process of 'co-construction' takes place, in which the preschool teacher, and or more skilled peer, is the expert assisting the child/novice, but both partners are seen as participants in making meaning (Rogoff, 1990).

In play situations children not only pretend and use their imagination, following rules related to the roles they play (sometimes placing themselves within the ZPD), they, in addition, play with other children and "are capable of doing more collectively than they would individually through processes such as creative imitation, observation and imagination" (Wood, 2014, p. 148).

In *Adult-guided play*, children's free and spontaneous activities are valued for their contribution to their learning and development, but the play may be structured, planned, resourced, and managed by preschool teachers in ways that promote specific outcomes. The play starts from children's ideas and interests, and teachers are involved at different levels ranging from supporting children's ideas and actions to organizing frames within which the children will play (Wood, 2014).

The emphasis is on teachers and children making sense of the world together, interpreting and understanding activities and observations as they interact. In this way, the teacher needs to become aware of what the child thinks, knows, and understands, and to engage with the child's existing knowledge (Jordan, 2009). Recognizing their own powerful role, teachers may attempt to empower children and support their agency, acknowledging that children are powerful players in their own learning and that children's expertise is as valid as their own (Jordan, 2009). Preschool teachers and children may build joint understanding through interaction

with a group of the children's peers as well as with other preschool teachers (van Oers, 1999; Vygotsky, 1933/1967).

Within the frame of adult-guided play, it has been argued that 'play pedagogy' consists of "discovering the most effective means to enable children to access the learning objectives of adults through their own pleasurable engagement in play activities" (Brooker, 2011, p. 153). In this pedagogy, preschool teachers develop practices where the aim is to connect play and learning. Examples of these are frame play (described below) or drama games (Broström, 1999), and play narratives or, a similar experience put in other words, storying events (Goouch, 2008).

Frame play, which Broström developed in collaboration with preschool teachers, describes play activities in which the children and the teacher decide on general theme together and then plan how to explore, such as 'What happens in the airport?' The preschool teacher supports children in the formulation of some dimensions within the theme, such as when one child suggested this expanding element: 'Then we pretend there is a catastrophe in the airport.' Inspired by various aspects of the theme, the children plan the setting and discuss different roles, rules for the roles, and possible actions attached to some specific roles (Broström, 1999). At a certain point in the play, the preschool teacher might present another 'sub-theme', like starting a fire, to encourage a response from the children. These challenges, from either the children or the preschool teacher, enrich the play that develops from the children's ideas and help bring children into the zone of proximal development (Broström, 1999).

In a similar manner, a preschool teacher may use storying events with children (Goouch, 2008). Without instruction, she/he follows children into play and the children's purposes lead the way, co-constructing narratives to better understand children's existing knowledge to, in turn, support their learning processes. The preschool teacher needs to be able to co-operate with children in complex situations and to endure confusion, trusting children's and their own intuition as part of adopting playful pedagogy (Goouch, 2008).

The third version of educational play, the *technicist*, is intended to promote specific ways of learning and to lead to defined learning outcomes and meeting curriculum goals. The teachers' purpose is to put policy into practice and to make an assessment that shows whether goals that were set for the play have been attained. In this version of educational play, there might be all kinds of instructions, demonstrations, or dialog; nevertheless, the teachers' goals are foregrounded, and children are

eventually meant to find answers (particular answers matching the goals). These methods are meant to enact effective pedagogic interactions, such as 'sustained shared thinking,' which in early education refers to how children and preschool teachers share their thinking through interaction and having clear instructional purposes. Sometimes these interactions are identified in effective preschool settings in terms of child outcomes (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009), but are less typically applicable to children's collective activities in free play, which is why 'sustained shared thinking' is difficult to apply to play.

There are other problematic aspects to the technicist version of educational play. One is related to these goal-directed methods' aim of creating the ZPD, which in this mode is close to the concept of 'scaffolding.' In this case, the adult's aim is to support the children's efforts toward the level at which they are capable in situations where the adults have a specific end in mind, and gradually the adult or more skilled peer releases control to children when they come closer to meeting the teacher's target (Wood, 1998). As the adults' goals are foregrounded and it is difficult to know exactly what the children experience, very likely these zones tend to be the adult's instead of the children's. These issues contrast with research that shows how children learn by taking part in play where they are able to construct their own pedagogical routines, rules, and practices. More recently, Aydođan, Farran, and Sađsöz (2015) have shown that a high level of instructional support reveals children as more deeply engaged in their learning if the interaction of preschool teachers' and children also is more emotional. Lillemyr expresses a view that is in line with these results, as he contends that a sense of relatedness is more strongly promoted in play or child-initiated activities than in teacher-directed learning (Lillemyr, 2013).

The limitations of the technicist version of educational play thus have to do with the difference between play that is valued for children's purposes and play that is a means for children to acquire particular learning goals determined by the teachers. If play is valued because it leads to children obtaining educational goals but not for its own complex benefits, teaching and learning in this mode will risk losing the benefits of play as such, but then again also might become the means to an end.

### **2.6.5 Teachers planning 'play pedagogy'**

A play pedagogy based on children's own interests is not easy to achieve. Preschool teachers adopting a 'play pedagogy' have to tread a thin line between pursuing curricular goals and listening to children's interests,

catering to their abilities while at the same time preserving the independence, creativity, and voluntary nature of play (Broström, 1999). Rogers and Evans' 2008 study showed a huge discrepancy between the teachers' formal curriculum and the curriculum that children actually experienced. Several issues might explain this disparity, such as:

- Teachers' unawareness of children's real interests; even if teachers are prepared to listen to children's views, they bring their own perceptions and agendas to their interactions with the children, and their perspectives may be at odds with the children's perspectives (Rogers & Evans, 2008).
- When children are playing self-initiated games, the teacher may observe what is of interest for the children and how they solve problems but may miss the opportunity to support children in achieving their intentions.
- When children offered resistance or articulated their concerns, they often remained unable to affect the outcomes, and the adults' made the decisions (Rogers & Evans, 2008).
- Children's primary goal during free play was often to be with a certain friend rather than to undertake a particular activity. In some cases, children may try to deceive the teacher in order to be with the favored peer (Einarsdóttir, 2014a).

Having the points above in mind might help researchers and preschool teachers to understand how to find the balance between child-initiated and teacher planned play-pedagogy.

According to Broadhead (2010), children's play is more likely to become complex and collaborative when preschool teachers participate in it. When surveyed, Icelandic preschool teachers agreed that they should prepare for and influence children's play, but at the same time, they took a passive or reserved role in children's dramatic play and were reluctant to participate unless invited by children (Einarsdóttir, 1998). This ambivalence has also been detected elsewhere. A similar contradiction appeared in a British study (Bennett, Wood, & Rogers, 1997) on the relationship between Reception teachers' theories of play and their classroom practice, which showed that the teachers' theories were not always synchronized with their practice. The Reception teachers organized the environment, provided resources, and planned activities to support their broad intentions of play-based learning. Despite the fact that children's needs and interests were seen as central by teachers, however, and despite the fact that activities

were structured to link play with specific learning outcomes, quality learning outcomes were not always achieved, and progression in learning through play was difficult to sustain. Teachers identified instances where they had over-or under-estimated children's competencies. By acting as co-participants in the study, the teachers engaged in a process of reflective consideration, which led to changes in their theories, practice, or sometimes both. The teachers recognized the need to gain more informed insights into children's patterns of learning and interaction, which could inform their pedagogy and curriculum planning. In particular, they realized, as others have (e.g., Wood, 2009), that children need more time to develop sustained segments of play and to return to their own themes and ongoing interests.

The next section discusses the distribution of power and principles of control in the relations between preschool teachers and children.

### **2.6.6 Distribution of power and principles of control**

An important emphasis in Bernstein's work was the development of models that can be used to analyze the distribution of power and principles of control in all forms of pedagogic activity (Bernstein, 2000) in order to describe the underlying structure of the social contexts regulating children in schools. The framework "...attempts to show at a theoretical level, the relationships between a particular symbolic order and the structuring of experience" (Bernstein, 1977, p. 112). In order to describe various aspects of power and control, Bernstein (1977) introduced the concepts of *classification* and *framing*. Classification refers to the degree of boundary maintenance between different areas of content and curriculum aims (the subject matter and what to teach), while framing refers to how pedagogy is used within the classification, such as the teachers' methods and interaction with the children.

Bernstein described both classification and framing in terms of their relative strength and weakness. Strong framing locates control with the teacher (in Bernstein's terms, the transmitter), whereas weak framing locates control more with the child (in Bernstein's terms, the acquirer). In Bernstein's view, power and control are transformed into rules of legitimate communication and interpretation through the acquisition of classification and framing values (Bernstein, 1990). Weak classification is realized through invisible pedagogies (weak framing) but it does not necessarily follow that weak classification always gives rise to weak framing.

According to Bernstein's model, visible and invisible pedagogy are related to whether rules are explicit or implicit. When rules are explicit, the power most of the time is in the hands of the teacher, and the child gets explicit messages about what to do. Implicit rules do not make clear whether the teacher or child has the power. Although, the child may appear to have greater control over the regulation of her/his movements, activities and communication, the teacher may control more than is clear to the child. In Bernstein's opinion, however, an implicit rule can mask power relationships, and the child is likely to be subject to regulation by her/his peers, rather than the teachers'. In such a situation, the teacher can be invisible while the group of children is in the foreground. Explicit sequencing can relate to the curriculum (whether national or school) stating what children at a certain age should learn. If the sequencing rules are implicit, however, the child cannot know what he/she should learn; only the teacher will know, and s/he will interpret the behavior of the child in light of these implicit rules. In Bernstein's model, criteria refer to outcomes for the child and can be explicit and specific or implicit, multiple and diffuse (Bernstein, 1977), thus, this is about whether it is clear to the child how progress is assessed.

Weak classification and framing can also be seen as examples of invisible or implicit pedagogy, and strong classification and framing as visible or explicit pedagogy (Bernstein, 1977). Strong and weak classification and framing are seen neither as unchangeable nor as dichotomies, but rather as different modalities. A school or setting may combine strong classification with weak framing, and vice versa; the power can move or change over time (Bernstein, 2000; Emilson & Folkesson, 2006).

In Bernstein's view, when children do not share their teachers' social class or cultural background, explicit approaches are usually more helpful. When weak framing is used, children can find the performance criteria diffuse and unclear and have difficulty perceiving or understanding the rules, as they are clear only to the teacher (Bernstein, 1977). In this understanding, children in preschools where the teacher uses explicit methods are more likely to know what they are meant to do, even if they have a different background from their teacher. On the other hand, children attending preschools where the teacher uses weak framing and thus more invisible methods might need to guess what the teachers require and thus have difficulty meeting the requirements. This is especially likely if the children do not share an experiential background with the teacher.

The methods teachers use in preschools have been put forwards as aims and practices in curriculum documents and educational models, which have been developed in a time of rapid social changes since the 1960's. Among the issues related to this change are the contrasting views and methods toward how children learn, referred to as the transmissive or emergent pedagogical approach (Broadhead, Howard, & Wood, 2010). In Bernstein's model, the transmissive pedagogy is in line with strong classification and framing, that is, visible pedagogy, and emergent pedagogy to weak classification and framing, that is, invisible pedagogy. On one hand, teacher in some schools build on a transmissive pedagogy where they make plans in advance about the content and the procedures of the learning and teaching, where the teachers know what is best for all children (Wood, 2010). While, on the other hand, teachers in other schools use emergent curriculum and make spontaneous plans, either building on children's interests or developing themes and projects together with children. In this kind of pedagogy, there are no right or wrong answers; rather the emphasis is on valuing multiple meanings (Wood, 2010). With regard to methods building on transmissive or emergent views there probably are no 'either or' methods in most preschool practices and UK research evidence indicates that the most effective preschool practices offer children a balance between teacher-initiated group work and freely chosen play activities (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004).

In the current study Bernstein's model is used to analyze the power balance within the pedagogies of the two preschools in relation to the teachers' methods and children's participation. The pedagogy used is described in terms of the strength of its classification and framing, where weak classification and framing are seen as examples of invisible or implicit pedagogy, and strong classification and framing as visible or explicit pedagogy.

### **2.6.7 Advantages and disadvantages of play-based pedagogies**

The discussion about the relations between play and pedagogy still stands and is reflected in the struggle taking place in preschool practice at least in the Western world if not internationally, as children's play and their motivations, interests, and activities are in focus while at the same time a pedagogy focused on teachers' aims for children's learning is supported. These methods in preschools descend from Vygotsky's ideas about play and learning, and are further developed by post-Vygotskian views. They stress the importance of the teacher's role in supporting children's learning. In

addition, such pedagogy is subject to the power relations between the preschool teachers and the children. In order to bridge such pedagogy with the concept of play, different modes of 'play pedagogy' have been developed, although preschool teachers still need to engage with several conflicting issues, among them children's motivation and 'ownership' of the play. Further, children's free play in peer groups, sometimes with and sometimes without the preschool teacher's intervention, can reveal unequal power relations or conflicting experiences for children taking part in the play. Play is often pleasurable for children, but it may not always be viewed as purely positive, as for some children and in some situations taking part in play can be marginalizing, and children may be excluded.

Nevertheless, play is a key characteristic of most preschool pedagogy in the Western world (e.g., Brooker, Blaise, & Edwards, 2014; Hedges, 2014) and often is viewed as purely positive, despite evidence that it is a complex matter, as the notion that play needs to be built on the child's interest and initiative means it undeniably will be dependent on power relations in the peer group. As preschool teachers become concerned about power relations, they may observe many issues to consider, such as how diversity (Brooker, 2002; Fleer, 2008), belonging (Greve, 2009), and exclusion (Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2006) are revealed in play episodes (discussed in sections 2.5.2, 2.5.3, and 2.5.4). The different views toward play and the ongoing debate about what it is and what it is not have brought attention to and made more apparent its conflicting roles and characteristics. As Ailwood (2011) has argued, "It can be a point of cohesion and friendship, of marginalization and exclusion, a place of pretense or of quiet solitude. How the range of different players in early childhood education settings understands play is based in powerful sets of discourses and relationships" (Ailwood, 2011, p. 19).

In preschool practice, teachers may need to recognize the different situations and individuals in social contexts that influence play, and especially to be aware of how and when children become interested and involved (willing to participate) in different activities. In addition, that play can be fun and interesting or not, and that children can be involved or not. In these complex situations, the preschool teachers' awareness of this multiplicity is critical. In order to better understand the context and characteristics of play, van Oers (2010) suggests three dimensions of play: the nature of implicit rules, degrees of freedom, and level of involvement (discussed in section 2.6.3), all of which he sees as important to maintain the quality of play through teachers' reflection.

The theories, views, and methods discussed above are mainly coming from a socio-cultural perspective and the main ideas of the sociology of childhood. These ideas are in line with the ideas of the Learning Story approach developed in New Zealand, where the main concept used in assessment is learning dispositions.

Thus, the next section discusses learning dispositions from different viewpoints.

## **2.7 The use of these approaches in the current study**

The theories, ideas, and methods in early learning discussed thus far inform and support the approach used in this study. Some of the main concepts that run through the data construction and analysis are difficult to discuss separately but are represented here through learning dispositions, which are discussed next.

### **2.7.1 Main concepts supporting the research method**

The data in the current study were generated through observations, and I constructed children's stories that were analyzed in the end of the analyzes process to identify the learning dispositions in groups of children. In this study, learning dispositions are described by referring to New Zealand's *Te Whāriki* curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996; Carr, 2001), which views children as interested (showing a sense of belonging), involved (demonstrating well-being), persisting with difficulties (exploring), able to express ideas or feelings (communicating), and able to take responsibility (contributing to their social milieu). In this study the five learning dispositional features were rearranged into three lenses in order to engage with the theoretical underpinning of the study (this is discussed in sections 1.4. and 2.7.3) and also to minimize the complexity of the entwined features that was first developed as an assessment tool for use in preschools in New Zealand. The learning dispositional features are supported by many diverse theories about children and their learning. First, a theoretical explanation of learning dispositions will be provided. Next, the learning dispositional features described by *Te Whāriki* will be introduced, and finally, the main concept, learning dispositions, will be discussed and related to three interlinking concepts.

### **2.7.2 Learning dispositions – a theoretical explanation**

In this section, the concept of learning dispositions will be discussed from different theoretical viewpoints, a psychological and a sociological

perspective, and in relation to concepts with a similar meaning. First, there is Katz's discussion of dispositions building on a background from developmental psychology. Next, Bourdieu's concept of habitus will be briefly discussed. Finally, the section concludes by discussing learning dispositions proposed in the national curriculum of New Zealand and by Margaret Carr and a team of practitioners, as descriptors for aspects of children's participation in a group of learners.

Lilian Katz (1995) is a British-born American scholar whose writings have been influential in early education. Her work builds on research in developmental psychology (Dweck & Leggett, 1988) and discusses dispositions in relation to concepts and terms with similar meanings, such as traits, attitudes, habits, thought processes, and skills. For Katz, a disposition describes trends in an individual's behavior and is distinct from attitudes, which refer to an evaluation or a cluster of beliefs about something. Thus, an individual could have an attitude toward something without having a disposition toward it (Katz, 1995).

In Katz's understanding, it is possible to have the skills required for an action, such as the ability to read, but not the disposition to use those skills, that is, be lacking the disposition to be a reader. If a child reads frequently, "...it can be said that the child has a robust disposition to be a reader; when it is rarely or never observed, then it can be said that the disposition is weak, has been damaged, or has not been acquired" (Katz, 1995, pp. 55–56).

In Katz's view, a disposition refers to how a child goes about doing things, how he reacts, or how he finds a solution (Katz, 1995). Katz says that one of the main reasons for including the development of dispositions as a goal in early education is that "the acquisition of knowledge and skills alone does not guarantee that they will be used and applied." An example is a child who has the skills required for competent peer interaction but does not use them with sufficient strength and frequency to build or maintain relationships (Katz, 1995, p. 64).

From the field of social theory, Bourdieu (1977) refers to a similar but more inclusive concept, habitus, which is an individual's tendency to behave in a certain way in response to experiences. Practices produced by the habitus may enable children to cope with unforeseen and changing situations, including educational experiences. Habitus is defined by Bourdieu (1977) as 'a system of dispositions' and can be understood as the values and dispositions gained from each individual's cultural history. These values and dispositions allow us to respond to experiences in a variety of

ways, but the responses are always determined largely by our cultural background and generally stay with us across contexts (Webb, Schirato, & Danaher, 2002). The habitus is anchored in the body or daily practices of the individual child and groups they participate in, and it is molded or influenced by a child's past and present circumstances, such as family upbringing and educational experiences. A child's habitus comprises a system of dispositions that generate perceptions, preferences, and practices (Grenfell, 2008) and helps to shape her present and future practices. Thus, the habitus acquired in the family underlies the structuring of school experiences and is transformed by schooling and, in turn, underlies the structuring of all subsequent experiences (Bourdieu, 1977). This means that the child takes to preschool the habitus he has acquired within the home, and that habitus is influenced by his experiences at school. The extent that the child's family habitus aligns with the preschool habitus will have consequences for the child's success in acquiring the values and dispositions valued by the school (Webb et al., 2002).

More recently, researchers have used Bourdieu's concepts in education; for example, Brooker (2002) has described the experiences of children from two different ethnic backgrounds as they started school. In her research, habitus is used to explain social and educational inequalities of children from different social and cultural groups. Habitus is defined in her study as a system of dispositions toward life acquired by children and their families through experiences in different physical and psychological environments. These environments generate different ranges of strategies for children to select from when they enter formal schooling. The child acquires aspects of the family habitus and also structures a unique and specialized habitus of her or his own with the help of the home environment, the school and society as a whole. The research describes the experiences of individual children in the transition from being a child in a family to becoming a pupil in a school. It explores how the context of the early years meets (or fails to meet) the needs of children from culturally diverse backgrounds and discusses individual children's differing chances of success in relation to their different individual habitus (Brooker, 2002).

In the context of New Zealand *Te Whāriki* curriculum, Carr (2001) describes the concept of disposition deriving from psychology and the concept of habitus from sociology. She argues that learning dispositions are about becoming a participant in a learning place and acquiring a metacognitive view of that participation (Carr, 2001) in order to recognize what learning is valued in the context (Carr, 2011). Carr and Claxton (2002) discuss learning dispositions as habits, meaning they can be thought of as

tendencies to respond to situations in certain ways. A learning disposition is seen as being formed by the reciprocal interaction between the environment and the child's motivation and learning strategies. The child is viewed as a learner who "recognizes, selects, edits, responds to, resists, searches for and constructs her/his learning opportunities" (Carr, 2001, p. 21). This means that children in preschool use personal methods to engage in what interests them, and through reciprocal interaction with the people and artifacts in the environment, they form and develop their participation.

Researchers and educators in New Zealand have been developing an understanding of how children learn by dividing learning into two interrelated facets, capabilities and dispositions. Ability is conceptualized as being seen from a range of perspective, teachers, parents and children's. A child having knowledge or skill does not mean that a child in any situations is able to use this knowledge. Capability has to do with the children's own views on their ability, and is not seen as a constant feature. Being able is having knowledge that contributes to being ready and willing. Being ready is about seeing oneself as a participating learner and is a focus of interest that is foregrounded, but it must be supported by being willing. Being willing is about the child recognizing that the preschool is a place for learning and being sensitive to making judgments about and responding positively to the preschool context (Carr, 2001). In practice in New Zealand's preschools, children's inclinations toward being ready, willing, and able are described through each of the five features of learning dispositions, which are described in the next section.

The scholars referred to above define learning dispositions and habitus differently, but all definitions focus on children's tendencies to behave in certain ways. Katz sees it as possible to have various skills required for an action, but not the disposition to use those skills; this will mean that the acquisition of knowledge and skill alone does not guarantee that they will be used and applied. Bourdieu's habitus and Carr's learning dispositions add the element of situationality, e.g. a reaction to an experience; and include in their concepts values and how the child sees himself as a learner. Like Bourdieu (1977), Carr (2001) emphasizes the influence of cultural background on habitus and learning dispositions with support from Brooker, who identifies the child's habitus as being brought from home to school. Carr and the New Zealand curriculum seek support from psychology and sociology and combine these perspectives in how they view learning dispositions. The definition used in New Zealand (also discussed in section 1.4) involves what is of interest to children and how they see themselves as learners, what the children know and how they use that knowledge, and

how they take part and interact in preschool contexts. Thus, the individual child's learning dispositions are seen as a way to make visible the child's learning processes and her or his inclination to react in a certain way, which can include attitudes such as curiosity, friendliness, or assertiveness (Ministry of Education, 1996). Using learning dispositions as a tool to analyze the data in the current study thus is in alignment with the aim of exploring the factors influencing young children's learning processes while participating in different preschool contexts. Applying learning dispositions helped me to explore children's learning processes in an organized way but at the same time to give a detailed description of how children are learning in their daily lives.

### **2.7.3 Learning dispositional features in the New Zealand curriculum**

The five features of learning dispositions in preschool settings are viewed as a tool to support the construction of children's identities as learners by considering their (1) belonging: taking an interest, (2) well-being: being involved, (3) exploring: persisting with difficulties, (4) communicating: expressing an idea or a feeling, and (5) contributing: taking responsibility.

1. **Belonging:** Taking an interest can depend on self-categorization and group identity, two criteria of social belonging. It can, for example, be about whether the child sees her or himself as a learner in the area she or he is working in and whether she or he sees or himself as part of the group or community.
2. **Well-being:** Being involved refers to whether the child pays attention, remains focused, and feels safe in the local environment. It is also related to how the child sees her or himself as a learner and the need for social recognition and competence.
3. **Involvement:** To evaluate whether a child is involved, questions that come to mind include the following: Does the child feel secure and content? What methods does the child use to become involved and remain focused?
4. **Exploring:** Refers to the child's sensitivity to places and occasions, and how or if the child asks questions and seeks for answers when solving problems. It also is related to persisting in the face of difficulty and uncertainty, can involve whether the child is prepared to take a risk or make a mistake in finding answers and learning.

5. **Communicating:** This involves the child's ability and willingness to express ideas or share feelings with others as well as to be able to sense when the climate permits him to express his own views. The child is able to use one or more ways to express himself and can understand situations and communicate with others.
6. **Contributing:** Taking responsibility refers to the child considering another's point of view and having a sense of justice and taking responsibility for oneself and others. This responsibility refers to the child's ability to make decisions and to be fair to her- or himself and on behalf of others (Carr, 2001; Ministry of Education, 1996).

The five features of learning dispositions are developed from many different theories, ideas, and concepts that overlap and are variously entwined. These features were developed within the Learning Story Approach as an assessment method in preschool practice. In order to relate to the theoretical underpinning of the current study, and to minimize the overlap between the entwined features, I reconstructed the learning dispositional features and described through three theoretical lenses relevant in the current study (also discussed in section 1.4). The third lens is most relevant to the focus in this study.

### **Lens 1. Main focus on the social context**

*Communication and involvement* with the environment, a topic, or interaction with others. This is seen in the child's intensity of showing interest, exploration and communication in a group (Laevers & Heylen, 2003);

### **Lens 2. Main focus on the individual child**

*Well-being and belonging.* This involves the individual child's feeling of belonging seen as the degree to which children feel at ease, find an atmosphere in which they can be spontaneous, and are satisfied in their basic needs such as the need for attention and affection, the need for social recognition, and the feeling of competence (Laevers, 1994); and

### **Lens 3. Main focus on interactive learning processes**

*Contribution and taking responsibility.* This concerns how the child finds ways to influence and contribute to the preschool context, and communicates with others using various methods to express ideas and feelings (Carr, 2001).

In order to explain further the concept of learning dispositions, three key concepts (from the three lenses above) are further elaborated on: involvement, well-being, and contribution.

Two of the learning dispositional conceptualizations, involvement and well-being, were central concepts in a research project developed by Laevers and others who constructed an educational model, Experiential Education (EXE). EXE aimed to improve practice and assessment in preschools and primary schools in Belgium (Laevers & Heylen, 2003), and is referred to in this study as it fits well with the theoretical frame as a process-oriented approach building on socio-cultural views.

*Involvement* is about the child's intense participation in an activity, which is driven by the child's interests and the need to be active in exploring artifacts and issues or communicating with others. It can be seen in the amount of concentration and fascination the child demonstrates, where the child seems to find pleasure in exploring the activity at hand, wants to understand what is going on (get a better grip on reality), and is seen to persist with difficulty (Carr, 2001; Laevers & Heylen, 2003). A child who is involved appears to be very focused on and to enjoy the activity. The child's posture and facial expressions, a kind of positive tension, and the level of the performance matches the competences of the child. Any disturbance or interruption might be experienced as frustrating for the child.

In Laevers's description, children who are involved in an activity narrow their focus to one limited circle of attention, showing strong motivation and fascination.

Furthermore, there is an openness to (relevant) stimuli and the perceptual and cognitive functioning has an intensity, lacking in activities of another kind. The meanings of words and ideas are felt more strongly and deeply. Further analysis reveals a manifest feeling of satisfaction and a bodily felt stream of positive energy. The 'state of flow' is sought actively by people. Young children find it most of the time in play (Laevers & Heylen, 2003).

Laevers suggests that children's sense of satisfaction stems from one source—the exploratory drive—that includes the need to get a better grip on reality, an intrinsic interest in how things and people work, and the urge to gain experience and work things out (Laevers & Heylen, 2003). In order

to detect intrinsic involvement, a preschool teacher or a researcher needs to carefully observe the child's different ways of expressing her- or himself, in words as well as body language and actions.

The concept of *well-being* draws on several disciplines and refers to several different domains, such as the social situation of an individual or her/his physical or mental health. From the definitions referred to as a part of the learning dispositions in the New Zealand curriculum, two different disciplines are considered, one with a psychological origin (Dweck & Leggett, 1988) and the other derived from Laevers' (1994) educational model.

First, well-being is related to the research on 'self-theories' by Dweck and colleagues and their role in the development of motivation and personality theories formulated over the past 30 years. This psychological research influenced the development of the learning dispositional features in relation to the child's views and methods when tackling difficulties or solving problems. These studies examined whether a child shows a tendency toward, on one hand, trying to gain favorable judgments or avoid unfavorable judgments about her or his ability or, on the other hand, trying to improve her or his own competence (Smiley & Dweck, 1994). A child who seeks favorable judgments is usually not prepared to make a mistake and believes that her or his ability is something for which she or he will be rewarded and that her lack of ability will result in her being deprived of something. By contrast, a child who wants to become better at something is prepared to try challenging tasks, even though she may fail at first; she thus believes that it is possible to improve her ability through repeated efforts (Dweck, 2006). Dweck's and her colleague's research have been a part of how well-being is defined by Carr (2001) and in the New Zealand curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996).

Carr (2001, 2010), like Laevers, relates well-being (such as: feeling at home, being oneself, feeling happy) and involvement (the intensity of the activity at hand and the amount of concentration), to Csikszentmihalyi's (1991, 1997) concept of 'flow.' Csikszentmihalyi has researched the role of involvement and in his understanding the feeling of 'flow' is an experience that an individual enjoys and wishes to repeat. A child in preschool might be feeling 'flow' when taking an interest and being drawn toward an activity or an idea, which can be perceived as a starting step in deep engagement and task involvement, which can evolve into being a part of developing resilience. The experience of 'flow' is likely to happen when a child meets a challenge that is just about manageable, neither overstepping nor

underestimating the child's ability. According to Csikszentmihalyi a child experiencing 'flow' is generally doing his or her favorite activity and is less likely to be distracted from his or her subject of focus. The idea of 'flow' is complex and, for a researcher or a teacher, can only be partly observable as another person's feelings can never be fully known to others.

The second view supporting the definition of well-being in the current study, is related to the work of Laevers and his team where well-being is about the child's need for social recognition, feelings of competence, and the need for understanding the meaning in life, as Laevers puts it. Furthermore, it refers to the child's need to be noticed, to experience tenderness, and to be safe. Well-being involves the degree to which children feel at ease, find an atmosphere in which they can be spontaneous, and are satisfied in their basic needs such as the needs for attention, affection, social recognition, and a feeling of competence (Carr, 2001; Laevers & Heylen, 2003). In this view, a child who has a strong sense of well-being may be absorbed in an activity, focused, and enjoy being involved.

To be able to detect these subjective and emotionally grounded reactions, a teacher or a researcher needs to carefully observe the child's expressions (words and sounds as well as bodily gestures) when observing and developing children's learning stories and to look closely at how the child tackles difficulties: Does the child demonstrate persistence? Is she or he driven to find an answer? Does the child show persistency and want to find solutions or solve a problem? In some situations, the child might give up on finding solutions and seek help from others. It is important to note that interpretations of these contrasting reactions needs to be handled with care; they are situational and depend on the activity or the child's level of interest and, as mentioned above, involve intangible expression such as feelings.

*Contributing* is related to democracy and power. It is about how children find ways to influence and contribute to their preschool context as well as their inclination to communicate with others using various ways to express themselves and put forth their ideas and feelings. It refers to considering another's point of view, to sense justice and take responsibility for self and others. Within the preschool context contributing relates to the degree of children's empowerment in the setting and includes the climate in the preschool and whether it allows children to have their say and whether they are listened to (Carr, 2001).

As discussed above (in section 2.4) children's rights to agency put forward in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989), means that in their daily lives, children should be encouraged to contribute to society. Preschool teachers aiming to support children's contributions might develop democratic practices by, for example, facilitating children's means of expressing themselves; listening to children and reacting to their views; and countering the idea that the teacher knows all the answers.

Doing so helps to balance the power relations in the preschool seeking more equal power balance between preschool teachers and children (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Bae (1996) recommends that preschool teachers who wish to support children to influence their daily lives in the preschool community consider the concept of *definition of power*. This refers to the preschool teachers as those with the power to define children's activities; to determine what is right or wrong, good or bad; and to decide the rules and regulations in the preschool community. Bae argues that this unequal power balance can lead to an atmosphere in the preschool that does not value children's rights to express themselves. Thus, the common definition, used in politics in contemporary societies, where the rule of majority by voting is followed, has inspired the definition of democratic communities as places where children's freedom of expression is valued and decisions are based on the views of the majority (Dahlberg et al., 1999) is not sufficient. Bae believes that it is important to define democracy differently in relation to children's views of how they see their own participation and influence in the preschool community. In this sense, it might be more realistic to discuss 'democratic moments' when discussing democratic collaboration in communities of young children (Bae, 2009). In this study, an attempt was made to understand how children influence their daily lives; careful observations were made and analyzed; and an attempt was made to understand children's involvement and participation in their preschool groups.

Although the ideas used to explain learning dispositional features are complex, they aim to reflect a holistic view of what children learn and to integrate the cognitive, social, and emotional, and to include not only what children know but also how they use their knowledge. In the current study, observations of children's participation in their preschools were analyzed using the learning dispositional concept, seen through the three lenses building on the theoretical underpinning of the study: communication and involvement; well-being and belonging; and contribution and taking responsibility. The data were thus built on a detailed description of how or if: the children interacted in their preschool context; expressed their views;

listened to others; were involved within the group; and contributed to the preschool context. The analysis also involved interpreting children's activities, words and bodily expressions were revealed in order to suggest about and interpret features of a subjective nature, such as interests and feelings.

## **2.8 Summary**

This chapter began with an introduction of theories and ideas looking at learning in its social, cultural, and historical contexts. It assumes that as children gain external knowledge in co-construction with others (in the social plane), referred to as external learning processes, they will, at about the same time, begin internal developmental processes (in the individual plane) as this knowledge becomes internalized. In this study, the focus is on children's external learning processes, as the purpose is to explore in what ways curricular contexts support – or inhibit – these processes.

This study is supported by sociocultural theories of learning that are influenced by Vygotsky and draw on different disciplines and discourses (e.g., Rogoff, Wells & Claxton). Within these theories, the child is viewed as situated in a cultural reality within particular structures, practices, and discourses. A particular focus in this study is on Rogoff's account of guided participation in a social-cultural milieu that looks at the interactive processes within a community; that is, how children are guided by the values and practices of the preschool and, at the same time, take part in creating the cultural context. Therefore, in this view participation in preschool is about the children's interactions within the preschool context, the environment, teachers' methods, and peer cultures. Children's interactional processes in the current study are referred to as learning processes in the social plane and as guided participation (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1933/1967).

In this study, an attention is paid to issues found in the construction of the 'sociology of childhood' (e.g., Prout, 2011): children's agency and an image of children as strong and competent participants in the preschool context (Mayall, 2003), children as participants in peer groups where they co-construct meaning together with their peers and preschool teachers (Corsaro, 2015; Dahlberg et al., 1999), and attending to how children can be a subject of oppression by adults. In relation to the last point power relations are discussed in relation to pedagogy and play.

In order to capture this multiplicity of the preschool contexts, I constructed children's stories, inspired by the Learning Story Approach, and

in the final steps of the analysis process I analyzed the data in terms of learning dispositions.

The next chapter will expand upon the above ideas and practices by focusing on the cultural context of the study; the preschool policy in Iceland and to introduce pedagogy in the two participating preschools.

### **3 Cultural context**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

In the previous chapter I presented recent views of children and their learning with the purpose to reflect on preschool education. In chapter two I explored how or if: children and adults structure involvement through participation, children are seen as active agents, children participate in peer groups, and, finally, factors in early education influence children's learning processes in relation to pedagogy, play, and power relations. This chapter follows up on these ideas by briefly discussing curriculum and policy in Iceland. After this the curricula and pedagogy of the two preschools taking part in this study are thoroughly explained.

In many European countries, curriculum documents have been differently planned in terms of the degree to which the curriculum is developed within each school or how much the authorities centrally administrate it. In Iceland, as in many other countries, a national curriculum was first published in the 1990's (Ministry of Education 1999). This first curriculum for preschools in Iceland was rather open and invited each school's own interpretations and further planned methods, but at the same time, the curriculum stated that each preschool should produce their own school curriculum with specific aims and methods. This approach has been sustained in the more recent curriculum (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011). According to the more recent curriculum, Icelandic preschools should implement policy put forward by the authorities and frame their own school curriculum, which has resulted in many Icelandic preschools referring to specific theoretical views or preschool approaches.

#### **3.2 Icelandic curricula for preschools**

According to the aims of Iceland's National Curriculum Guide from 1999, which was valid for preschools at the time this study took place, the child should have the opportunity to be active, take initiative, play, and make friends. The Guide maintained that in preschool, a child's life-skills should be developed, and his/her ability to communicate and become open-minded and curious should be supported. At that time, the curriculum was play-based and described common aims and requirements for all Icelandic preschools. Nevertheless, it was mainly seen as a pedagogical guide and

simultaneously as a flexible frame or an open curriculum. Additionally, all schools were meant to develop their own school curriculum describing the what, how, and when of implementing diverse practices (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 1999). The current National Curriculum Guide (2011) builds on the previous one with additions in line with more recent views in education. The aim is for preschool children to feel that they are competent and their individual characteristics are valued.

The two preschools taking part in this study were chosen to be a part of the study as they supported very different views and methods, but also because, from the 266 preschools in Iceland, they used the two approaches implemented by the largest number of schools. In 2007, at least 22 preschools were inspired by ideas from Reggio Emilia (Karlsdóttir & Ólafsdóttir, 2007) and 16 preschools had adopted the Hjalli pedagogy (The Hjalli pedagogy, 2011).

In the next two sections, the pedagogy of the two approaches will be discussed in relation to their goals, philosophy of education, and methods. In doing this, the sections 3.3 and 3.4 draw on the founders' accounts of their own aims and practice. It is important to keep in mind that the amount of written material is unequal, and thus the accounts for the preschools might be biased. The founders of the ideas the Reggio Emilia preschools build on, have produced a large amounts of documents such as books, article and documentations for several decades (mostly in English from the 1980's). In contrast, the first Hjalli preschool started in 1989 and the pedagogy used has been explained in just a few books, articles and the school curricula.

### **3.3 The Reggio Emilia pedagogy**

Seaside, the Reggio Emilia-inspired preschool included in this study, had been developing the use of Reggio Emilia-inspired methods for more than 20 years when the current study took place and refers to writings associated with the original pre-primary project. Their home page [<http://www.reggiochildren.it>] makes reference to the pedagogy's main ideas: its origins and founder, its belief in the strong and competent child, its principles of listening to children and seeing knowledge as co-constructed. Reggio Emilia preschools have their roots in parent-run and -built preschools where parents, concerned about the fascism of World War II, were passionate and determined not only to build a new school for their children but also a just society; thus, a focus on democracy and seeing parents as partners in their children's education became important

foundational principles for this pedagogy (Malaguzzi, 1998). In preschools inspired by ideas from the city of Reggio Emilia, the curriculum is emergent: preschool teachers put forward general educational objectives, but specific goals are made created for each project or each activity; they start from the children's ideas and hypotheses to formulate goals that are flexible and open to the children's needs and interests (Rinaldi, 1998). The Reggio Emilia-inspired preschool taking part in this study emphasizes these methods by planning projects and activities for the children that start from their ideas. Furthermore, they attempt to be open toward children's ideas through the process of the activities, to listen carefully to children's interests and the solutions they create, and to support children in expressing their opinions. In Seaside, there are mixed classes, with children from 3-6 and boys and girls together. The environment is planned to have a multitude of artifacts accessible and visible to the children, meant to be evocative and encouraging for children gain new ideas, thoughts, and creative thinking.

### **3.3.1 Main Ideas about children and learning**

Loris Malaguzzi, often referred to as the founder of the preschools in Reggio Emilia, and the other Reggio Emilia educators developed their own pedagogical practice from the combined educational theories and research of others (e.g., Dewey, Bronfenbrenner, Bruner, Gardner, Piaget, Vygotsky, Foucault and Rodari). The cornerstone of the Reggio Emilia pedagogy is an image of the strong child, meaning each child is unique and is the protagonist of his or her own growth (Filippini, 1998). Preschool teachers need to believe in children's competence to be equal partners in the preschool community's development and need to see children's contributions as important, in Reggio Emilia pedagogy. Children have 'stronger potential than we give them credit for' (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 55). In preschool, these views are reflected by trusting children to be autonomous and by believing in their ability to have ideas, find solutions to problems, ask questions, and carry things through.

Vecchi (2010) recently described how preschool teachers and 'atelieristas' in Reggio Emilia preschools meet these competent children by carefully and respectfully 'listening' to children's ways of thinking and the strategies they use to express themselves as they find answers to questions in collaboration with other children and educators. In a preschool, valuing this kind of 'listening' and attending to children's strategies and ways of thinking children provided with time to find their own solutions and

supported to shape their own lives and environments as they participate in their preschool. There are not any recommended methods to do this; rather, the teachers reflect on their views toward children and their learning, such as by valuing how children make theories by intertwining rationality and imagination (Rinaldi, 2006; Vecchi, 2010). In preschool, this might be seen in project work about a theme such as the rain. The children would reflect on and find answers to questions like: what is rain and where does it come from? One child might make a drawing of how water flows in pipes between the clouds in the sky where the pipes lead to machines that sprinkle the water on to the earth. A teacher who 'listens' takes the child's theory of where the rain comes from seriously and does not explain or give the correct answer; rather he/she respects the child's theory and continues to support the child seeking answers and asking new questions about the rain.

### **3.3.2 Main goals for children**

This approach lays out general educational objectives and specific goals for each project or activity are not formulated beforehand (Spaggiari, 1998). The curriculum is emergent; activities often start from children's ideas and hypotheses through dialogue with other children as well as the teacher, who adds new knowledge and challenges ideas (Rinaldi, 2006). Children's projects might start when the group goes out for a walk and sees something of interest, such as when they meet a cat and want to ask all sorts of questions. For example: Where does the cat live? Who owns the cat? What does the cat like to eat? These speculations could end as a project where the children would go on to seek answers and ask more questions with the teacher's support. These kinds of processes are seen to support children to develop their ideas and hypotheses, and, eventually, their meaning-making; their own understanding of the world.

In this pedagogy, children's co-construction of meaning is the main goal of learning; at the same time, it is seen as a main thread in the process of learning and teaching. Co-construction of knowledge, values, and identities is the individual's process of meaning-making in relation with other children and teachers. Building on such methods, children make their personal theories or theories formed in co-construction with others. The basis for all learning is the children's competencies in making their own meaning from daily life experiences through planning, coordination of ideas, creativity, and abstraction (Malaguzzi, 1998). In preschool practice, co-construction is likely to take place in different situations and activities, such as when the

children and teachers work on projects. In such situations, the participants' (children and teachers) different ideas might appear through their diverse forms of expression such as words, physical expression, and all kinds of artistic experiences.

According to Reggio Emilia ideas, knowledge emerges in the process of self- and social construction, using democratic methods which aim to make children active agents in their own socialization and knowledge building with peers and preschool teachers rather than "just passively endur[ing] their experience" (Rinaldi, 1998, p. 115). Democratic methods are supported by listening to many forms of expression and by listening to other individuals' different voices. The power of democracy lies in letting go of the belief in one right answer and in understanding and listening to the different meanings people hold about knowledge and the world (Vecchi, 2001). In preschool practice, when the aim is to support democratic methods, the intention is that the preschool teachers are open to many solutions and possibilities during these processes and take the children's theories seriously. This calls for an open discussion between children and teachers where all ideas are legitimate and where the teachers are prepared to share power with the children.

### **3.3.3 Teachers' methods and views – pedagogy**

Reggio Emilia educators believe that children desire to gain knowledge, are curious and capable, and want to relate to others (Filippini, 1998). The preschool teacher's role, therefore, is to be active (on the inside as well as visible on the outside), open-minded, and non-judgmental; they need to be able to "capture the right moments, and then find the right approaches" (Malaguzzi, 1998, p. 81). Preschool teachers who want to focus on children's understanding carefully follow the children's processes of exploring phenomena or taking part in project work as well as examining their own processes of supporting children. Through observing these processes, they seek clues about children's ideas and interests to be able to encourage and assist children as they enter into activities, develop methods to interact and take part in activities, and find solutions.

Reggio-inspired preschool teachers see learning and teaching resources as emanating not only from what teachers themselves bring to the situation, but also from what children offer: their ideas, suggestions, problems, questions, clues, and paths to follow (Malaguzzi, 1998). For this to happen, preschool teachers and children need to believe in each other's strengths. In a preschool where relationships exhibit reciprocal mutually

respectful collaboration and where children trust their preschool teachers and see them as resources, children are more likely to be able to take part in the co-construction of meaning.

To be able to look further into these processes, preschool teachers follow and interpret the children's ongoing learning pathway by listening, recording, and documenting children's 'strategies of thought and action'. Malaguzzi explains that listening and documenting are entwined processes where preschool teachers go from research to action. Preschool teachers build theories and make meanings as they document children's interests, questions, ideas, and theories (Filippini, 1998). The preschool teachers' documentation of processes might describe different areas and perspectives, such as the development of an activity, how children's solutions evolve, how their ideas emerge and are constructed, or the interactions processes between themselves (the teachers) and the children. To make documentation, they choose from different methods: for instance, written documentations, photos, videos, or children's artwork. Documentation in Reggio Emilia starts with the preschool teachers recording children's theories and ideas so that the children, teachers, and other adults can reflect on them and so that they are made visible to the children and others in their social surroundings (Rinaldi, 2005). These ideas are revisited in subsequent work with the children. By making the documentation processes explicit, they listen to children's different means of expression.

With regard to listening, the Reggio Emilia preschool teachers' have explained their standpoint on listening with these words:

We embrace an approach based on adults listening rather than speaking, where doubt and amazement are welcome factors along with scientific inquiry and the deductive method of the detective. (Rinaldi, 1998, p. 115)

In Rinaldi's more recent writings, listening is also seen as a form of understanding and as awareness of one's own and others' thoughts. Rinaldi describes listening as a tool to "reveal the ways in which children perceive, question, and interpret reality and their relationships with it" (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 112). The preschool teacher reflects on her/his own methods and thought while collaborating with children, as both inner and outer reciprocal dialogue takes place (Rinaldi, 2005).

### 3.3.4 Environment

Children are provided with spaces that are evocative and relational (involves interaction with other children and preschool teachers), are organized in a way that encourages communication and collaboration, and are meant to evoke children's reactions, interest, and curiosity. In accordance with the philosophy of relationship building, the spaces' organization must be planned with structures and materials carefully chosen for the children so that the environment becomes an "open invitation to explore" (Gandini, 1998, pp. 162-163). Preschool teachers build on their observations and documentation to suggest what artifacts might be evocative for children and thus be brought into the space. The environment includes diverse materials and objects meant to meet children's interests and also to evoke their curiosity and a sense of aesthetic experiences; a states of mind experiencing beauty, emotions or even attitudes. The environment might include all sorts of play material, both traditional such as blocks and books, but also less traditional ones meant to elicit experiences of beauty or interest such as artifacts hanging in the air or moving, or colored water in bottles on the windowsills. The space also reflects the culture of the people who create it and thus is constantly changing as materials are brought into the school by children and families who are incoming every year.

One of the main characteristics of the spaces is the walls' transparency. Gandini (1998) says there are walls of glass between rooms as well as big outside windows that create continuity between interior gardens and outside gardens and give children the opportunity to follow and connect with what is happening in areas beyond the one they themselves are situated in. Gandini says this architecture, which produces much natural light, contributes to evocative, interesting, and even aesthetic experience for children and can provide an occasion to play with transparencies and reflections, for example (Gandini, 1998). Vecchi (1998a) argues that the flood of light in the space is ideal to stimulate children's perceptions and build the relationship of these perceptions to the environment (Vecchi, 1998b). Children can see what is happening in other areas in the preschool, either through the glass walls or within the open spaces. The teachers see it as important for children to be curious and to get an overview of what is happening in other parts of the preschool.

The piazza, stationed in the center of the school building, represents the main square of the Italian city, a space where people meet, discuss, and speak with one another. The piazza is seen as a place where people pass by,

exchange meanings and ideas, and arrive and depart; the more frequently they meet, the more ideas circulate among adults and children (Gandini, 1998). The central point in preschools has play material and play stations, but is an open space where children and adults might pass by. Children might be taking part in project work, for example building or painting, and as they are in the middle of their creative processes there are people passing by, looking, commenting, or asking questions.

In planning what materials and artifacts should be in the preschool environment, visibility and accessibility for children are emphasized. Especially in the atelier, the materials have been precisely selected and neatly placed in transparent containers. These spaces have been described as similar to market stalls, where customers look for the wares that interest them, make selections, and engage in lively interactions (Gandini, 1998). The function of the atelier is also connected to the image of the 'tool box', as children should be able to seek the materials and tools that will carry their ideas forward:

Then, once the children have chosen from among the activities available or to continue with one of the projects in progress, they will find the necessary materials and tools set up on tables, light tables, and easels, or placed in convenient spaces. They will be able to find everything else they need on well-organized open shelves, stocked with recycled and other materials. (Gandini, 1998, p. 176)

An important part of the environment is the visibility of the documentation, in the form of posters, slides, constellations, small books and all sorts of materials used with children, preschool teachers, and families. Key: documentation makes learning visible. The atelier functions as a workshop for the documentation, which becomes a center of the culture where the process and tools of the documentation have been modified (Vecchi, 1998a). Making the documentation visible in the preschool environment is a democratic opportunity, as ideas are circulated and possible themes and projects are visualized. Furthermore, the more projects that are visible to all participants, the more the participants develop and learn (Vecchi, 1998a). In preschool, the visibility of the documentation can take many different forms such as an exhibition put up on the wall with photos from a project or an event and textual descriptions of and reflections on the different processes. Children's artwork might be on display; for example, three-dimensional clay figures or houses constructed from cartons and

painted. Furthermore, there might be videotapes from children's activities playing on a screen or children's portfolios assessable to children and parents.

### **3.4 The Hjalli pedagogy**

Lava Ledge, the Hjalli preschool taking part in this study, works with an Icelandic preschool approach called the Hjalli model ['Hjallastefnan'] developed by Margrét Pála Ólafsdóttir, a preschool teacher, who was the head teacher and founder of the first Hjalli preschool in 1989 (Jónasson, 2006). Building on her experience, education and intuition from working as a preschool teacher since 1981, Ólafsdóttir developed her ideas and is the author of the pedagogy. Later, in 2000, Hjalli became privately run by a firm with the same name 'Hjallastefnan', owned and run by Ólafsdóttir. The firm has been developing, and still is run as an independent education company, where the ownership also has been shared with other professionals and those interested in, and enthusiastic about, education.

In 2007, when the current study was planned, there was information on 16 preschools building their practice on this approach. The firm now runs 14 preschools and five primary schools in Iceland (The Hjalli pedagogy, 2016). The Hjalli model is introduced in a staff handbook and booklets used in the preschools, and on the Hjalli pedagogy website. Furthermore, in the first years of the Hjalli pedagogy, a book with practical explanations on the approach was published (Ólafsdóttir, 1992), and a few years later, Ólafsdóttir's self-biography was published (Sigurjónsdóttir, 2008) with one chapter about the Hjalli method. Two studies looking into the long-term influence on children who have been in Hjalli preschools have been published (Ólafsdóttir, 2000; Sigurðardóttir, 2011). The most recent document, describing the Hjalli pedagogy is the currently used handbook for the Hjalli model (Ólafsdóttir, 2014). The handbook describes thoroughly the main rules starting having in focus child and family, teachers, environment, material nature and society. The handbook often refers to staff ('starfsfólk'), which are preschool teachers and assistant teachers, with or without further education. In the sections presenting the Hjalli pedagogy I mostly refer to teachers or preschool teachers as the group of staff working with children in the Hjalli preschools.

The handbook of the curriculum-centered Hjalli model is directed to all those working with children in the Hjalli preschools and underlines the importance of the preschool teacher's role and the responsibility each teacher has in collaborating with parents, but most clearly, the importance

of the teacher's attachment to each child. In Ólafsdóttir's words: "In its simplest description the Hjalli model is a loving and creative democratic approach" (Ólafsdóttir, 2014, p.3).

Of course in our schools we greatly value a few main ideas: such as creativity, democracy, friendship and having fun. In developing the Hjalli model we have been seeking support from many of the theories and ideas known in education and psychology, such as Dewey, Wittgenstein and Piaget, not forgetting to mention behavioral psychology. (Interview with Ólafsdóttir, July, 2016)

Ólafsdóttir describes how the ideas and methods in the Hjalli pedagogy have been influenced by other educational ideals such as the common saying, used by children and teachers in the Hjalli preschools, "practice makes perfect." This saying has been used to support children's boldness, as they tell themselves and each other that next time they will improve their performance.

These ideas were in the beginning inspired by the well-known educator Caroline Pratt [a progressive educational reformer and the founder of City and Country School in Greenwich Village, Manhattan, New York City], and her famous quote, "I learn from children," which also means they are deriving from Dewey. (Interview with Ólafsdóttir, July, 2016)

Ólafsdóttir also points out:

The Hjalli method is Pragmatic, in the sense that "if it doesn't work it isn't good." In Wittgenstein's understanding, others reactions to the children become a sign in social interaction. This means that putting forward clear messages to children is important. In contrast parents and teachers often tend to give children double messages, e.g., when a child cries and does not want mother to leave, the mother several times repeats that now she has to go to work, but she does not go. Clear messages can, for example, help children to follow instructions. (Interview with Ólafsdóttir, July, 2016)

Next the six main principles of the Hjalli method will be explained.

### 3.4.1 Main ideas about children and learning

The handbook describes six main principles that are seen as a policy declaration and the preschool's ideology, as well as stating goals for children and children's learning with directions for preschool teachers and other staff. Each principle is explained and followed by a list of up to 15 items on what preschool teachers need to do to meet the requirements (Ólafsdóttir, 2014; Sigurðardóttir & Ólafsdóttir, 2008).

1. *The first main principle is: children and parents.* The preschool education is about children's experience and aims to meet the needs of every child, to respect and recognize children's individual interests. The preschool teachers should meet each child with positivity and warmth, in addition to support children's need for friendship in the peer group. Children's families should be informed about the preschool planning and the pedagogy.
2. *The second main principle is: personnel.* This rule is about the role of the teachers in the preschool, as key persons in supporting positive thinking, joy, and care in collaboration between teachers, teachers and children and parents. This rule stresses the importance of teachers in the preschool to see themselves as responsible for their own lives and actions, and to foster their own positive thinking, such as to be positive towards others' idea and to be open towards seeing others' actions as having good intentions. Teachers in the Hjalli preschools are encouraged to be good role models as they are in a key position to influence children's positive co-operation.
3. *The third main principle is: environment.* The social and physical environment is meant to be transparent in the meaning that teachers and children are able to read into signs given: by a clear plan of the day schedule, organization of material and rules made visible (such as having areas and artifacts marked and labeled) for everyone to be able to find their way around the school as independently as possible. Children are provided with an environment they can understand and manage themselves, related to their age and competences. The environment is carefully planned, filled with calm and minimum stimuli, where everything has a meaning for the children and they and the preschool teachers are able to 'read' the environment and learn quickly to interact within it.

4. *The fourth main principle is: material.* This rule confirms that play material is planned to be different and rather seen as an addition to what children have access to in their homes. In the Hjalli preschools children are provided with open ended material, inviting children to diverse experiences where the material is assessable to children, having the aim to support their independence, creativity and imagination. The play material is not overflowing, it is intentionally minimal, in the way of not always having too many items of each sort, which calls for children to negotiate with each other about the use of material and children also are meant to learn to share and develop contentment and moderation. In this way children are seen to become self-reliant and able to create their own play-world as well as their learning.
5. *The fifth main principle is: nature.* In the Hjalli preschools children spend much of their time in the outdoor areas and also frequently go for walks, inspecting the environment close to the school. Children are taught to value the natural environment; learn to enjoy being outside, sense seasons, weather, plants and animals and be able to discover the unique beauty of nature itself.
6. *The sixth main principle is: society.* In the Hjalli preschools rules on how to interact with others and behave within the preschool environment are clear. The aim is for children to learn to follow rules and teachers, in a positive and warm way, encourage children to do so and to practice good behavior. Teachers introduce the preschool plan to children and ask for their opinion and on a regular basis encourage children to express their feeling of well-being. Teachers in the Hjalli pedagogy reinforce children's positive behavior by complimenting and encouraging children in a positive way, by focusing on success and what has been well done (Ólafsdóttir, 2014; Sigurðardóttir & Ólafsdóttir, 2008).

The Hjalli pedagogy builds on the view that boys and girls express themselves differently because of their experiences: they behave and react differently, see themselves differently (Bredesen, 2004; Ólafsdóttir, 2014; Sigurðardóttir, 2011), and, in preschool and in their homes, encounter different attitudes and reactions depending on their gender (Ólafsdóttir, 1992). Ólafsdóttir explains that this gendered image was reflected in Hjalli when the eldest children in the girls' group and the boys' group were drawing pictures of themselves. As they were asked to describe their picture, the girls used words about themselves such as fancy/cool, good,

and sweet and the boys described themselves as fancy/cool, big, and strong (Ólafsdóttir, 1992). To explain further why boys' and girls' in the Hjalli preschools are in separate classes, this understanding has been further explained in the preschools handbook (Ólafsdóttir, 2014). In addition to the view that boys' and girls' express themselves differently, the handbook states that according to research boys and girls attending mixed classes get unequal shares of attention, that most of the teacher's attention is directed towards the boys, even though this attention often is negative. Furthermore, the Hjalli pedagogy supports the view that in mixed gender schools there is a tendency that boys' and girls' monopolize roles that are considered appropriate for their gender (Ólafsdóttir, 2014). Planning preschool practices where boys' and girls' are in separate classes is seen as a way to work against gender inequality and to work towards justice and democracy in the society, such as working towards minimizing the gendered stereotypes and develop a new understanding in relation to girls' and boys'. Building on these views the Hjalli model developed compensation projects and games for children, for boys with the aim to strengthen their empathy and taking care of others, without the girls taking over, while for the girls the aim was to strengthen their courage and self-confidence, without the boys taking charge.

In the gendered curriculum there are six main competence areas practiced in both the girls' and boys' groups, but generally differently emphasized in the gendered groups, supporting more strongly the competence seen as stronger with the opposite gender. In all groups the six themes also run through the year plan, focusing on one competence at a time for a few weeks' period. The themes focusing on social competence, seen as needing more practice in the girls' groups are *independence*, *positivity*, and *daring*. The themes focusing on individual competence, seen as needing more practice in the boys' groups, are *discipline*, *communication*, and *friendship* (Ólafsdóttir, 2014; Sigurðardóttir & Ólafsdóttir, 2008; The Hjalli pedagogy, 2016). The practices involved in the six themes of the gendered agenda are further explained below.

Social competence:

- Supporting *independence*, where children practice being the focus of attention and expressing themselves in whatever way they like before a group of people. The tasks are related to children as a part of a family; children tell the others about their family and introduce objects they bring from home.

- Supporting *positivity*, which aims to support children in being optimistic and happy. Children are taught what positivity is and are also encouraged to set their own limits, which are exercised by discussing what they like and want to do.
- Supporting *daring*, which aims to support children's boldness, courage, and being 'happily active'. Training children to be daring can be practiced very differently: through bodily strength or athletics, by performing before a large group of people, or by debating their own ideas on topics such as changing the environment. Generally, activities seek to strengthen children's role as doers.

Individual competence:

- Supporting *discipline*, where the children learn to follow rules of behavior and be polite and learn manners, such as table manners and being orderly as they put their outdoor clothes away.
- Supporting *communication*, which aims to support children in respecting and supporting each other. This period is seen as a way to work against bullying, for example, and can be connected to cultural differences relevant for each particular group of children, such as different nationalities, different types of families, or disabilities.
- Supporting *friendship*, which aims to support partnership and promote friendship in the preschool. Caring is taught in many different ways, for example, by inviting families with younger children to the preschool and by finding real assignments for children to assist children in other groups or helping staff in different ways (Ólafsdóttir, 2014; Sigurðardóttir & Ólafsdóttir, 2008).

These qualities are the same for all groups but are emphasized and implemented differently in the girls' and boys' groups. Girls are encouraged to become active, assertive, and show initiative. Their training focuses on girls becoming daring, learning to make mistakes, and coping with pain and blood. For example, the girls, practice daring by jumping down from heights or going barefoot in the snow (Ólafsdóttir, 1992). Boys are encouraged to become sensitive and non-aggressive. The focus is on their social training

and developing courteous behavior, self-discipline, communication, and cooperation based on rules. Their training focuses on exercises in intimacy and the brotherhood of boys, as they learn to take care of each other. For example, they give each other massages and practice taking care of the younger boys (Ólafsdóttir, 1992).

### **3.4.2 Main goals for children**

The main goals for children are manifested in the socialization process: to teach children good behavior and to follow rules and to teach children the qualities of the opposite gender as girls and boys are seen as different (Ólafsdóttir, 2014; Sigurðardóttir & Ólafsdóttir, 2008). A strong focus is on children's socialization process in order to make preschool life more relaxed and problem-free for both children and preschool teachers, but also in order to prepare children for their future in other schools and in society as whole.

As the current study aims to explore the multiple factors influencing children's learning processes in two preschools, the methods these preschools use need to be described, in relation to the main goals for children. In the Hjalli preschool taking part in this study, among the main goals expressed in the six rules and the gendered curriculum are that children should learn to:

- behave according to rules
- adopt competencies commonly seen as stronger in the opposite gender
- be independent and believe in themselves
- develop positive thinking
- value and enjoy nature
- be creative and imaginative

### **3.4.3 Teachers' methods and views - pedagogy**

The curriculum-centered Hjalli pedagogy is pre-planned, with the six main principles put forward in the handbook, referred to as 'rules' (see section 3.4.1) and meant to unite the practices of the entire staff; preschool teachers and assistant teachers.

The main issues addressed in these rules include views towards children, teachers' methods, the planning of the environment, materials, and issues seen as important for nature and in society. The preschool teachers and other teachers in the preschools are meant to support several values, of which some are briefly described below:

- Teachers are meant to meet the needs of every child and to respect and recognize children's individual interests.
- The teachers are role models and are in a key position to influence children's positive co-operation.
- The environment is meant to be clearly organized, transparent for children, so they are able to 'read' the environment and quickly learn to manage themselves within it.
- The play materials are open-ended, inviting children to diverse experiences, seen as an encouragement to use creativity and imagination to play and find solutions when taking part in activities and play.
- Teachers support children in respecting and valuing the natural environment, to learn to enjoy being outside, sensing the seasons, weather, plants and animals and to be able to discover the unique beauty of nature itself.
- The teachers are supposed to teach children to behave according to rules, using positive and warm methods as interacting with the children
- Teachers are meant to foster children's positive thinking.

The rules are consciously put forward as few and clear, and both preschool teachers and children are expected to follow them (Ólafsdóttir, 1992). Nevertheless, some further rules are decided by children and preschool teachers and may be changed through appropriate procedures where the main issue is children's views on what is just and fair (Ólafsdóttir, 2014; Sigurðardóttir & Ólafsdóttir, 2008). If the children find the prescribed rules unjust and unfair they are encouraged to express themselves and discuss the issue in the group, even though the teachers' make final decisions on how to react to the issue.

Practical support for the preschool teachers is found in documents and handbooks. To support children's positive behavior, preschool teachers are

encouraged to notice everything well done and to praise children. The preschool teachers are encouraged to make a list of words and concepts that are seen as good for praise and encouragement (Ólafsdóttir, 2014; Sigurðardóttir & Ólafsdóttir, 2008). In the Hjalli documents, many such words and concepts are discussed and explained. For example, talking about what is allowed is emphasized, rather than telling children what is forbidden. If the group is waiting for one child to join them at the dinner table, the teacher says: 'it is allowed' for you to sit down now, instead of saying: 'stop running around'. This is related to another recommendation for the teachers 'not to say no' (Ólafsdóttir, 2014, 1992), as when children are lively and moving around and the preschool teachers find the noise difficult, they can say: 'it is allowed to have noise outside' instead of saying: 'no noise inside'. The words and concepts are carefully chosen to reflect and stress positivity rather than negativity. This means that children are encouraged not to react to something they don't like by complaining about their situation, instead to express what they want to change. Instead of saying: 'I am cold' or 'There is no room for me here', children are encouraged to react more positively and include a solution. The children then, rather than complain, would be encouraged to express the solution they are seeking, for example: 'I need to put on a pullover' or 'can you move, please?' The preschool teacher might start by asking the child 'complaining' about the situation: 'what do you want to do about it?' (Ólafsdóttir, 2014, 1992).

Many of these recommendations are well known from pedagogy and practice in preschools in the Western world (i.e. High/Scope, Kamii & DeVries, and several research building on psychology disciplines), all though sources are rarely referred to in the documents. In the Hjalli pedagogy, these recommendations have been chosen from different disciplines and are made clear for all staff and parents' by describing in the handbook practical methods related to the six main rules (see section 3.4.1).

#### **3.4.4 Environment**

The environment in the Hjalli pedagogy has a clear frame, with the same program every day, a few clear rules, and artifacts in the environment that are always the same. The surroundings are visually organized so children and teachers can more easily know how to follow rules. As each artifact has

its place, there often are markings to make clear where things are meant to be stored after use. For example, as children meet in the large group at choosing time, they each sit down in their place, a numbered square on a mat. The reason for having the daily schedule simple and the same every day is that it gives the children security and power. They feel secure when they know what will happen next, and they are also empowered when the teacher can change neither the plan nor the rules without asking the children (Ólafsdóttir, 2014, 1992).

### 3.5 Summary of the two pedagogies

The different pedagogies, Reggio Emilia and Hjalli, originate from quite different backgrounds: The Reggio Emilia pedagogy derives from the work and ideology of Italian parents wanting to build a democratic society for their children after the Second World War. The Hjalli pedagogy, on the other hand, builds on concern over discrimination between the gender and seeks to address children’s behavioral problems and to tackle current societal tensions, and is specific to Iceland. Thus, the main ideas about children and learning, main goals for children, children’s learning and teachers’ methods, and the physical environment are quite different in these two pedagogies, as can be seen in table 3.A.

**Table 3.A Different views, goals and methods**

	The Reggio Emilia pedagogy	The Hjalli pedagogy
Main ideas about children and learning	A strong and competent child learning through co-construction of meaning	Children need clear and transparent rules and freedom within a strong organized frame

Main goals for children	Support children in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• developing their ideas and hypotheses</li> <li>• constructing meaning, as individuals and in collaboration with others</li> <li>• working on projects, building on their interest and being creative</li> </ul>	Support children in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• learning to follow rules</li> <li>• positive thinking and independence</li> <li>• develop competence and qualities seen as strong in the opposite gender</li> </ul>
Children's learning and teachers' methods	Preschool teachers listen and document children's and their own processes in projects where children are active and find solutions to problems	Choosing time in large group – children's playtime Group time in small group – teachers plan activities,
Environment	Transparent, encouraging relationships, evocative, and constantly changing	Balance of simplicity and transparency, open ended material, visible and clear rules reflecting routines and how to behave

In the Reggio Emilia pedagogy, children and preschool teachers work on projects, and children are seen as competent and making meaning in co-construction. Preschool teachers listen to children's voices and document processes of projects in an evocative and encouraging environment (Malaguzzi, 1998). In the Hjalli pedagogy, goals are clear, focusing on children practicing social competence in gendered groups and supporting children in competence areas seen as stronger in the opposite gender (Ólafsdóttir, 2014; Sigurðardóttir & Ólafsdóttir, 2008). Exploring preschool practice according to the two very different methods could be interesting and informative; to look further into the multiple factors influencing children's learning processes and how they are learning.

## **4 Research design and methods**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In this chapter the focus of the study is explained and rationalized, including planning a research design supported by ethnography for studying children in their social context. The argument for the methodology is addressed by referring to subjective issues, underlining the importance for a researcher to reflect on the data and be as non-judgmental as possible throughout the research process. The methods are described, accounting for the participants and the different approaches to data generation in each of the preschools, depending on the social context; that is, the different pedagogies in the two preschools. The process of generating and analyzing the data is explained. Ethical issues are discussed in relation to the participants giving their consent and the researcher ensuring their anonymity and confidentiality when handling the data. In the study I attempted to build trusting relationships with the participants. To make the information from the study more trustworthy I tried to be as non-judgmental as possible, and made my own views explicit and supported by theoretical underpinning and methodological approaches. Finally, the strengths and weaknesses of the design and methods are discussed.

### **4.2 Focus of the study**

This study is an enquiry into the multiple factors affecting young children's learning processes while participating in two distinctly different curricular contexts. Furthermore, I aim to give a detailed description of how children are learning in their daily lives as they participate in the respective preschools. In order to capture the complexity of children's learning processes within the preschools, it was important to choose methods, which would embrace and interlace the various factors affecting learning. The data was made from field notes that were further developed by going through an analysis process, building on observations and reflections using methods that are inspired by ethnography (Fetterman, 1989), processes of studying children in context (Graue & Walsh, 1998), and inspiration from the Learning Story Approach (Ministry of Education, 1996). This complex, multi-layered process is further explicated in the following.

To gain insight into lives in preschools, especially the lives of five-year-old children and their preschool teachers, lengthy ethnographically inspired observations and consultation with both preschool teachers and children were undertaken in each setting. Such ethnographic observations are

intended to help the researcher better to understand cultural contexts and how individuals make sense of the world within a particular cultural orientation (Hatch & Coleman-King, 2015). The aim in the current study was to start by generating the insider's (emic) perspective from within the culture, including my notes, observations, reflections, and the reflections of participants, and later, through analysis, the outsider's perspective (etic) through my own reflections and by relating to concepts and theory. Generating data required me to be non-judgmental and open to the different meanings, experiences, and emotions of individual participants. In each context, I documented observations in notes, photos, videos, and narrative reports concerning the environment, artifacts, preschool teachers' methods, and children's individual actions and interactions. Lastly, I reflected on children's learning processes, seen as children's and adult's co-construction of knowledge in a social context (discussed in section 1.3), I sorted and analyzed the data seeking themes and developed learning stories for individual children. In this study the learning stories are referred to as children's stories, as they are, especially in the final steps of analysis, mainly building on my reflections on the children's ways of being and acting. Finally, I describe children's participation in a group by analyzing the children's stories in light of specific learning dispositions (communication and involvement; well-being and belonging; and contribution and taking responsibility, discussed in section 2.5.3), inspired by New Zealand's Learning Story Approach (Ministry of Education, 1996).

The research questions were as follows:

1. What are the multiple factors that influence children's learning processes when they participate in preschool groups?
2. How are the children learning?

This chapter presents the study's approach and methodology, its design, and the methods used for data generation and analysis. All of these aspects are intimately entwined with the ethical concerns of the study and the subjective nature of the interpretation of its results. In closing, the strengths and weaknesses of the design and methods are discussed.

### **4.3 Research design**

The aim of the present study was to offer insight into the learning processes of children in preschool within the context of Icelandic policies on early education and care. To identify the influence of sociocultural context on

children's participation, the research was conducted in two different preschools. To be able to access insider information in each school and to build a trusting relationship with children and staff, I, the researcher, stayed at the preschools for at least three to four hours per day over a three-month period, first in Autumn 2009 in the Reggio Emilia-inspired preschool of Seaside, and second, in Autumn 2010 in Lava Ledge, a school implementing the Hjalli curriculum.

In the social sciences, researchers have called for ideological or methodological support from different approaches—for example, ethnography, a method developed and used first by anthropologists to describe groups and cultures. According to Fetterman (1989), ethnography involves working with people for long periods in their natural settings. Ethnographers conduct research in people's 'native' environments to describe them and their behavior given real-world incentives and constraints. Miles and Huberman (1994) have described such proximity as the researcher's extended contact with a given community, focused on identifying ordinary and extraordinary day-to-day events. In describing ethnography as a method of understanding the world, or some small fragment of it, Fetterman (1989) has argued that it requires studying that world in all of its wonder and complexity.

Qualitative methods influenced by ethnographic approaches are thus arguably well-suited to the present study, which seeks to capture the complexity of children's learning processes in two distinct preschool contexts.

#### **4.3.1 The use of ethnography in the research strategy**

The ethnographically inspired method chosen for this study can be located within "real-world" research (Robson, 2002, p. 3), in which the construction of data focuses on ordinary events in natural settings and is embodied in the cultural features of the society where it takes place. Consistent with this view, Fetterman (1989) has described ethnography as a journey through the complex world of social interaction, not a 'one-day hike' (p. 9). Ethnographers do not focus on people's attitudes, but rather on their social (inter-) actions; within a social context they observe what people do instead of what they say that they do (Gobo, 2011). At the same time, the influences of the local context are not stripped away, but rather taken into account, thereby revealing the possible existence of hidden issues. Often, ethnographic strategies have relatively little structure beforehand and

researchers may use multiple methods of constructing data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

In this study, I sought to identify both ordinary and extraordinary day-to-day events by constructing and making sense of data from participants in two different preschool contexts. This process I refer to as generating data (Graue & Walsh, 1998; Hatch & Coleman-King, 2015), to underline that I started from the field notes and created the data by going through a process of connecting to concepts and theories as well as to my own and, to some extent, the participants' beliefs, attitudes, and values. In order to gain insight into the multiple factors influencing the children's learning processes, and give a detailed description of how children are learning in the daily lives in the respective preschools, I came to each preschool several times a week, for one term, and made extensive observations including research notes, photos, video tapes, and audio tapes.

In Fetterman's (1989) account, fieldwork requires an insightful, sensitive cultural interpretation combined with rigorous data-collection techniques. Ethnographers generate understandings of culture by starting to construct data from the native (i.e., insider or *emic*) perspective, after which they seek to make sense of what they have collected in terms of both the insiders' view and their own external or scientific analysis, referred to as the outsider or *etic* perspective. The emic perspective of reality is not objective (and does not claim to be), but is used to help researchers conducting fieldwork to understand why members of the social group do what they do. In gathering information from the emic perspective, the recognition and acceptance of multiple realities in which individual diversity is a source of creative adaptation may be deemed appropriate. By contrast, the etic perspective is the external, social-scientific perspective on reality. Ethnographers have understood and used the emic and etic views differently; some are interested only in describing the emic view, whereas others want to start with etic data—that is, with the scientific view – “and consider ‘emically’ derived data secondary” (Fetterman, 1989, p. 32). Most ethnographers start generating data from the emic perspective and later seek to make sense of their data in terms of both emic and etic views, that is, analyzing data by connecting it with their scientific perspective (Fetterman, 1989).

The emic part of my study, the *initial data*, occurred when I made research notes based on my observations, photos and videos, reflected on those, and included the participants' reflections, as well as the teachers' and children's views, as I was trying to map the children's experiences. By

contrast, the etic part emerged in the analysis undertaken by connecting the data to learning dispositions while I made *children's stories*, the narrative reports of observations as I described children's experience in the field. Finally, in the concluding discussions, I related children's stories to the theoretical and ethical frameworks of the study.

#### **4.3.2 Studying children in a social context**

The aim of the study was not to compare and critique factors that affect learning in two different contexts, but instead to make visible the factors influencing children's learning processes differently in the two preschools. The research design was thus inspired by Graue and Walsh (1998), who discuss studying children in contexts, such as preschools, as a way to pay close and systematic attention to children in their local context. These authors conceive of the research process within a social context as having three levels: the everyday observable, rich description, and theorized explanation. By *the everyday observable*, Graue and Walsh mean that which is immediately visible: what anyone would notice upon entering the preschool setting. At the beginning of a study, researchers experience an initial period during which the obvious is all they observe. Researchers who persist through this period of seeing only the obvious by carefully recording what they see eventually begin to notice previously undetectable aspects that were nevertheless there all along. By contrast, *rich description* emerges from paying close attention to a particular object or situation over an extended period of time. Rich description is thus an understanding developed from lived experience and an attempt to see a phenomenon from various perspectives; this level involves cross-checking hunches developed from various sources of data. By still further contrast, *theoretical explanation* goes below the surface to the invisible in search of an understanding of what the mundane social life of human interaction means. Theoretical explanations broaden the scope of rich descriptions by allowing observations to be connected and ideas developed about a preschool context that explain why situations occur as they do (Graue & Walsh, 1998). Theoretical framework is an analysis tool for doing different things, such as providing focus and structure to the study and to organize the use of theory and concepts.

In the current study, the research design was planned by choosing theories and concepts (explained in section 1.6.2) to clarify my views toward children and their education, but also to use in the analysis process in order to develop answers to the research questions. In this study, the

underpinning views are socio-cultural, seeing learning as taking place in the reciprocal interactions between the social context and the individual child, with a focus on participation, power relations, and seeing children as competent. According to Graue and Walsh (1998), theory provides a framework for connecting the descriptions from a local level toward a broader understanding, which can have application to a bigger idea, by conceiving the descriptions as instances of a larger situation instead of as isolated circumstances. In light of these views I attempted to cast a light on the factors influencing children's learning processes as they participate in preschools groups and to give a picture of how the children are learning.

The current study can be explained in light of Graue and Walsh's (1998) three levels as follows:

*The everyday observable:* In this study, I attended each preschool group and took notes, thereby behaving initially as an observer, in the beginning being more on the periphery. At first, my attention fell to what seemed central in the group at the time; for example, when children were arriving in the morning, I observed the actions of each child while saying goodbye to his or her parents and being greeted by other children and preschool teachers. The more often I was there at the beginning of the day, the clearer the picture that emerged of each child at that time of day and the more I knew about each child and the children as a group, especially concerning which activities they preferred and with which other children they sought interaction. An example of an initial observation made in the first week of generating data involved several children sitting at a table; a boy entered from another room, handed an object built of Legos to his friend, and asked, 'How do you do that? How do you make the wheels roll?' He received advice from his friend and returned to the other room. At this point in the study, I knew nothing more about these boys than what this initial obvious interaction revealed, which initial reflections and further observations elucidated.

*Rich description:* As the children grew accustomed to my presence at their preschools, I started to use other means of observing, including photography and videotaping, to produce richer, more detailed information. At times, I followed up on activity that had previously caught my attention—for example, the interaction between the aforementioned pair of boys. I sought an opportunity to examine how they interacted while playing together with Legos and during other activities, and a fuller picture of the boys started to emerge. One was interested in and quite clever with building, while the other was exceptionally imaginative, and sometimes

their interactions reflected each of their individual strengths. As time went on, I in this way came to better know the children, their interests, and their tendencies during interactions with others. From this information, a narrative observation for each child was developed.

*Theoretical explanation:* In this phase of data generation, observations of children's participation in their preschool groups were reflected on, mainly by me, and I made children's stories by connecting to the strands of learning dispositions. The ultimate step of data generation and analysis involved discussing and explaining in greater detail what happened and why, chiefly by relating data to the theoretical framework of the study. Within the framework, learning takes place in a socio-cultural context, and is seen as the product of reciprocal interaction between two main entities: the social context and individual personal qualities (Rogoff, 2003). Furthermore, children are seen as capable individuals who are learning through taking part in play and other activities as they participate in their preschool group.

Throughout the data generation and analysis, this process evolved into telling stories from the children's experiences in the preschools. I made these stories from the field notes, including reflections, mainly from me but also from children and preschool teachers. In the final writing up for the thesis, as there already was a vast amount of data, with signs of saturation, I chose representative episodes to 'paint a picture' of where the data came from. The episodes were then followed by children's stories for the individual children taking part in each episode. Having in mind to map children's integrated cognitive, social, and emotional factors of learning in their preschool group, including a view into children's own view toward their participation, the observations were, in the final steps of analyzes, linked to learning dispositions (Carr, 2001). Thus, to the extent possible, the data generation also included information of a subjective nature, such as attention to children's well-being and belonging.

#### **4.4 Rationale for the methodology**

The research approach in this study is qualitative and is intended to explore the factors influencing children's learning processes in two preschools. Children's experiences are described in detail, and by carefully reading into/interpreting issues of a subjective nature, such as the children's emotions and thoughts, an attempt is made to map children's participation in complex situations in the preschool groups.

To be able to understand and assess the complex learning processes that occur in preschool contexts, different theoretical underpinnings, methodological techniques, and practices need to be integrated. Rogoff's (2003) research and theories build on cultural psychology and ethnography, focusing on the cultural nature of learning. Rogoff sees children's learning as taking place when they participate and are involved in different activities, with different people, in different places. As learning and teaching, at least in many parts of the Western world, have shifted focus from learning as a product toward valuing the process of learning, the same shift has occurred in research. Thus the focus in this study was on the learning processes in the preschool context and the purpose of choosing this approach for the current study was to capture as many aspects of the 'real world' (Robson, 2002; Rogoff, 2003) and its problems as possible.

#### **4.4.1 Subjectivity in ethnographic studies**

Some research methods used in the social sciences stress objectivity and aim to avoid subjectivity, largely in order to ensure that results are as valid as possible and not subject to bias. In ethnography, however, objectivity is not conceived as the most important means of increasing validity (Robson, 2002). Lincoln and Guba (1985), for instance, have questioned the idea of neutrality in this kind of research, since researchers not only bring their own assumptions and preconceptions to situations under study, but also inevitably influence participants by their mere presence. To establish the legitimacy of qualitative research, these authors prefer to discuss what they call trustworthiness. Trustworthiness has been identified as having four interconnected elements: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Hatch & Coleman-King, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In the current study I worked toward the first element, *credibility*, by representing the reality in these preschool contexts through multiple representations; using various ways of capturing what was happening in the preschool groups, such as video and audio recordings and written notes, when children were playing or taking part in other activities. I attempted to be friendly, show my interest in what the children were doing and what the children and preschool teachers were expressing, in order to build trust between the participants and me. The second element, *transferability*, refers to providing enough information for the findings to be applicable in other contexts. In this study I attempted to create "thick descriptions"; that is, describing in detail parts of what happened in the interactions between children and between children and adults. The third element, *dependability*,

refers to making enquiry through the data-generation process by reviewing and rethinking, carefully analyzing the records through the stages of the analysis process. In the current study I developed a process of analyzing the observations, in order to gain deeper understanding of the learning processes taking place in the two preschools. As I was going through the steps of analyses (further described in section 4.4) I read into (interpreted) the children's multiple means of expression, I reflected on the data, and made an attempt to detect in more detail the children's different experience and views. By following the reflection process, I included children's and teachers' views and at the same time developed my own views, resulting in being able to include new information's into the research data. Finally, *confirmability* refers to the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the participants and avoid researcher's bias. In the current study I shared observations with children and preschool teachers to build trust between us and to include their views in the data. Furthermore, I tried to be non-judgmental when making observations and throughout the analysis process by being aware of how my views and experience might influence the study.

Instead of stressing objectivity, Fetterman (1989) has underscored being non-judgmental, which he has claimed that qualitative researchers must be, while at the same time being aware of their own and others' subjectivity. Being non-judgmental involves being open to the different meanings, experiences, and emotions of individual participants, being objective in analyzing one's and others' meanings, yet also being aware of one's personal meanings and emotions—in other words, using one's subjective knowledge. Fetterman (1989) has written:

Ethnographers must attempt to view another culture without making value judgments about unfamiliar practices, but cannot be completely neutral. We are all products of our culture. We have personal beliefs, biases, and individual tastes... However, the ethnographer can guard against the more obvious biases by making them explicit and by trying to view another culture's practices impartially... The imposition of one culture's values and standards on another culture, with the assumption that one is superior to the other, is a fatal error in ethnography (Fetterman, 1989, pp. 33–34).

Ethnography comes from anthropological research which focused on gaining knowledge about cultures, at the time, those different from

Western cultures (Gobo, 2011). Often the purpose of ethnographic research is to understand a cultural group and how individuals within the group make sense of the world within a particular cultural orientation (Hatch & Coleman-King, 2015). Fetterman (1989) has also discussed culture and different cultural values in relation to societies and ethnic backgrounds. In a similar sense, it is possible to talk about the cultural factors within each preschool as being special, though each is part of a broader social culture as well. This is the case with the distinctively different educational ideas and methods used in the two preschools in the current study, which draw on and reflect different traditions, routines, and values.

The typical model for ethnographic research accommodates multiple perspectives, both those of the participants in the research and those of the researcher who all act on their individual perceptions. Importantly, “those actions have real consequences—thus the subjective reality each individual sees is no less real than an objectively defined and measured reality” (Fetterman, 1989, pp. 15–16). The researcher thus seeks multiple perspectives of participants and researcher appearing in the data in order to better understand what is occurring, in this case, the learning processes taking place in the preschool contexts. In this study, which explored two different curricular models, I sought to be open in detecting different perspectives, chiefly by viewing each preschool’s pedagogy, the methods used, and the views of participants as impartially as possible. In my attempt to be open to and non-judgmental about the culture of each school, I aimed to keep my own views to one side, to write down my thoughts in the research notes and build upon observations and reflections, and to be more conscious of my personal beliefs; that is, seeing children as competent individuals, who learn best through participation in activities that are of interest for them in the preschool context (further explained in chapter 1).

In the present study, I sought to foster an atmosphere of collaboration with participants in both preschools. The means to this end involved building a network of relationships within each school’s groups taking part and, at the beginning of fieldwork, by introducing myself and the project carefully to the children and preschool teachers. When interacting with the children I tried to be friendly and listen to them, showing my interest in what they were doing and expressing. At the same time, I tried as much as I could to adapt to each situation, by taking part as an adult in the children’s interactions when they invited me and, if needed, offering them support. Interacting with the preschool teachers I discussed my role as a researcher, and that I did not intend to make judgments about their work; that I instead wanted to be able to see the methods they used to follow up on the aims of

their school curricula. In addition, that I wanted to focus on children's competence; by focusing on the multiple factors influencing their learning processes I also wanted to see how children were learning.

#### **4.4.2 Reflection supporting subjectivity**

Reflection can help researchers to identify potential areas of influence on research (Robson, 2002). Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody (2002) have discussed engagement with emotions and unconscious processes as absolutely crucial for understanding not only how multiple subjectivities are held together, but also the tricky intersection of the emotions of the researcher and participants within the research process. In this way, Walkerdine and her colleagues, "tried to find some way to take seriously subjectivity that always intrudes, no matter what one's best intentions" (p. 194). Bae (2005) has posited that if researchers seek to make knowledge from findings more trustworthy by attending to the subjectivity of the people involved, then their self-reflection on ethical problems is inextricably a part of their research (p. 283), adding that "[t]he researcher must be open to unexpected observations and patterns, and be able to account for how his or her thinking changed in the course of the study" (Bae, 2005, p. 289). In the current study, reflection was ongoing throughout the data generation and analysis process, which had the aim of deepening my awareness of my own and others' subjective views and expression. Furthermore, my reflection helped me to become more aware of ethical factors in the study and helped me to understand the power relations within the preschool context. In the study I managed to deepen my understanding through reflection; by going carefully through the observations, reflecting on and analyzing those, each detail became more visible for me giving me better insight into the ways power relations were influencing the different situations.

In this study, I aimed to include children's views by sharing photos and videos I took of the children's activities with children and preschool teachers. We explored, discussed, and reflected on the images; I asked the children rather open-ended questions, such as if they remembered what they were doing and if they could explain what was happening in the photos or video. This strategy was influenced by the Mosaic approach (Clark, 2005), and was intended to support children's empowerment by providing them with multiple means of communication (Clark, 2005). Meetings for reflection with children were planned in two groups in each preschool. During the first meeting, the children and I looked at photos of

the process when the children were playing house (at Seaside) and when they were drawing self-portraits (at Lava Ledge). During the second reflection meeting with the groups of children, a group consisting of four to six children, a preschool teacher, and me watched video clips of the children's participation in a painting project (at Seaside) and children playing with open-ended material (at Lava Ledge).

Notes from these reflection meetings with children and from the more casual reflections with preschool teachers were both included in the observations. I decided to choose situations that were different in each school, the choice of place and activity being specific for the particular aims in each preschool context. I also planned reflection with the teachers differently, as the working methods and traditions were different in the two schools. At Seaside, reflections from meetings with preschool teachers and the teachers' documentation (e.g., photos with written notes) were simultaneously included in the data-generation process, as was also the case with information from the informal discussion with the preschool teachers at Lava Ledge.

By planning meetings to reflect on the photos and videos together with the children and preschool teachers, I sought to create an opportunity in which children and teachers could have their say, both to respect children's agency and to capture their views. The reflection activities with the children nurtured a relationship of trust between us, as well as contributing to my attempts to be ethical. Despite these efforts, I must admit that only in a few incidents did the children's views become more elaborated. (The delicacy of interpreting children's different expressions is further discussed in section 4.7). The children's contributions from these meetings had only a little impact on the final analysis of data, as discussed below. There were, perhaps, things I could have done to come closer to the children's views in this study. Planning a shorter time period between the time photos and videos were taken and the time of the reflection meetings is one. Another issue to consider is that the material to discuss in the meeting with the children was initiated by me; I chose the photos and video clips for the reflections. It might have been more fruitful if I had planned ways of supporting children's initiative in relation to the material chosen to reflect on. This might have increased their interest in the reflection and supported children in being more active in the meetings, which might have given a closer view of the children's perspectives.

## **4.5 Methods**

### **4.5.1 Locations and participants**

According to the National Curriculum Guide in Iceland (1999, 2011), each preschool should generate its own curriculum (referred to in the Guide as school curricula). Many schools choose to emphasize particular subjects or areas of learning, including the arts, movement, or sustainability, whereas other schools accommodate known approaches or ideologies, or even use a mixture of the two, for example choosing an approach like Outdoor school or emphasizing art education. At the time of planning the current study, two approaches were especially popular in Iceland; at least 20 schools worked in the spirit of preschools in the Italian city of Reggio Emilia, and 16 schools practiced an Icelandic approach known as Hjalli. This dual popularity explains why data were generated in two preschools, one of each kind, yet both situated in the greater Reykjavík area. The two preschools studied were selected based on asking representatives of the municipalities and those running the preschools which preschools were seen as effective in putting the aims of the approaches into practice.

At each preschool, a sample of preschool teachers and children were invited to be more active participants in generating data by being involved in documenting, reflecting, and analyzing data. In selecting participants, practical factors were taken into account, including which preschool teachers were accessible, available, and willing to contribute to data generation. Participants from each school consisted of three preschool teachers and their respective groups of children, plus two or three additional preschool teachers who attended reflection meetings at Seaside. The children who participated in the study were grouped according to the degree of their participation, which manifested in four levels: The first group consists of all the children in the department or core (i.e., classrooms); the oldest children in the group make a subgroup; children whose children's stories were constructed are a subgroup of the older group; and lastly, children whose children's stories are presented in the two following chapters make the last subgroup (see table 4.A).

**Table 4.A Participating children grouped by degree of participation**

Preschool	All children in the departments or cores (i.e., classrooms)	Children in the eldest group observed	Children whose children's stories were constructed	Children whose children's stories appear in chapters 5 and 6
Seaside (Reggio Emilia)	24 children	15 children	5 girls 6 boys	2 girls 3 boys
Lava Ledge (Hjalli)	26 girls	11 girls	6 girls	3 girls
Lava Ledge (Hjalli)	25 boys	10 boys	7 boys	4 boys

*All children taking part.* To prevent any child from feeling excluded, all children in the respective educators' groups took part in the study.

*Children in the eldest group were observed.* From the beginning, the study included 15 children from one department (group) at Seaside and 21 children from two cores (groups) at Lava Ledge.

*Children whose children's stories were constructed.* The final analyses encompassed the children's stories of 11 children (five girls and six boys) at Seaside and 13 children (six girls and seven boys) at Lava Ledge. From each child, while taking part in play or other activities, children's stories were made, inspired by the learning stories as described in the New Zealand Curriculum for preschools (Ministry of Education, 1996). Furthermore, episodes from children interacting in play and creative activities were chosen, as they were seen to be representative for what happened in the preschool and thus to give the reader a view into the background material, to 'paint a picture' of the situations the children's stories built on. Six episodes and children's stories from the 24 children taking part in these were made and written up.

*Children whose stories appear in chapters five and six.*

These six episodes with children's stories from 24 children had become a large amount of data, showing signs of saturation, and in addition the two episodes from each classroom represented similar cases; thus one episode from each classroom was chosen for display. Instead of abridging

descriptions and creating a more general overview with an account of all 24 children, only half of the data is displayed in the form of the children's stories I constructed, or a total of 12 cases. Presented and discussed in the thesis are one episode followed by the children's stories of two girls and three boys at Seaside appearing in the episode, and two episodes, one from boys and one from girls, followed by children's stories of three girls and four boys at Lava Ledge.

*Case study* methods were used to focus on individuals and groups of participants in order to draw conclusions only about those individuals or groups and only in a specific context (Nolan, Macfarlane, & Cartmel, 2013). In ethnographic research, the term case study does not refer to what is done with surveys and discursive interviews, but to the many occurrences and instances that researchers observe during a study period, or to the dozens of individuals who they meet on dozens of occasions during fieldwork. In this light, researchers are more interested in the actions that occur within an organization or group than in the organization itself (Gobo, 2011). In preschools, case-study research provides the researcher with an opportunity to gain in-depth knowledge of a specific child, or group of children in a particular context (Hill & Millar, 2015). Generally, as is the case in research inspired by ethnography, the purpose of qualitative case studies is to reveal the ongoing processes or even interpretations of those within the cultural context, and can provided material for an evaluative analysis that describes, explains, and interprets the data (Hatch & Coleman-King, 2015).

The data in this study was written up in the form of descriptive cases, revealing in the thesis half of children's stories I constructed, with the purpose of being able to show the actions that occur within the preschool context (Gobo, 2011), to give the reader opportunity to gain an in-depth knowledge of a child or a group (Hill & Millar, 2015) and make the ongoing learning processes explicit (Hatch & Coleman-King, 2015). I believed providing more detailed descriptions ('thick description') of half of the children's stories I made, would reveal each child's ways of interacting within the preschool group and have greater value than portraying a briefer, more general overview with an account of all children.

To explain this choice further, the two episodes from each classroom (i.e., two groups at Seaside and two groups from the girls' core and two groups from the boys' core at Lava Ledge) shared common threads, and discussing half of the episodes accompanied by half of the children's stories in detail added depth to the discussion. Although the episodes were

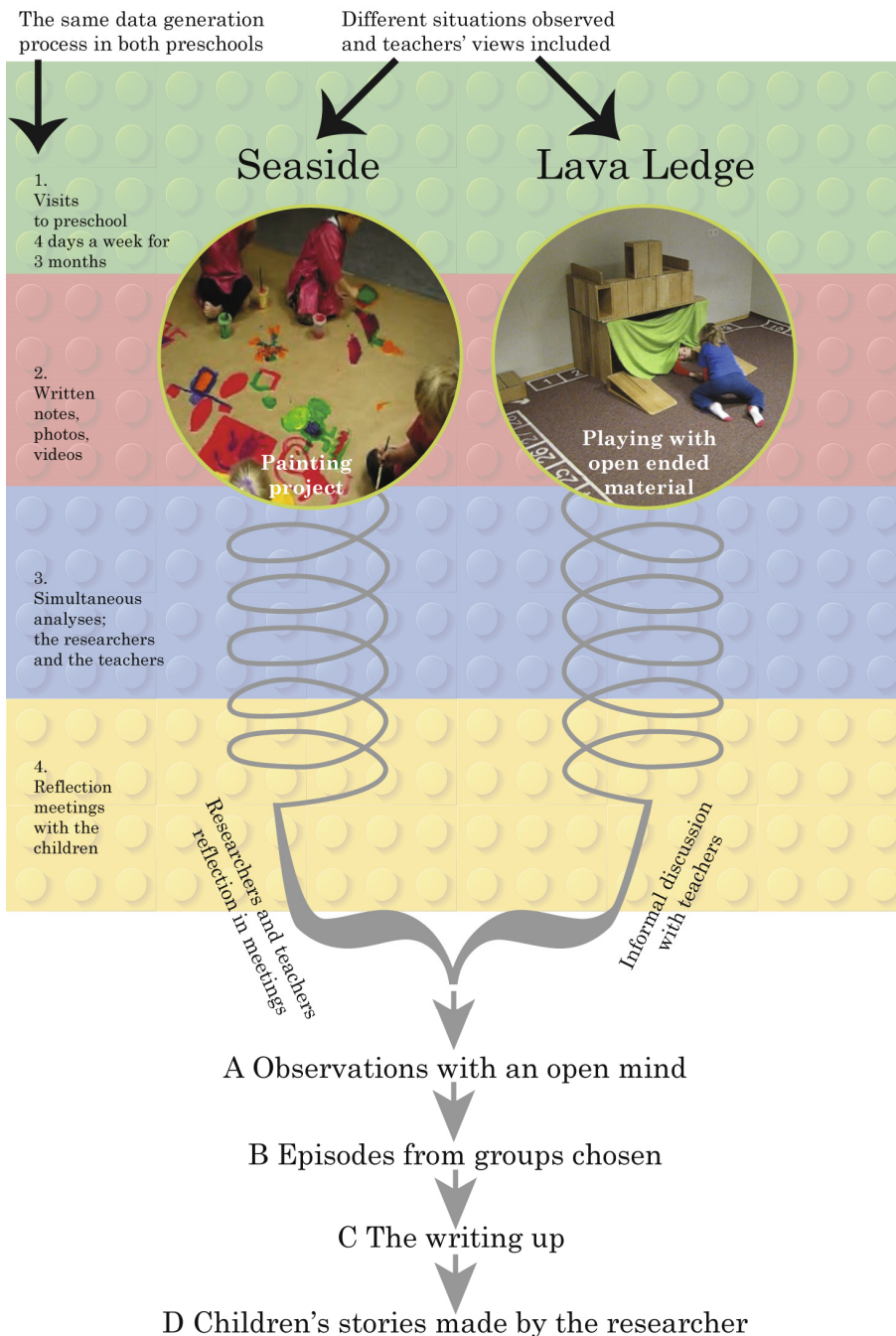
situated, many situations from the different contexts tended to recur; thus in the current study I chose specific samples, the episodes, as representations of what I saw in the groups of children.

In the current study multiple research methods were used to investigate particularity and complexity for a case, through making rich descriptions, using several data collection methods (mainly observations and reflections), as well as focusing on different perspectives, specifically the children's, the teachers', and the researcher's. The purpose was to provide in-depth understanding of the case, individual children, and groups of children in preschools, and also to provide the trustworthiness found in credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (see above in section 4.3.1). By revealing the ongoing processes in the current study, the aim was to explore complex situations in a way that would provide more understanding of how factors in contextual conditions are influencing the situation and those who are a part of it (in this case, mainly the children, but situated within a particular context where the preschool teachers also play a big part).

In both preschools, data generation occurred in a group with the oldest children, most of whom were five years old during fieldwork and preparing to begin primary school the following year. This study aimed to make visible how the two contexts support children's learning processes differently and thus explored individual children and groups of children in particular situations. The findings may inform the discussion in Iceland concerning the education of five-year-old children as they are preparing to transition to primary school.

#### **4.5.2 Different approaches to data generation**

Although building upon the same experiences studied in the pilot study (see section 1.4), the process of data generation in this study differed according to the pedagogies and the culture of the two preschools. Furthermore, although the same plan for fieldwork was followed at both preschools and the final analysis procedure was the same for both data sets, the choice of situations to be described and the methods of including teachers' views differed (see figure 4.A).



**Figure 4.A Data generation: different situations and reflections, a similar analysis process**

In both preschools, I regularly attended the preschool during the Autumn Semester, as the year's planning in both preschools (as is so in most preschools in Iceland) tended to be influenced by the seasons. Data generation in both preschools primarily relied on my notes, written observations, photographs, and videotapes, particularly those focusing on children's strengths and varied ways of doing things. In both preschools I followed the same process of data generation, seen in the four steps marked by A in the figure: the process of (1) visits to the preschools; (2) writing notes, plus taking photos and videos; (3) simultaneously analyzing my views and the preschool teachers' views of my initial field notes; and (4) reflection, my own and with children and teachers'. Despite following the same process, the situations described were different (marked by B in the figure) and I have chosen to visualize the methods used to follow the main aims in each preschool with the purpose of reflecting the different cultural contexts. In the later steps of the data generation, the analysis process was the same: observations made with an open mind, episodes from groups chosen, the writing up and finally, children's stories made by the researcher. After this children's participation in preschool groups were linked to learning dispositions (The analysis process is described below in section 4.4. and in section 1.6.3).

In the two preschools data was generated in different situations, which was meant to reflect the main aims of the preschools. In *Seaside* I chose to follow two groups of children in a situation where children took part in a project as project work was among the primary methods used in Seaside to follow up on the main aims from Seaside's school curriculum: develop children's ideas and hypotheses, co-construct meaning, and support their creativity through involving them in projects. The preschool teachers planned a painting project in which, during the first session, I participated while videotaping and taking notes. During the second session, a few days later, the children and preschool teachers reviewed and reflected on the large painting they had created, finally following up by a session where they viewed and discussed a video film of the project with me. In *Lava Ledge* the situation chosen to make observations was when the children were in choice time, playing with open-ended materials, as this part of the day was planned to build on the children's interest and initiative. These situations might reveal the main aims from the Hjalli curriculum: to teach children to follow rules, to support their independence and positive thinking, and to encourage them to be active in what are seen as characteristics strong in the opposite gender. Thus, I made observations in choice time, in four groups of children—two of 10 girls, another two of 11 boys—when the

children were playing with open-ended materials and there was minimum involvement from the preschool teacher.

The preschool teachers' reflection process was different depending on the culture and methods in each of the preschools. At Seaside, I took part in the preschool teacher's weekly reflection meetings that were planned in the preschool for reflecting on documentations in the Reggio Emilia way (Filippini, 1998). In Seaside I discussed my observations with the preschool teachers. In Lava Ledge, how reflection took place with the preschool teachers had to accommodate the fact that neither observation in the form of written notes nor documentation were part of the daily practice. In addition, there was a principle to plan no, or very few, meetings during the children's stay in the preschool. Therefore, during the data generation period in both the boys' and girls' groups, reflection with the preschool teachers occurred informally, typically when there were opportunities to discuss observations of children, which emerged effortlessly when teachers took their groups to the outside areas surrounding the preschool, a playground, or a nearby park.

Following the fieldwork, the later steps of analysis were identical at both preschools, building on my *observations* made with an open mind as well as including my and the participants' reflections. I chose *episodes* from the observations, representing the different situations when children were playing and taking part in activities, to give the reader a view into the background material the children's stories build on. Then, in the *writing up*, I chose half of the episodes, one from Seaside and two from Lava Ledge to be displayed, in order to give the reader opportunity to gain an in-depth knowledge of a child or a group by showing more clearly the actions that occur within the preschool contexts and make the ongoing learning processes explicit. After this, I constructed '*children's stories*,' from 12 children that appeared in the episodes, by reflecting on children's learning processes (children's and adults' co-construction of knowledge, discussed in section 1.3), seeking themes from the data, and organizing the themes. Finally, the children's stories, made by me, were further analyzed and, in the final step of the analysis, the children's participation in a group was described in terms of learning dispositions, where the data was sorted into the different features of learning dispositions (communication and involvement; well-being and belonging; and contribution and taking responsibility, discussed in section 2.5.3). The purpose of making the children's stories was to be able to describe children's relationships, interactions, and emotions in order to reveal children's learning processes as they participated in their preschool communities.

### 4.5.3 The process of generating data

The research design in this study aims to capture what influences children's learning processes in complex situations within two preschools, using a method inspired by ethnography. The data gathering started by making observations with the aim of mapping children's experience, and then making sense of the data by analyses.

My observations constituted the greatest portion of the data, although the teachers' photos and written notes at Seaside were also included to the data. First, I wrote notes by hand in a research journal, consisting of observations as well as reflections, mainly my own but also children's and preschool teachers' reflections. Then I typed those notes and translated them into English. The first notes from Seaside totaled 20 narratives, whereas the notes from Lava Ledge totaled 24 narratives. About 300 photos were taken at Seaside and about 3,000 at Lava Ledge, a difference partly attributable to Lava Ledge's being far less familiar to me, but also the amount of written information available consisted of a few books and essays (compared to vast amount of written information about the preschools in Reggio Emilia). In addition, the data were generated a year later at Lava Ledge, at which time I had a better camera available. The videotapes shot at Seaside and Lava Ledge totaled approximately 300 minutes of film for each preschool: at Seaside, 12 periods ranging from 5–60 minutes, and at Lava Ledge, 16 periods ranging from 5–60 minutes.

Mid-fieldwork, I brought to the preschools my photographs of the children for them to discuss, and near the end of the period, I brought video clips of the children's activities to watch with the children and preschool teachers. By planning these reflection meetings, I hoped to give the children an idea of what my research was about, but also to get closer to understanding their views; that is, how they saw what was happening in the photos and the videos. When we were looking at the photos, I asked the children if they remembered what they were doing at the time when the photos were taken and if they could tell me more about their role and views in the activity. Looking at the photographs seemed of interest to the children, and they remembered, but although they laughed and enjoyed looking at them together, they put forward very few new ideas or views concerning what was happening in the photographs. In the reflection meeting when we watched video clips, I similarly asked the children if they remembered what was in the video, what they were doing, and what they were planning to do. It was clear that the children were waiting for their own picture to appear, and if they commented on what they saw, it was to

describe what had happened, not so much to explain the situation in greater detail or express their thoughts, at the time or in retrospect. These reflection meetings, thus, might have given the children insight into my work and even have strengthened the trust between us, but information on what their views were was scarce. This might be explained by several issues such as the elapsed time between filming and viewing, the choice of video clips was made by me and other clips might have been more interesting for the children, and the children were not used to looking at video clips from their own activities with the aim of reflecting on their learning.

#### **4.6 The process of analysis**

In developing the generation and analysis of data in the current study, I aimed to give a picture of children's learning processes; to look further into and map the multiple factors influencing these processes, and to explore how the children were expressing themselves, and how they interacted and learned in two preschools. The data generation was planned in a similar way as researchers in anthropology did (in the 1900s), at a time when they wanted to move away from seeing other cultures through the lens of Western culture (Marcus & Fisher, 1986). Not only did I want to make children's learning processes explicit but I also aimed to minimize the influence of the traditional scientific way in developmental psychology of classifying and stratifying children and groups to be able to generalize about children (Burman, 2008a). Instead I attempted to make explicit the child's understanding of the world; to reveal what I saw as being the child's point of view (Sommer et al., 2010), describing "the reality" as I saw it.

Through the analysis process in this study I explored children's multiple expressions in order to study their experience, both in order to detect what children express through different means, and also to read their feelings, views, and understanding (Greene & Hogan, 2005; Nolan et al., 2013). In order to connect the data to the research questions I thoroughly and repeatedly read through the data-set, exploring what seemed essential, striking or odd, seeking key issues or patterns from the data first by sorting the initial data (see level A, step 3 of the analysis process, figure 4.B) and later by developing four main themes (what the children did; the support and reactions they got; the ideas or hypotheses that the children expressed, and how or if children's ideas were listened to). Building on these themes I made the children's stories and after this continued to work with the appearing patterns by systematically coding the whole database, using *framework analysis*, where the themes were sorted and summarized, using

the learning dispositional frame (see level D, step 6 and 7 of the analysis process, figure 4.B).

In the first steps of the analysis process I used the inductive ways of analysis inspired by Ethnography. After developing the data through analysis by thoroughly reading, and rereading, and finding themes it was relevant to organize this vast amount of information. The data set was organized in order to make explicit themes across the different preschool contexts, and reveal issues such as similarities and differences in the two preschools. Fetterman (1989) describes different ways a researcher can use to make sense of a large amount of data in the end of an analysis process (after the data has been coded or themed), such as by making a matrix to sort the themed data (Fetterman, 1989). This has also been referred to by Marcus and Fisher (1986) as the “writer’s problem of representation” that is how the researcher represents the “reality” described in the data, and links to a theoretical discourse as interpreting “reality.” Such as what words are being used and how these words reflect the researcher’s views or his/her own statements (Marcus & Fisher, 1986, p. 13). In the current study I sought support from the learning dispositional features developed in New Zealand as an assessment method in a specific socio-cultural context. I developed three lenses of learning dispositions, to emphasize the socio-cultural views underpinning the current study, and to discuss children’s participation in their preschool groups.

In this way, analysis was from the beginning inductive, moving from the general to the particular, but in the later steps of the analysis process was undertaken in a more deductive way, moving from the particular back towards the general was used (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Manson, 2002), in order to make sense of the data for the writing up of the theses.

The analysis process is described in figure 4.B. The figure is meant to be read from the bottom up, as the initial data, mainly building on my written notes, photos and videos from the field, is seen as the foundation the data generational process starts from, and is the beginning of the data analysis process.

*A: Observations made with an open mind* (steps 1, 2 and 3 in figure 4.B). At the time of the fieldwork I made observations in the preschools; between my visits to the preschool I rewrote the notes, reviewed photos and videos, reflected and included my own reflections and the participants, and, in addition, I translated the notes from Icelandic to English. After this, in the next step of the analysis process, I started to analyze the initial data. I reflected on the children’s different actions and expressions (such as facial

expression, tone of voice, movements, activities, and words), looking for the specific characteristics found in the learning processes of individual children and the group in the social context.

B: *Episodes from groups* (step 4 in figure 4.B). I chose episodes (from my research notes) to give the reader a view into the children's reality in the preschools and at the same time the background material on which the children's stories (made later in the analysis process) were built showing the actions that occurred within the preschool context (Gobo, 2011). I used thematic analysis; I closely explored, read through several times, seeking key labels or themes, looking for information about what was found to be of interest in the data. After a thorough exploration of the data-set, these themes appeared: (1) What the children did; (2) The support and reactions they got from the environment; (3) the ideas or hypotheses that the children expressed; and (4) How or if children's ideas were listened to.

C: *The writing up* (step 5 in figure 4.B). The six episodes, and the children's stories from 24 children, were not only a large amount of analyzed data and too many words to publish in a thesis, but also there were similarities in the episodes. I had to choose between providing more detailed information on the experience of half of the children from the two preschools or abridging the material from all the children and risking losing some of the details from the thick description. I chose to write up three episodes and children's stories from 12 children, two girls and three boys in Seaside and three girls and four boys in Lava Ledge. Thus, the purpose of revealing half of the data in the theses also was to give the reader the opportunity to gain an in-depth knowledge of each child and the group of children they were interacting with, and by doing so making the ongoing learning processes explicit (Hatch & Coleman-King, 2015; Hill & Millar, 2015).

D: *Children's stories made by the researcher* (step 6 and 7 in figure 4.B). In this step there were two levels. Firstly, I wrote children's stories (building on inductive methods), in a form similar to the learning stories developed in New Zealand. Secondly, I described children's participation in a group (using deductive methods) by analyzing the children's stories in terms of learning dispositions, seen through three lenses.

In the first part of this step in the analysis process, I was building on the research notes by developing and analyzing the data and making narratives, referred to in this study as children's stories; stories. These stories were my stories about what the children did and how they interacted in their preschool groups; I also attempting to reveal what I saw as the child

perspective, and to describe the children's individual characteristics. Through the analysis of the data I saw similar trends in children's communications in all six groups. I saw children:

- having *individual ways of interacting* in different situations;
- nearly always *seeming interested* in the activity at hand;
- *expressing their views* and wishes; and
- frequently *supporting other children*.

These characteristics were frequently seen in all six groups in both preschools. The thorough analysis, also brought my attention to how some children in some situations seemed to struggle to belong to the group. This appeared several times in Vala's story, when she for a moment seemed to give up the struggle to belong to the group of the other two girls (chapter 6, Steps 20 and 21, Phase 2). In this way, when exploring the data by thoroughly analyzing, I sometimes detected more negative learning dispositions. This appeared in several other occasions, for example, in one of the groups in the Seaside preschool. In this episode, Dagur seemed to demonstrate a part of the positive learning dispositions, being interested and engrossed in his work, but he very seldom expressed his wishes or was supported by another child. Even when the teachers made attempts to support Dagur in expressing himself, this did not help (chapter 5, Steps 14 and 21, Phase 2).

In the second part of this step of the analysis process, I described children's participation in a group by analyzing the children's stories in terms of learning dispositions. I was working from the thematic analysis of the initial data (that mainly built on written notes, video tapes, and photos), and used framework analysis; I sorted the data following steps of three themes, relevant in socio-cultural research, building on my organization of *the learning dispositions*: (1) *communication and involvement* (the social context), (2) *well-being and belonging* (the individual child's perspective), and (3) *Contribution and taking responsibility* (the interactive learning processes in the groups).

This part of the analysis process was particularly interpretive, as I carefully studied children's expressions and read into issues of a more subjective nature, such as by focusing on how children solved problems, I interpreted how they seemed to sense well-being and belonging. An example from how children could be seen to tackle difficulties appeared in Vala's story, when she was playing house (see table 6.B in section 6.4.1) with two other girls in the girls group in the Lava Ledge preschool. Katla and

Hera were inside the house they all had built together, but there had not been room for Vala inside the house. Vala, acting as the puppy, was under the table (the table was the puppy's house). Vala took the initiative and said she now was going to decide when there was a day by turning on the light (chapter 6, Steps 8 and 9, Phase 2). Analyzing the data, I read into the children's expressions and actions. For example, in Vala's story, it appeared to me that she seemed as she wanted to belong to the group, and was prepared to take a risk to make an attempt to be included. This was seen in her interactions with the other girls when she:

- told the other girls she was going to decide when there was day (Step 8, Phase 2);
- carefully expressed her intention of making the day by turning on the light (Step 8, Phase 2); and
- seemed to adapt to Hera's wishes by turning the light off again, as Hera wanted a longer night (Step 9, Phase 2).

I explored how each child contributed to and took responsibility for what happened within the preschool context, in relation to how they seemed to sense justice and be responsible for self and others. In this step I continued to carefully read the data, detecting children's activities and reading into their expressions to get a closer picture of issues of a more subjective nature such as the children's understandings, views, and emotions. I looked for clues in children's expressions, read and reflected on the different expressions, such as signs and facial expression that indicated children's feelings, wishes, and views, but also carefully followed the process of a children's actions through the play period.

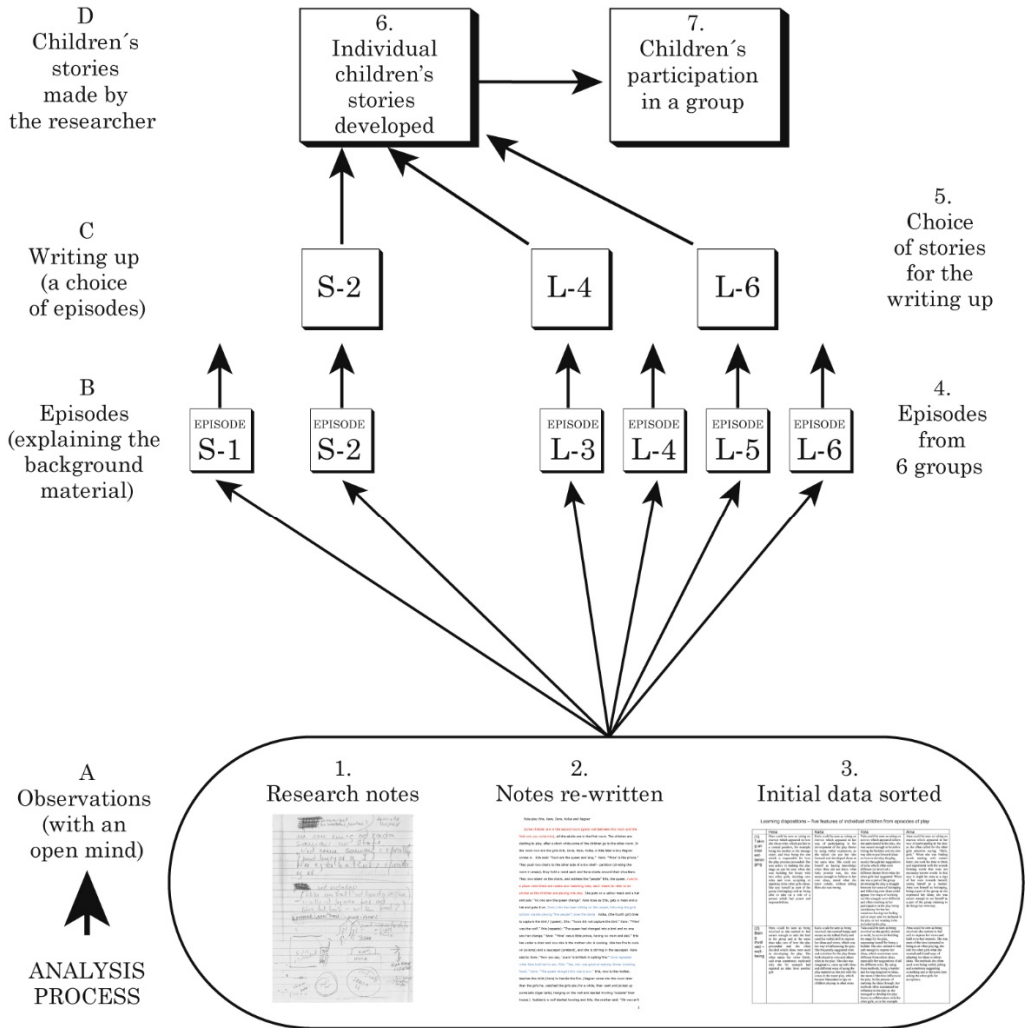
An example of looking carefully at the process of the children's interactive processes and reading other signs could be seen in the same episode where Vala was playing house (see table 6.B in section 6.4.1) with Hera and Katla. During the episode, Hera several times turned down suggestions and ideas from Vala (chapter 6, Step 11, Phase 1, and Step 19, Phase 2). After they had been playing for a while Hera seemed to rethink her actions. Expressing her words in a smooth and warm voice she offered Vala the chance to build an attic on top of the house, and helped her with the building (chapter 6, Step 17, Phase 2). I read into these interactions and saw this as an example of how Hera intentionally took responsibility for the situation, and included Vala in the group. Seen through the learning dispositional lens, Hera found ways to influence and contribute to the play situation, to take responsibility for Vala's input in the play. Hera's communication with Vala now became different; she helped her to find a

place within the house, which helped Vala to be more of a participant in the play and to belong to 'the family' inside the house.

The children's stories I made are narrative inquiries (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), made by me, building on the initial data (observations, written notes, photos and videos) and developed through the analysis process. These stories are intended to give insight into the children's experience in their preschool contexts by giving detailed descriptions of how the children participate in their preschool group, and how the learning processes in the group reveal how each individual child learns in two different preschools. The information was used to develop answers to the research questions; the factors influencing children's learning processes and how the children were learning.

Through the data generation process, first in the three-month period in the field and later when going through the analysis process, making children's stories, I paid close attention to what was happening in each preschool, making rich descriptions of children's participation, including details of the children's learning processes. In the first part of the findings chapters (sections 5.2, 5.3, 6.2 and 6.3) I describe the children's participation in their preschool groups, to illuminate the multiple factors influencing children's learning processes. In the first part of these chapters I refer to my field notes, including observations from written notes, videos, photos, and my own and others' reflections. As the analysis process is far from being linear and also includes issues of a subjective nature (see sections 4.4.1 and 4.4.2), I refer to the field notes as narratives of which a few are numbered to be able to refer back to those in the later steps of analysis. In the second part of the findings chapters (sections 5.4, 6.4 and 6.5) my construction of children's stories were narratives where I described children's lives in the preschools, as they appeared in my data. A researcher writing narratives faces a multiplicity of complex processes that can be at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and she or he needs to recreate what is seen in the data, through reflection, understanding, and interpretation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Graue & Walsh, 1998). The strength of writing children's stories in the form of narratives, as I did, was found in describing what happened in detail, thus providing large amount of analyzed data. As the main aim was to make children's learning processes explicit, I, instead of counting how many times a child acted in a certain way, chose to explore the children's experience in depth. I described what they did and how, and through the reflective analysis process I interpreted and described in detail what I saw. The purpose was to develop an understanding about children's lives, in order to reveal the children's participation in their preschools

groups: the factors influencing their learning processes, the power relations within the different preschools, and how the children were learning when interacting in their preschool groups.



**Figure 4.B The process of analysis via data generation**

## 4.7 Ethical issues

The ethical issues that need to be considered for this study, are building on international ethical guidelines (BERA, 2011; EECERA, 2015), valuing confidentiality in many aspects, the notion of truth and reality as being

“perspectival, contextual and multiple” (Bresler, 1996, p.135), and listening to children to foreground their strengths rather than vulnerabilities (Morrow & Richards, 1996).

In the current study, the British Educational Research Guidelines (BERA, 2011) were used as a frame of reference from the beginning. The BERA guidelines are similar to the EECERA Ethical Code for Early Childhood Research (EECERA, 2015), which also is consistent with the Scottish Educational Research Association, and the American Educational Research Association. All these ethical codes suggest that researchers respect young children and their families, and see both children and their families as research participants and subjects developing in the context of their families and communities. Therefore, the researcher should treat young children taking part in a study in a way that is free from prejudice and respectful of cultural identity. The ethical principles framing a research process, especially one that includes young children, should ensure all involved in a study have the right to be treated fairly, sensitively, and with dignity, and be informed about the research and their rights to participate in or opt out from the study (EECERA, 2015).

#### **4.7.1 Consent and anonymity**

Regarding consent and anonymity in this study, it is important to bear in mind that Iceland is a small country, with slightly more than 300,000 people and only 277 preschools. In this light, it has been even more important to treat all information with respect, especially the sensitive information about preschools, preschool teachers, the children, and their families. Those running the preschools, head teachers and the preschool teachers taking part in the study, and the parents of all children in the groups taking part in the study received a letter from me. The letter introduced the study and me, I promised confidentiality, and I asked parents to sign, giving permission to include their child in the study.

I sent a letter seeking consent from those running the two preschools (one municipality and one private firm), which was returned to me with assenting signatures from both parties (to protect the anonymity of the participants in the preschools the signed consents are not included in the appendix). Parents, educators, head teachers, and school administrators all received similar letters (Appendix) with information regarding the research and me, and were asked for their written consent. They were asked to grant their formal consent for their child, children, and/or themselves to be participants in the research. All participants who received a letter signed

their consent and returned it to me. The parents of one child asked for more information before eventually signing their consent.

In research with children, or other people in a vulnerable situation, it is important to use diverse methods to inform the children about what their participation in the study means, ask for their consent to join in, and to see to it that they have been informed that they can opt out during the research process (Dockett, Einarsdóttir, & Perry, 2012). I asked all potentially participating children to provide their oral consent, initially during the first meeting at which their teacher introduced me to them and helped to explain what the study was. I also asked the children for permission to be with them each time a new activity occurred and attempted to read children's expressions carefully. On the rare occasion that a child seemed reluctant or hesitant toward me, I withdrew my attention.

In recent years' researchers have developed different methods in order to come closer to providing children with information about research to increase their influence as they give their consent or decline to take part in a study, and to listen to their voices in research (Clark, 2011; Dockett, 2008). Methods have been developed using means other than oral language such as using pictures, diagrams, videos, or other digital means to convey to the children the nature of the research. Further to make it easier for the children to indicate their feelings about involvement in the study (Mac Naughton, Rolfe, & Siraj-Blatchford, 2010), children have been given an opportunity to sign their consent for taking part in a study, often by using photos or symbols (like smiling or sulking faces). The children's understanding about their participation might be different from the researcher's or other adults presenting the study, and therefore a child might tend to react in a way the child thinks the researcher expects from her or him, as it may be difficult to say no to a more powerful adult (Green & Hogan, 2005). An example about how easily a researcher can impose her or his ideas upon the child is described below (see section 4.7). When planning the current study, I knew I would try to be open and non-judgmental, relate to the children by being positive and showing my interest for them and their activities, and to introduce, in collaboration with the preschool teachers, the study to the children. My intention was both to contribute to children's ability to make an informed and non-coerced choice about participation and, for me, as the researcher, to come closer to children's views (discussed in section 4.6.2). However, even though I believe I managed to build a trusting relationship with the children, children's consent might have been built on a stronger base if I had

explained the research further using different means, such as making diagrams and developing a sheet for the children to sign their consent by using symbols.

#### **4.7.2 Truth and confidentiality**

Ethnographically inspired research deals with multiple realities, multiple meanings, and multiple perspectives (Bresler, 1996). Truth then cannot be seen as one specific “right” truth; rather there are many truths, or “regimes of truth”, a set of truths within a given field that constitute a consensus about what needs to be done in that field and how it should be done (Mac Naughton, 2005). In the current study I supported this understanding through the data generation process and attempted to hold the view that I was not looking for a specific truth about the two different contexts, not trying to find out if what I observed was right or wrong, rather to be open minded, observing what happened, and how children took part and interacted in different situations. The purpose of valuing many truths and the participants’ multiple views was not only to increase the trustworthiness of the study (discussed in section 4.3.1), but also to listen to the participants’ views (children’s and preschool teachers’) in order to include multiple meanings and perspectives in the preschool context. My quest also was to try to avoid imposing my own values on participants, as well as to be open and understanding toward them, and by doing so minimizing my own influence in generating and analyzing the data, often referred to as the researcher’s bias. One way of limiting the researcher’s bias was to include multiple meanings and perspectives of the participants. I reflected on and discussed parts of my observations with the preschool teachers and twice during the field work, I planned reflection meetings, with all groups of children in both preschools where we in the first meeting discussed photos from the children’s activities, and later we did the same with video clips from children’s play and activities (these issues are discussed in section 4.3.2).

Only once did a girl reject my interpretation. When we were looking at a video clip from the girls’ play, I said to the girls: “...and then you suddenly were playing another play?” The girl said: “No, this was the same play; we were just a family going camping.” I, the researcher, had seen a girl changing the play from being a family play into some sort of a play where they were driving in a race, but she saw this as the same play. This example reminds me as a researcher of the importance of listening to children and reading carefully into their expressions. It is very likely that this happens

more often than we realize; children probably often see things differently from what we, the adults, do. This story thus is a reminder to all adults of treading carefully, especially to those doing research with children.

Very seldom did the teachers express views contrary to what I had observed when the children were participating. In such a case, the teacher and I discussed what had happened and both continued to observe the issue at hand, and later discussed the matter again. I added our different views to the initial research notes and used the information to make a fuller picture of a child when I wrote the children's stories. Such incidents happened only a few times in this study. An example is when I had been observing a boy, who I saw as quite clever when he was playing and interacting with the others; I saw him as a story teller and very imaginative. The preschool teacher saw him as being overprotected at home and thus not very skilled when interacting and playing with the other boys. We both continued to be observant when he was playing and later discussed what we saw in his actions. Our reflections added more information to the data. I, for example, saw the boy when he was frightened of climbing a rock the other boys dared to climb and the preschool teacher saw more clearly how the boy used his skills of telling stories when interacting with the other boys. I included these "snap shots" into the detailed picture of the boy in the data. Working with data in this way was inspired by the idea of many truths existing (Mac Naughton, Davis, & Smith, 2010), rather than only one truth, about what the boy was or was not when he was participating in the reality of the preschool.

### **4.7.3 Listening to children**

One issue to consider when the aim is to listen to children's perspectives in research is related to how children tend to be positioned as vulnerable, incompetent, and relatively powerless in society in general. This conceptualization of children needs to be taken into account in social research (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Mayall, 2003; Morrow & Richards, 1996). To address these concerns researchers have planned participatory approaches to engage young children. These approaches not only build on an image of children as strong and fully capable of having their say in their own matters and in society as whole, but also value children's rights to choose whether or not they wish to be involved in research (Dockett, Einardóttir, & Perry, 2012). In this study, I made an effort to foreground what children were capable of doing and how they went about doing things. I attempted to listen to children, and to be open and non-

judgmental as I interpreted children's perspectives as expressed in their body language and their words. I tried to express that I believed in the children's ability to make decisions, for example by asking them as often as possible for permission to be with them and by asking when they were prepared to take part in the study. Furthermore, I had casual discussions with the children and asked questions about what was going on in the preschool, about issues like the day-schedule, planned activities and events. As listening to their answers I attempted to read into their various expressions: facial expression, tone of voice, movements, activities, and words. In this way I addressed the issue of foregrounding children's competences by increasing my awareness of and attention to them, and working as collaboratively as possible with children and preschool teachers at the time I made the field notes. I saw these methods as a way to reduce the power imbalance between me as the researcher and the children taking part in the study.

Recent studies addressing listening to children have adopted strategies in which children are asked to show researchers, who are seen as guests, around in their preschool (Clark, 2005; Dockett, 2008). Furthermore, these studies have discussed the ways in which children might indicate their desire not to participate, underlining the importance of children being able to dissent at various stages of the research process. A key tool for a researcher is to read into children's verbal and non-verbal interactions and to be able to interpret indications of children's dissent (Dockett, Einardóttir, & Perry, 2012). In the present study, keeping these guidelines in mind, I attempted to read carefully children's different ways of expressing themselves during the first two weeks in each preschool and to be observant of children's expressions and their responses. I sought to read the signs of children that informed their view of me being at the preschool. Below are examples of observations from my notes:

*At the beginning, I came to the preschool and slowly developed a relationship with the children. I tried to read into children's expressions so that I could communicate my understanding of their situation. I managed to develop what I interpreted as trust between the children and me and as their acceptance of my being with them. Very soon the children frequently asked me to join them in activities, invited me to come with them for a walk, tell me what was for dinner, or what they had been doing with their family the day before.*

*Signs of children welcoming me. When I had visited Seaside on only two or three days previously, a girl wanted to give me a tour of the school*

*and show me her portfolio. Soon after I started to regularly attend the departments and cores, the children would approach me to tell me something important: what was for lunch, what they had done at home during the weekend, or about a trip they were going to take in their preschool group. They frequently asked me whether I would participate in an activity, and, at Lava Ledge in particular, children approached me to ask whether I would be staying with the boys or the girls on that day. All of these signs I saw as the children's acceptance of my being at their preschools.*

*When children disapproved. Only once did a child not want me to videotape what he was doing and very rarely did children express shyness toward participating. In these situations, I drew back and postponed what I had intended to do, for I realized that it was important to build trust between the children and me. I wanted the children to know that I would listen to them and respect their rights to dissent from involvement in the study.*

*Signs of children accepting my participation in their play/activities. Two girls who were writing and drawing at a small table—they told me that they were making a secret book—occasionally asked me to show them how to write different letters. After a while, they moved to sit under the table, explaining to me that no one was allowed to see what was inside the book. After some time, they at last invited me to approach them under the table and showed me the contents of the secret book. I saw this invitation as a sign from the girls that they accepted me as a part of their preschool.*

All of the above are example of ways in which I attempted to read children's expressions by carefully listening and being open to their thoughts and views. The key issue seemed to be to read into their expressions and respect their views. In this sense, it was necessary to realize children's tendency to submit themselves to doing as they have seen adults do or to do what they think adults want them to do (Vecchi, 2010). To this end, I found it important to tread lightly, to listen carefully, and especially to respond to children when they approached me, by showing them I was listening, reacting to their wishes, and expressing clearly that I respected their decisions.

#### **4.8 Strengths and weaknesses of the design and methods**

The methods used in this study built upon concepts of reading into children's multiple expressions and of generating data by different means.

Developing data by using multiple methods to explore complex situations in preschools might lead to all sorts of misunderstanding. In the present study, several moments revealed the delicacy of interpreting children's different expressions. An example from the written record appears in what follows:

*Vala had been playing, for a long while, in the unit block area with Hera and Katla. She was up on the roof (in the "attic" they had built for her) of their house, and the other two were inside. Vala changed the house into a camper (i.e., van) by starting to drive, pretending to have a steering wheel in her hands. She started the engine and drove away; they were now a travelling family, and the other girls accepted this development by playing along. In a reflection meeting with the girls and John, the educator, in which we looked at a video clip from the girls' play, the researcher asked Vala whether she had started a new play. Vala replied, 'No, not at all'. She said they were just driving, going on holiday. Vala was quite determined, and in her mind this was not a new play . . . it was the same play.*

The example demonstrates how easy it is, or perhaps how little it takes, for a researcher to impose her or his own ideas upon a child's experience and thereby wrongly interpret its meaning. These issues are further discussed in some of the former sections, such as section 4.3.2.

Another weakness of the study is in the choice of method that might have favored one preschool, as the data generation was inspired by the Learning Story Approach which builds on an ideology, views, and methods similar to the ideas developed in one of the preschools, Seaside, the Reggio Emilia-inspired one. In contrast, the Hjalli pedagogy does not include, pedagogical documentation or making learning stories in their practice. In effect, the range of methods used in the study to include preschool teachers' views might have favored data generation at Seaside. In retrospect, it might have strengthened the design to accommodate a more formal way for preschool teachers at Lava Ledge to include their views in data generation.

A part of the research design was making clear my views and where I come from (see section 1.2) and to support the study by a theoretical frame, building on socio-cultural views (see section 1.3). An important factor in the analysis was to demonstrate the coherence among the theories and concepts underpinning the study, my views, the ethical factors in the study, and the methods used. It is thus important to consider whether these factors may have favored one of the two social contexts more than the other.

To support the credibility of the study, I saw it as important to respect children's right to approve their own participation and to include children's views. However, the data generation during this study indicated that as the children were asked to be a part of the study, they could decide whether they wanted to participate, therefore the plan to include children's views in the data was not fully realized (as said earlier, e.g. in section 4.7.3). One explanation might be that the reflection meetings were planned by me, and I also chose and prepared the photos and videos to view and discuss. When researchers want to listen to children, it is not enough to create opportunities for children to be heard. Instead, it might be more important to listen when children are prepared to express their views, largely in order to give children a chance to take initiative, thereby preparing the researcher to take advantage of the opportunity to listen. These opportunities occurred several times in the present study—for example, in the narrative of Kolka and Irma's working on their secret book and in the end inviting me to share their secret (briefly discussed immediately above and in section 5.2.1). More attention to such occasions might have supported the influence of children's views. It is furthermore important to keep in mind that, since children express themselves in different ways, reflection or discussion might not be the best way for all children to express themselves, as could be observed when the children several times expressed that they wanted to stop discussing and reflecting and to start acting.

Sharing data with the preschool teachers was another weakness. During fieldwork, sharing data with educators by reflecting together differed in the two contexts and depended on the different methods of the two curricula. Since reflection was highly valued at Seaside, I could participate in the preschool teachers' reflection meetings, and special meetings were planned for reflection. At Lava Ledge, by contrast, overall meetings in the preschool were kept to a minimum in order not to deprive children of their teachers' time. Sharing data with the educators at Lava Ledge thus occurred during informal discussions when the opportunity arose, such as when we were outside with the children during their free-play period. In summary, not only was the method used to inspire the process of data generation, the Learning Story Approach, ideologically closer to Seaside, the preschool inspired by Reggio Emilia, but also the ways of reflection might have been not in favor of the Hjalli preschool, Lava Ledge.

Most of the analysis occurred after fieldwork was finished. It was undertaken by me with the aim to share data with the educators and include their views, for which I could have planned regular reflection meetings during the latter part of analysis. In the later steps of analysis, the

copious amount of data made sharing it with the educators' problematic apart from a final read-through of the conclusions concerning the respective preschools. Since this study was a school project with no funding, I believed it would have been asking too much from the preschool teachers to use their own time to participate in reflecting on the development of the children's learning stories.

The aims of the study required considering ethical factors, addressing power relations and being reflective, and gaining a more complete picture of the participants' views and understandings. Generating data in this way might be deemed a strength in this study, as my intention was to include multiple meanings and views of the participants in order to increase the trustworthiness of the findings. However, there is reason to consider what could have been planned or carried out differently, particularly concerning including children's views in data generation and sharing data with preschool teachers. If I had been able to involve the participants (children and preschool teachers) more consistently in the analysis process, their perspectives would have made the descriptions fuller and increased the trustworthiness (Hatch & Coleman-King, 2015) of the study. Adding more information from the participants to the findings, to represent the lived reality of these preschool contexts, would have increased the credibility of the study. Also, more information from the participants might have given a deeper understanding of the learning processes taking place in the two preschools which, again, would increase the value of the results in other contexts (transferability). If the findings of the study had been more significantly shaped by the participants, the weight of my views would not have been as strong which might have decreased the influence of my bias as a researcher. Unfortunately, for many reasons, this was not possible.

## **4.9 Summary**

The aims of this study were two-fold: (1) to explore the multiple factors affecting young children's learning processes while participating in two different early childhood curricular contexts; and (2), to give a detailed description of how children are learning in the daily lives as they participate in two profoundly different preschools. To be able to understand and identify the complex learning processes that occur in preschool contexts, a range of theoretical underpinnings, methodological techniques, and methods were integrated.

In order to gain insight into lives in preschools, I used qualitative methods influenced by ethnography, by describing cases in two preschools

with the aim of capturing the complexity of children's learning processes within the preschool contexts. The method used for data generation was inspired by the Learning Story Approach, developed in New Zealand for use in preschools. Data was constructed by following a pre-planned process: observations made with an open mind; children's stories were made by linking to learning dispositions; episodes from groups were chosen; and finally, the writing up of the analyzed data. The method involved building on my field notes, my own reflections and to some extent the participants' reflections, the preschool teachers' reflections, and formal planned meetings for sharing data with the children. At both schools, the analytical process followed four steps: observations made with an open mind; children's stories for individual children linked to learning dispositions; episodes chosen to give the reader a view into the background material; and finally writing up the findings. The next two chapters demonstrate this process in the two case study settings.

In the writing up of the findings in chapters 5 and 6, I decided to foreground three episodes (i.e., occurrences and events) and children's stories from individual children taking part in their preschool contexts. In the final document, I chose to write up half of the episodes and children's stories of analyzed data, to be able to show the details from the situations in each preschool; that is, for highlighting the factors influencing children's learning processes and how children were learning. One episode involved a group of children at Seaside, followed by children's stories of the children in that group, accounted for in chapter 5. Another episode was from the girls' group, and a third was from the boys' group, both at Lava Ledge and accounted for in chapter 6.

## **5 Findings: Seaside—A Reggio Emilia-inspired pedagogy**

### **5.1 Introduction**

In this chapter and the next the findings from the two preschool settings will be described. The data generation in both schools was primarily built on my field notes: written observations, photographs, and videotapes, made over a period of three months in each preschool. During the first part of the data generation process, the observations were shared with the preschool teachers and children, while the later steps of the analysis process were mainly developed by me. The final analyses included detailed descriptions of two episodes and children's stories of 11 children (five girls and six boys) at Seaside and four episodes and children's stories of 13 children (six girls and seven boys) at Lava Ledge. At this point in the data generation process, the data set had become too large and needed to be managed in order to avoid exceeding the word limit. Instead of slimming down all of the descriptions and running the risk of losing details which might provide valuable information about children's learning processes in their preschool groups, I chose to display half of the data. Rather than portraying a shorter, more general overview with an account of all the children, I saw it as having more value to show a more detailed description of fewer groups and half of the children's ways of interacting within the preschool environment. Furthermore, each classroom (one department in Seaside and two cores in Lava Ledge, further explained in sections 5.2 and 6.2), had similarities that allowed for choosing one episode and stories from the children taking part in each of those, to represent the preschool context in the two preschools. I decided to write up one episode from a group with children's stories from two girls and three boys in Seaside, and two episodes from groups with the children's stories I constructed of three girls and four boys in Lava Ledge.

This chapter uncovers the social context in Seaside, a preschool working in the spirit of Reggio Emilia, which has the specific aims of supporting children in developing their ideas and hypotheses, co-constructing meaning, and constructing creativity through participating in projects. First there is a description of the preschool's environment, including the physical environment, routines, and social conventions of the preschool context, the curriculum, environment, and pedagogy (see section 5.2). Next, there is an exploration of the children's daily life in the preschool setting, and how

children participate in a group of children and teachers (see section 5.3). After this there is an episode from one group of children taking part in a painting project, followed by children's stories of each child who took part in the episode (see section 5.4). Next, the children's learning processes are discussed in relation to participation in a preschool group (see section 5.5).

*In this chapter, the sections written in italic font are from my research notes, observations, and reflections.*

## **5.2 The preschool**

In Seaside, the Reggio Emilia preschool, at the time the data generation of this study took place, there were about 80 children in the preschool, divided into four departments (department is a translation of the word "deild" in Icelandic, commonly used in Iceland to refer to what some others call a large group or classroom). At this time, the preschool was under renovation and in the process of adding more departments. The departments were divided by age: two departments had one- to two-year-old children, one department had three- to four-year-old children, and one department had four- to six-year-old children.

### **5.2.1 Participants in this study**

This study took place in the eldest department of children (four- to six-year-olds) with a total of 24 children. The children in the department were divided by age into three smaller groups that worked with their respective teachers in theme work and other activities during group time.

This chapter builds on the observations of eleven children—five girls and six boys (see table 5.A), with their preschool teacher Vera, the art teacher Sunna, and occasionally other staff members. From the field notes two episodes and children's stories of children taking part in a painting project were developed. One episode and children's stories of five children were written and further discussed in the latter half of this chapter (see sections 5.4. and 5.5). The data generation took place in the autumn term of the year in which eight of the children turned five years old and would therefore move to the primary school in the next autumn term. The remaining three children were a year younger than the others (Dora, Dagur, and Karl).

**Table 5.A Children whose children's stories were developed**

Girls	Boys
Irma* (5 years)	Dagur* (4 years)
Kolka* (5 years)	Oddur* (5 years)
Dora (4 years)	Villi* (5 years)
Erla (5 years)	Karl (4 years)
Kara (5 years)	Ragnar (5 years)
	Ivar (5 years)
* Episodes and children's stories that are discussed in the latter half of this chapter, in sections 5.4 and 5.5, are marked with an asterisk (*).	

At Seaside, the teachers used their preparation time to work on their documentations. It was seen as important to have meetings during the day, inside the working hours of the staff, in order to be able to discuss and reflect on documentations. As this preschool valued reflection, the head teacher understood how important it would be for me to plan reflection meetings with the teachers. She even saw it as an opportunity for the preschool and the teachers to take part in reflections with me. The reflection meetings were held once a week and lasted an hour. Those taking part included Vera, the preschool teacher, her assistant teacher Rosa, Sunna the art teacher, and Frida, a preschool teacher from another department who was very active in documenting.

*Daily schedule and working methods:*

The preschool opens at 7:30

Most children arrive at school before 9:00

Breakfast 8:30 – 9:00

Group time 9:00 – 10:30

Choice time 10:30 – 12:00

Lunch 12:00 – 13:00

Group time 13:00 – 14:00

Choice time 14:00 – 15:00

Tea break 15:00 – 15:30

Choice time or free activities 15:30 – 17:00

Children are 'picked up' by their parents, from about 16:00

The preschool closes at 17:30

### 5.2.2 The preschool context

In this section, the planning of the preschool context, the environment, and the daily schedule is described, as the preschool practice is influenced by the *outdoor* and *indoor* environments and the *daily schedule*. Finally, the section gives insight into the content and methods of the two main activities of the daily schedule: *choice time* and *group time*.

The *outdoor environment* close to the preschool building consisted of a large garden encircling the house, with different equipment such as playpens, swings, a seesaw, and large areas of natural environment with paths, trees, stones, slopes, and so forth. As in most other Icelandic preschools, the preschool practice emphasized being outdoors as important, and thus the children usually spent some time outside each day.

The preschool was situated in a beautiful surrounding, within walking distance from a center with stores and cafés, as well as an art gallery. These situational factors influenced the preschool practice; all sorts of interactive processes were connected to the beautiful natural environment, and the communal and commercial facilities were frequently visited by the children.

*This morning when I arrived to the preschool Vera asked if I would like to come to the art gallery with her, Rosa, and all the children in the department (large group). In the gallery an exhibition on Irish culture was on display. The children saw paintings displaying Irish culture and landscapes, with a focus on boats and fishery. Among the pieces they saw and inspected carefully was a rowing boat. After the visit to the art gallery Vera wanted to start a project around the experience from the exhibition, to connect it to the children's interests and maybe the social context in Iceland.*

The *indoor environment* consisted of classrooms and two areas in the corridor shared with another department—the block area and the art area. The department was divided into two rooms. In the first room there were two high tables with matching chairs, a sofa, and a corner with a carpet. Children's portfolios were visible and accessible to the children and a low desk with pens and paper was in one corner. The second room also had a corner with a carpet and one high table with matching chairs. There were

also low shelves with a variety of play materials such as dress-up clothes, and masks and tails for dressing up like animals hung on the wall. In all areas there were shelves with accessible play materials, as well as other materials kept in transparent boxes; to get access to some of these items the children needed to get help from an adult.

*As I walked into the preschool this morning I decided to follow the next child coming to school from the front door to the department. When Kara came through the door she took off her outdoor clothes and said goodbye to her mother. She walked into the corridor by the block area and then the art area, into the first room, where the preschool teacher welcomed her and asked what she would like to do now. Kara looked around and saw several children playing; two boys with cubes were sitting at one of the high tables, two girls were engaged in a jigsaw puzzle at the other table, one girl was sitting on the sofa with a book, and three other children were in the second room playing with costumes/dressing up. Kara hesitated for a short moment and then walked to the table where the boys were making transformers out of cubes (Plus cubes).*

To encourage children's experiences and to evoke their curiosity, teachers planned what they referred to as a *rich environment*, meaning an environment which had artwork and artifacts that encouraged children's engagement and attracted their attention as being beautiful or interesting. In the department, for instance, there were colored bottles on the window shelf, a mobile hanging from the ceiling, and children's artwork up on the walls. Also visible were the artifacts the children had collected on their preschool journeys, such as stones from the beach, and other things the teachers had brought in because they thought they would be of interest for the children.

*Among the different artifacts in the second room I saw a poster with the letters of the alphabet, with the letters all mixed up and irregularly spread around. As Vera explained the poster to me I saw it as an example of things that she had brought into the room because they were of interest for the children. At the beginning of this term, letters had seemed to interest the children to the extent that she decided to produce the opportunity for her group to play and work with letters.*

The daily schedule was framed by the common conventional practicalities in preschools, such as mealtimes and children gradually arriving to preschool and going home in the afternoon. Other planned activities were *group time* and *choice time*, each covering at least an hour, but to give

more space to all sorts of project work and visits outside of the preschool, these periods were half an hour longer in the morning than in the afternoon.

#### 5.2.2.1 Choice time

Most of the time each child was allowed to choose from the same areas, but the material or activity on offer in the various areas could differ from one day to another. Sometimes the teachers had decided to add special activities, such as a projector or a light table where the children could play with light and shadow, or a special assignment in the art area.

At the beginning of each day and as choice time started, the teachers gathered the children to the carpet, either in the first room or in the second room. The children sat down wherever there was free space and not in any particular order.

*This morning I observed as the assistant teacher had choice time with the children. She sat down on the carpet, spread the choice cards in front of her, and told the children to be well-behaved so she could tell them what was on offer, or what they could choose. She reminded the children that those who this morning was in the block area or had been in the art area making things from the play dough could not choose these areas again. She said: "Do sit down, I will invite those that are sitting to start choosing." The children now were all sitting and she called the name of one child at a time. When about half of the group had made their choices, some children began saying that they wanted to choose an area which was full. In one occasion when a child chose an area which was full she told the child this also would be on offer later, and the child chose another area. In another case a child wanted to choose the block area but it was already full. The teacher then turned to the four children who had chosen the area and asked if there possibly was room for one more child in the area, or if someone could rethink their choice. One child said there was enough room in the block area and the teacher asked if they thought there could be five children playing there. The children said they all could play in the area, if they could use different materials.*

Often the children chose an area and when they came to the area they decided which of the materials in the area they wanted to play with. In the block area, out in the corridor, there were all sorts of building materials sorted into transparent boxes, including items such as Unit blocks, small Legos, Lego Duplo blocks, Plus cubes, and all sorts of reusable materials. When a group of children started to play in the block area, they, together

with the teacher, chose which of the materials they found interesting to play with. One of the observations in this study showed how two girls and a boy made their decision on which material to play with.

*After choice time I asked Ivar, Erla and Kara if I could join them in the block area, which they accepted. When we came to the area they started their negotiations.*

### **Narrative 5a**

*Kara said she wanted to play with Lego Duplo blocks, Ivar said he would rather use the Kapla cubes, and Erla said she wanted to play with the Kapla cubes together with the dinosaurs. Kara then told Ivar and Erla what they had suggested was something very commonly chosen. When she got no response from Ivar and Erla she asked the teacher if it was all right for them to choose the large blocks (meaning the Unit blocks), and got an accepting nod from the teacher. Kara now sounded very enthusiastic and said to the other two children: "...check this out! We make a tower, it is dead easy, Erla and I once did it." Right away, Erla and Ivar accepted her suggestion and they started to build a tower from the Unit blocks.*

#### **5.2.2.2 Group time**

Group time was used for all sorts of group activities. These could include, for example, different types of art work, visits to the art gallery, going to the theatre, putting on a play, reading, drawing, or discussing.

The teachers used *documentations* (often photos with written text, but also other forms, such as videos, revealing events by using photos and artistic representation) and *reflected* on these documentations together with other adults or the children. These reflections could be about the children's interests, their ideas and understanding, but also how to develop or find themes the children would be interested in. After discussing the different themes, *projects* were planned by the teachers, building on their ideas of what interested the children.

*In this reflection meeting the teachers discussed themes which built on the interests they had observed and discussed with the children. The nearby surroundings of the preschool were one theme they mentioned as the children nearly always seemed interested in exploring their surroundings. Another theme was dogs, as they seemed to evoke the children's interest when people were walking their dogs on the path passing the preschool. The third theme was airplanes, as planes*

*frequently flew over the preschool on their way to land. A fourth theme was Star Wars, which often appeared in the children's play and their discussions. Other larger themes were mentioned, such as working with three dimensions, collaboration, or summer and sun. Finally, the conclusion was to start by giving the children the opportunity to create some kind of artwork which also might reveal some more information about their interests. The new project was planned in several phases and had the aim of following the children's ideas and interests that emerged through the process of the work.*

In this way the teachers planned an activity and developed a project from their discussions, as was in the case with the collaboration project described later in this chapter, where the children painted on a large manila paper on the floor for the first part of the project.

### **5.3 Describing and discussing participation in the group**

This section discusses children's participation in a group of children and teachers. First (see sections 5.3.1 and 5.3.2), an attempt is made to describe the children's learning processes in the preschool context, the environment, teachers' methods, and peer cultures. Second (see section 5.4), an episode from one group of children is described, followed by children's stories from each of the child who took part in that episode. Finally, (see section 5.5), the children's learning processes while taking part in their preschool group are discussed. As I was analyzing children's learning processes I focused on children's strengths, also often detecting strengths when the children were tackling challenging situations; however, what I saw was not always about children's strengths. The research notes also showed that some children in some situations expressed what might be seen as negative learning dispositions or the group of children did not manage to solve challenging problems.

#### **5.3.1 Children's learning processes**

From this group of children, the data was generated by means of written notes, photographs, and audio and video recordings. Reflections on the data with the participants were also part of the generation process. At Seaside, I took part in regular reflection meetings with the group's preschool teacher, the art teacher, and a preschool teacher from another department. In these meetings, throughout the period of the data generation, my documentations and the preschool teacher's documentations were discussed. Twice there were reflection meetings with

two groups of children, first reflecting on photographs from the children's play and, later in the project, a reflection on video clips from the painting project. The views and information from these meetings were added to the data set.

What was observed and documented took place at different times in the preschool's daily program, most of the time in *choice time*, *group time*, or when there were times with no plan, often referred to as *free play*. The following notes are an example of the complex interaction taking place in the children's play, the different roles they chose, and how they each expressed themselves in their own way. The narrative below is built from photographs and written notes and later reflections with adults and children. [The children refer to the characters they take on as 'mine', 'yours' and 'ours'.]

*I came into a room where four girls, Erla, Dora, Kara, and Kolka, were playing and asked if I could be in the room to observe as they were playing. The girls accepted my presence and answered yes to my request. I asked if I could take photographs while they were playing, which they also accepted.*

#### **Narrative 5b**

*Erla said to Kara: "Ours are the queen and king." Kara replied: "Mine is the prince." The two of them built a platform for the queen and king and climbed up to it, both with cloaks around their shoulders, crowns on their heads and wands in their hands, waving to the crowd (the other two girls). A moment later Erla ran to where the costumes were stored, put on a hat and a yellow mask and said: "No one saw the queen change into this bird." Kara and Dora did as Erla did and put on masks. Kara said: "'Mine' is the wolf." She added: "'Mine' was a little prince." Dora said she was the dog and a little later she also was a child. Erla (the queen and the bird) now had crawled under the chairs and had become the mother. She had a small lamp as the stove and in a pretend saucepan she was cooking for her children, the child (Dora) and the baby/little prince (Kara). A bit later Erla said: "Now the mother was teaching the child to handle the fire." Ragnar came into the room. At first he watched the girls play, then went and picked up some tiger tails hanging on the wall, then crawled on all fours and started to howl outside the girls' house. The baby became frightened and the mother said: "This is okay, it's just dad." Ragnar stood up and said: "It's just me, dad," and went back on all fours again and crawled and howled. While this was going on, the girls had been building a house from the high*

*chairs and mattresses. Kolka was the only one who had not taken on any role, but was moving around in the area, facilitating and helping to build the house, moving chairs and arranging the mattresses. At one point she said to the other girls: "Please move, I can't help you if you are in the way." In the end the house was a complex building with a first and second floor, made mainly from chairs and mattresses.*

When looking at and reflecting on the children's learning processes—how they adopt knowledge, skills, understanding, and social competence—several images of these children appeared.

*What I learned about these children's skills was how they seemed to be able to not only change roles but to go in and out of the roles—to hold several roles at the same time. Four of the children, Erla, Dora, Kara and Ragnar, did this several times throughout this play episode. When I discussed this with the teachers in the reflection meeting this did not surprise them, and later through the data generation I often saw that not only do these children do this, but other children also do this in their play.*

*Through the observations I saw signs of how the children were able to develop their social competence—what each child was capable of doing and how they had their own ways of participating in the group. Even though four of the children notably expressed themselves through the roles they took on, Kolka used different ways of expressing herself. Throughout the play episode she held the role of the facilitator, builder, and helper; she was active in building the house. In one of the reflection meetings the teachers said this often seemed to be her way of participating, which I saw several more times in the observations.*

*When Ragnar arrived in a room with four girls who already had started to play he seemed to be able to read the situation, and understood that he needed to find his way to become a part of the girls' play. He decided to take on the role of the tiger and through that role he got the girls' attention when the baby became frightened, and was offered the role of the dad. When reflecting on this with the preschool teachers they said Ragnar was very much into playing and using costumes. They saw him as being good at pretend play and in expressing himself by using gestures. I also saw this more often in the observations, for example in the collaboration project when he changed the monocular into oars when the group had mounted the pretend boat.*

These interactions were a typical example of all the times I later would observe children when finding solutions, either all on their own or in

collaboration with other children. I saw the children use particular methods to find solutions, at different times and in miscellaneous activities.

*In the first room, Irma and Kolka were drawing, sitting in the corner by a desk. The girls were best friends and often played together just the two of them, as they were doing this time. They had a large sheet of paper and were writing down names. Every now and then they asked me how to spell a name or how to write a certain letter. They told me what they were doing was a secret game and in a while they had moved and were sitting under one of the large tables. Finally, they beckoned me to come and look under the table. They said they were going to tell me their secret. As I understood it, they were mapping the children that had moved to the primary school last year.*

This is an example of the informal, and sometimes also tacit, learning taking place in the preschool. Examples like these from this study could address all areas of learning but I chose a particular example where the girls were learning to write letters, as reading and writing often are seen as a typical example of formal learning. Further, the girls might have been consciously preparing themselves for moving to the primary school the next school year.

### **5.3.2 The preschool teachers' beliefs and methods**

At Seaside the teachers aimed to support children in being creative, active, and critical. As stated in section 3.3.1, the teachers' role was to encourage children to discuss and define matters from different viewpoints, to understand the multiplicity of things, to reflect, and to take a stand. Thus, the adults' role was to support children in asking questions and finding answers. Reflecting on their methods of supporting the children was also seen as an important part of the preschool teacher's role. Vera and Rosa often were supportive in this manner.

*In my observations, these supportive or questioning remarks from the teachers were frequent. At one point I observed Rosa when she asked three boys who were building with the hollow blocks: "Would you like to tell me what you are doing?" The boys explained they were making roads and ramps for cars. As there also was a tall building, Rosa went on and asked the boys if the cars could drive through the building, and the boys explained and used gestures to show her how they could find ways for the cars to drive through the building.*

To inspire or motivate the children, when the teachers saw the children showing interest toward something, they often used *cues or suggested they use a model*.

*This appeared in one of Vera's (the preschool teacher) documentations. Six children were playing in the block area and Vera brought a photo of a bird house and suggested they could build one. Kolka right away said she did not want to take part in this. The others started to build and speculate. Two boys were especially focused. They looked at the photo and carefully chose cubes to rebuild the image of the bird house. Even Kolka encouraged the two boys to look carefully at the photo. A little later Irma told Vera: "Look, the birds can go in there...they are so small..."*

### **5.3.3 The teachers' reflections**

The preschool teachers used reflection as a tool with various purposes in mind, such as when they planned the environment or found themes for projects, but mostly when they discussed their own documentations. The teachers reflected on how well they had managed to support children in asking questions, finding answers, and being critical thinkers.

In a reflection meeting, after the first group had painted on the manila paper the teachers and I reflected on their methods and how they had affected the children's ideas through the painting process. The teachers discovered that small things in their interactions could influence a child and the group of children, which became clear to them when they discussed how they had used the word 'pizza'. They reflected on how their use of this word to describe how the children could start their painting had influenced the children's ideas. The teachers had continued to use the word 'pizza' throughout the episode and by that use they supported the idea of a pizza or not a pizza.

*Before the children started to paint, Sunna (the art teacher) made a dot in the middle of the large manila paper and suggested to the children that they would start painting from the dot and told them if they then would move backwards when painting as if they were making pizza slices they might avoid getting paint on their clothes. Using this word had influenced the children's ideas, as could be seen in their comments about their paintings, which they sometimes talked about as the pizza or as not being a pizza. Ivar was doing the largest pizza and he was not going to tell anyone what it was. In the reflection meeting the teachers discussed how they had unconsciously supported the image of the pizza, first by*

*describing their painting as a pizza slice and also through the process by using the word when they were asking children about their paintings. Sunna did this when she asked Ivar if this was a secret pizza, and Vera did it when she asked Ragnar if he wanted to change colors with Ivar so he could paint his pizza green.*

From this reflection, the teachers brought a slightly different approach to the second group; they were careful not to use the word pizza and they waited longer before intervening, giving the children time to find solutions and negotiate with each other, for example when they were changing colors.

From the reflection on their methods in the first group, when doing the painting project, the preschool teachers aimed to be more conscious about their methods, their interactions, and the words they used when the second group was painting in the project. When working with the second group, the teachers avoided using the word pizza when introducing the project and in this group there was no talk of, or making of, pizzas, as there had been in the first group. When working with the second group, the teachers mentioned putting on a play, that for a long period of the time was what they were doing. The teachers also brought up the idea of everyone going aboard a boat and sailing from one country to the other, which became a part of the process.

#### **5.4 Children's participation in a collaboration project**

In this section, an episode from one group of children is described (see section 5.4.1), followed by children's stories from each of the five children taking part in the episode (see sections 5.4.2 – 5.4.6).

At Seaside, the children's stories were generated from their everyday lives in the department. The episode and children's stories put forward and discussed in this section originate from the process of a group of children and their teachers starting a project. The episode is represented in different phases and each episode is broken into numbered steps, so as to be able to refer to these later in this section when the group and individual children's participation are presented. In the *first part, Phase 1*, the children painted a large painting together on the floor with the support of three adults: Vera the preschool teacher, Sunna the art teacher, and me. In the *second part, Phase 2*, they came back to the painting for a second time, now including Rosa, the children's assistant teacher, and reflected on it to see what they now saw in the painting. They then presented the painting in a play. In the *third part, Phase 3*, the children looked at video clips from their

participation in the painting project and reflected on these with Vera (their teacher) and me.

#### 5.4.1 Episode—Children paint and put on a play

In this episode, five children—two girls, Irma and Kolka, and three boys, Dagur, Oddur and Villi—were painting collaboratively on a large piece of manila paper, two meters by two meters. The five children were supported by three adults: Vera the preschool teacher, Sunna the art teacher, and me. (Sometimes the children used the words ‘mine’ or ‘yours’ as a play sign to underline that they were playing role play).

The *first part, Phase 1*, of the project started as Sunna gave each child a paint pot, made a dot in the middle of the sheet, and asked the children to start to paint from the dot. She also told them they could ask another child to exchange colors with them when they wanted or needed another color. In the beginning as the children were painting, Villi and Irma were beside each other, while Dagur sat with his back to Oddur and kept this position throughout the first part of the project (see figure 5.A).



**Figure 5.A** The children were starting to paint

Below is a description of the episode when children were painting and putting on a play. The episode is put forward in four phases with 37 numbered steps, which later are referred to when discussing the children’s stories, constructed by me.

**Table 5.B Episode—children painting**

**Phase 1:**

No.	Activity during the process of a painting project
1	Villi was the first to start painting from the dot. After the other children started, they all went on painting in silence for about 15 minutes, except for Irma who talked about what she was doing, sometimes addressing the other children, as if seeking a response from them.
2	Examples of Irma’s comments: “Wow, how did I do this?...I don’t know how I did this, Villi...Villi, I don’t know how I did this...(a short silence)...Kolka, I don’t know how I did this....now this was green, he, he, he.” She said she was drawing a figure of a girl and sometimes seemed to be talking more to herself, while the intervals between her comments became longer.
3	Dagur, who from the beginning had started to paint further away from the point in the middle, now had turned more away from the others, painting his picture by the edge of the paper.
4	Villi had painted a figure with a blue belly and said: “I need a bit of yellow.” Kolka handed him the paint pot with yellow and said: “You don’t want this one, you want greenish yellow.” Kolka hesitated and said: “Can I have...the purple one?” Villi said yes and handed her the color. Irma said: “I am using pink all the time.” Kolka: “[unclear...] you also need to exchange color,” and added something about being just and fair.
5	Villi said he had finished his guy and now needed to paint his girlfriend. Irma asked him right away if the figure in the painting was he and who his girlfriend was. Villi answered: “I don’t have a girlfriend and this is not me.” Villi now told Irma he needed the pink color and Irma answered: “...No, I can’t...I am just finishing.” A little later she handed him the color.
6	Oddur said: “Look how ‘mine’ is going to be...I can make an enormous alien.” Villi reacted and said: “...Enormous?” Irma laughed (scornfully) at Oddur’s idea and Villi said in Oddur’s defense that he might like that. Kolka looked at Villi’s pink figure and asked: “Does she have three eyes?” Villi: “No, this is the nose.”
7	Irma asked Villi one more time: “Who is this?” She pointed at the pink figure. Villi ignored the question, focused on his painting and

	said he needed to make hands on the figure. As Irma kept asking him who this was, Villi finally answered with irritation in his voice: "This is his girlfriend."
8	Oddur made a sound, like a growl/snarl. Villi looked in his direction and asked: "What is this?" Oddur: "Do you know what this is?" He repeated twice: "Villi, do you know what this is? This is an alien dinosaur." Irma laughed (scornfully) and Villi said: "He might like that."
9	Irma now again had the pink color and Kolka said: "Soon I will need the pink color." Oddur told Irma he had exchanged colors with the two children sitting on each side of him, Kolka and Dagur. A little later Kolka asked Irma if she could have the pink color and when Irma handed it to her she said thank you.
10	Dagur came a little closer to Oddur and put the green paint pot between them. Oddur handed him the pink one and picked the green one up. At the same time he put the orange paint pot between the two of them.



Figure 5.B From the painting process

**Phase 2:**

During the *first part* of this episode, the adults did not interfere with what the children were doing, other than practical comments such as reminding them not to step in the paint.

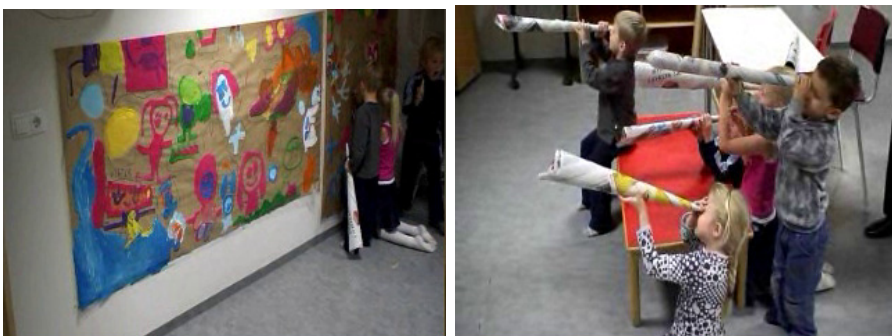
11	Now Sunna asked: "Villi, what are you doing?" Irma answered: "An alien, a child alien." Sunna: "Is this also an alien you are painting Irma?" Irma: "Yes, this is the mother." Oddur: "Do you know what 'mine' is? My alien is a child alien and a dinosaur
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	alien." Sunna: "A dinosaur child alien? Who is making that?" Kolka: "Oddur is."
12	Villi was sitting by his painting and said: "I need orange." Dagur stood up and put down the orange color by Villi's side, who did not seem to notice this.
13	Oddur: "I want yellow...have had purple and now need yellow." Villi: "I'm just finishing." He handed the yellow paint to Oddur, but Dagur picked it up. Oddur, absorbed in his work, did not seem to notice this.
14	Sunna asked: "Dagur, what are you painting?" Villi answered: "He is...painting my toe." Sunna: "He said something, what did he say?"
15	Oddur said (in a very soft tone): "Dagur, can I have the yellow one when you have finished using it?" Oddur reached out for the yellow paint pot, Dagur held on to it and Oddur said: "Can I have the yellow?" Kolka was standing behind them with the green color in her hand. She looked at Dagur, who was painting with yellow. She took the yellow from his hand and gave him green. Oddur said: "Then it's my turn," and he kept on waiting patiently.
16	Kolka quickly used the yellow color, then plopped it down by Oddur's side and said: "You can have it now." Shortly after this, Irma stood up walked around the large painting and picked up the red color at Oddur's side. She did not ask for it but Oddur said: "You can have it."
17	Kolka asked why they were painting and Oddur said: "We are making aliens." Irma: "...Alien painting." Oddur: "Yes, I am making an enormous 'Hulk' alien." Sunna repeated: "Are you making an enormous Hulk alien, Oddur?" Villi: "Are you making pirates?" Oddur: "This is like a baby alien...a very much Hulk...you know like a giant who can hold a house in his hands and eat it."
18	Oddur: "Wow, how large her eyes are, yours Irma." Irma answered in a very low voice: "Yes, I know." She walked over to Oddur and picked up a cup with paint in it and said to him in a soft and small voice: "I stepped in the painting." Oddur: "I dare do that." Irma: "Do you dare?" Kolka: "You can just make a stamp with your feet." Oddur: "Yes, I dare...I can make a stamp

	(rubber-stamp) with my feet.”
19	Villi: “Now I need ‘blue’” (with an emphasis on I, and he also said “blue” in English). Kolka ran to his side, handed him the color, and said: “Blue is here.”
20	Dagur stood up, walked around the painting, and seemed as though he was approaching Villi, who stood up together with Irma. They went to a table where the colors were stashed (out of the camera’s focus). When they came back to the painting they brought a new box with a white color.
21	Dagur now again was at “his” place, painting flowers. At one point he rose, walked across the floor, picked up a new color, went back and continued to paint. A little later, Sunna said: “Dagur, are you saying you need white? ...You know we will soon have to stop, so now we really need to exchange colors.”
22	Now there were two paint pots with white. Irma held one and moved close to where Dagur was. Kolka, who had been painting a butterfly, a sun, and flowers, approached them and said she needed white. Sunna asked Villi if he would give Dagur the white color, and explained that Dagur just had to do a little and he would soon be finished.
23	Villi said, “Wait a little, I need to finish.” A bit later he handed the white color to Dagur.

**Phase 3:**

In the *second part* of the project, the painting had been put up on the wall.



**Figure 5.C** The painting was put up on the wall for children's reflection

The children now all had cones made from newspapers, which they used as binoculars to look through at the painting up on the wall. They stood about three meters away from the painting and looked at it, little by little developing a play theme.

24	Vera asked: "What do you see? Do you see a theater? Or do you see a puppetry?" Kolka: "I see a butterfly." Irma: "I see a girl." Oddur: "I see a giant-child..." Villi: "I can see sea." Oddur added: "I can see sea and a spider."
25	Kolka saw a mermaid, and repeated this. Villi asked her to point out where she was. Oddur said he saw a shark and Villi asked where he saw the shark and when Oddur and Villi went toward the painting Oddur pointed at the painting and said this was the shark. Villi decisively said: "No, this is no shark."
26	Rosa, the teacher, asked Villi if she could peek into his cone. When she had put it up to her eyes she said: "Wow, what is this?" She handed the cone back to Villi and said: "Look at this...look what you can see."
27	Villi took the cone, peeped into it, and said he saw an alien. Irma saw a cross, a church cross (holy rood). They saw a round form, a ghost, and finally Villi saw a mermaid (which he had doubted earlier when Kolka saw the mermaid).
28	Vera asked the children if this could be the scene for the play and what play they could put on. Kolka started to answer but Irma cut in and said: "Búkolla." (Búkolla is an Icelandic folk-tale about a boy who has to escape an ugly giantess when looking for his parent's cow, Búkolla.)
29	Vera said this was a good idea and Rosa added: "Búkolla with a mermaid?" Villi added: "I see an alien." Vera then asked if they could have an alien and the cow Búkolla in the play. Oddur added: "...And a child-alien-dinosaur." Vera: "...A dinosaur in the play, Oddur?"
30	Kolka: "But why can't we just act?" Vera: "We can do that." Irma: "Act out the play." Rosa: "Yes, who would you like to be?... Búkolla?" Oddur pointed at the painting and said he was going to be the one he had painted, and added that the alien only had three fingers. Villi said he was going to act as the one he had painted, which was also an alien. Vera asked what "his" alien was doing and Villi said he was in the water/at sea.

31	Throughout this phase, when the teachers asked the children what they saw in their cones, Dagur did not answer any of their questions, not even those directed to him. Later, Sunna asked Dagur if she could peek into his cone, which she did, but Dagur still did not express in words what he saw. Sunna tried to ask him: “Dagur, would you like to draw a circle around something in the painting?”
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#### Phase 4:

In this phase the children and the teachers, in collaboration, put on a play. They had decided it would be about Búkolla (the Icelandic folk-tale), the roles being: a boy, an ugly giantess, and the boy’s parents in smaller roles. But as they started to develop the thread, children started to suggest other roles, more imaginative once and often referring to what they had painted in the first part of the project.

Now the teachers and the children started to plan the play.

32	Irma suggested roles for the teachers: Sunna should be the theater manager and Vera should be the narrator.
33	Vera asked the children if they were going to make the story. Oddur and Irma said yes but they also said they were the actors and wanted to act.
34	Vera told the children she could write everything down if they told her what the narrator was supposed to say.
35	Rosa sat with Dagur on her lap and asked the children about their roles. Irma said she was going to play Búkolla (the cow) and said the other roles were a boy, his parents, and a giantess, like in the story. Rosa asked her who Búkolla was and she said “a girl.” Kolka wanted to stick to the roles in the story: a cow, a boy, his parents and a giantess.
36	They started to rehearse the play. Oddur and Villi were running around on the stage. Oddur repeated a sound “Kizz, kizz...” Oddur was the child-alien-dinosaur. Irma first was the mermaid and then was the mother alien (his mom). Villi said he was going to act as the one he had painted, also an alien, and when Vera asked him what the alien was doing, Villi said he was in the water/in the sea.
37	Vera said now the first rehearsal was starting; they would do it like it was on TV. Rosa walked onto the stage holding Dagur by the hand. They sat down with Dagur on her lap. Rosa asked Dagur what

	they should say, but Dagur did not answer, so it was Rosa who announced that the name of the play was Búkolla.
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Rosa and the children continued to develop the thread of the story. They suggested roles, such as alien, mother, and giant-child-alien. Kolka took the role of a cat and became the storyteller when they started to act.

In the coming section this episode will be further explored, discussing these five children's ways of participating, as appearing in the episode above and in other observations from their preschool group. With the purpose to reveal the learning processes happening within the preschool context and to explore how the children were learning, I wrote the children's stories. As I was writing children's stories for each child, I had the following issues in mind: (1) What they did, their multiple ways of expressing themselves, and the roles they chose; (2) The support and reactions they got from the environment, involving the power relations in the group of children and between children and adults; (3) The ideas or hypotheses that the children expressed reflecting the roles they chose and their ways of communication; and (4) How or if children's ideas were listened to.

## 5.4.2 Individual children's stories

### 5.4.2.1 Irma's stories

Irma's stories showed her strengths when participating could be characterized by what she did and how she did it. Four of the characteristics found in Irma's stories are described below. She was seen to *express herself verbally*, be *active and interested* in what others were doing, be *collaborative*, and *follows her own ideas*.

*Verbal expression:* When playing, taking part and collaborating with others, Irma often expressed herself verbally, as she did in the first part of the painting project. She stated what she was doing, asked others what they were doing, or said something about the others' work. Sometimes it seemed as though she was talking to herself, or as if she was thinking aloud (in Step 1, Phase 1).

*Active and interested:* Irma was active and interested in what was happening when she asked other children what they were doing or commented on their work. Often her questions or comments on others' work were directed to someone in particular. She was especially interested in everything Villi did, as in the painting episode when she asked him repeatedly about the girl he was painting (in Steps 5 and 7, Phase 1). Irma

also could answer questions meant for another child, as when the teacher, Sunna, asked Villi what he was painting and Irma answered and explained what was in his painting (in Step 11, Phase 2). She did this spontaneously and as if she was doing him a favor. What he had painted, she said, was an alien, a child alien, but hers was the mother (in Step 11, Phase 1).

*Collaborative:* When collaborating with others, Irma's communication often was directed to Villi and Kolka. She discussed with them, asked for their opinions, and commented on their work. In the painting project, her interaction was also often directed at Oddur. She got responses from the other children, who sometimes returned her interest, as when Oddur commented on her painting: "...Wow, how large her eyes are" (in Step 18, Phase 2). She also supported Oddur when he said he was making aliens (in Step 17, Phase 2).

*Follows own ideas:* Irma was open to co-operation with the others but at the same time she could follow her own ideas or wishes and needs, as when Villi asked for the pink color she was using and she said: "I can't do it...I'm nearly finished" (in Step 5, Phase 1).

#### 5.4.2.2 *Dagur's stories*

Dagur's stories showed his strengths when participating could be characterized by what he did and how he did it. Four of the characteristics found in Dagur's stories are described below. He could be seen as very *focused and calm* and absorbed in his work, he was an *active builder*, even though he *kept to himself*, and sometimes was clearly *excluded* or ignored by the other children.

*Focused and calm:* When building, Dagur was focused and calm and often was deeply absorbed in what he was doing. This ability to become immersed in activities which interested him was also seen when he was taking part in other activities like play dough, painting, and building. This also could be seen through the process of the painting project, where from the beginning he marked himself a separate place by turning away from the other children (in Step 3, Phase 1), focusing on his own painting and most of the time keeping to himself.

*Active builder:* Dagur was active; most of the time he chose to play with some of the building material, for example, the unit blocks. He had moved to Iceland from another country together with his parents. He understood Icelandic well and could express himself verbally, although he sometimes lacked words. Dagur seemed to see himself as a builder, which often appeared when he was building with Núi (a boy from another department

with the same cultural background as Dagur), and the other children also seemed to see him as a clever builder. Several times a younger boy (from the same classroom) asked for his help. However, the children in his group very seldom took the initiative to involve him, although the teachers sometimes supported his participation. In the painting project, the teachers sometimes drew attention to his wishes (in Step 21, Phase 2) and in the second step of the project Rosa gave him a role and tried to assist him in being active in that role as the narrator (in Step 35, Phase 4). Despite this, he remained passive, only watching the other children as they put on the play (in Step 39, Phase 4; Step 31, Phase 3).

*Kept to himself:* In most of the observations in this study, Dagur either played alone or with Núi. Most of the time the two of them were playing, speaking their mother tongue [Polish] as they played. When the other children were in the same area, or even playing with the same material, they tended to be playing in two groups. In one of Vera's documentations, when the children were playing in the block area, two girls did not want to play with Dagur and Núi. The girls went to another area, and Vera's documentation reported: "...left in the block area there were two happy boys building on their own." In the painting episode, Dagur closely watched what the other children were doing but he interacted only when he wanted another color, and sometimes did that so quietly that the others didn't react to his request (in Step 21, Phase 3). He sat close to Oddur and for a short while they interacted through exchanging colors. Dagur often looked in Villi's direction and seemed to be more interested in what Villi was doing than what the other children were doing. Once during the episode Villi wanted the orange color, which Dagur had. Dagur stood up, walked over to Villi and put the color beside him. Villi did not notice this and Dagur quietly went back to his place. Vera said now Dagur had helped Villi which was good, but no one else seemed to notice this (in Step 12, Phase 2).

*Excluded:* Dagur did not seek the other children's attention and did not show much initiative toward collaborating with them. He did not often ask for help or attention, but if he did he tended to go to an adult rather than another child (in Step 21, Phase 2). In return he did not get much attention from the other children. He seemed to be on the verge of being included in the group as could be seen in the episode when the children were painting, although the other children did not show him much attention except when they wanted a color he was using (in Step 12, Phase 2; Steps 21 and 22, Phase 2). During the second period of the painting project, when the children devised a play, he was not involved with the play, sitting on the teacher's lap throughout. The teacher, Rosa, gave him the role of the

director of the play, or co-director, but he several times said he wished to return to the classroom. Rosa tried to support him and involve him in the play, without any success. Even though Dagur was marginalized by the other children, his strengths appeared in how he was focused and calm while taking part in the group's activities, and found his way to play and be active in using the material at hand.

#### 5.4.2.3 *Oddur's stories*

Oddur's stories showed his strengths when participating could be characterized by what he did and how he did it. Three of the characteristics found in Oddur's stories are described below. He was seen to be *active*, *imaginative*, and *helpful and considerate* toward others.

*Active:* Oddur could be seen as being an active participant, expressing himself both verbally and through actions. He seemed interested in the ongoing activities and what other children were doing and commented on their work, as when he told Irma that the girl she was painting had large eyes (in Step 18, Phase 2). He told the other children what he was doing and even sometimes tried to get their approval, especially Villi's (in Step 8, Phase 1).

*Imaginative:* Oddur was imaginative; his ideas often influenced the group, and often were included, sometimes serving as a leading thread in the play or activity. In the episode when the children were painting, Oddur developed an image of a figure he was painting. He started by saying it was an alien, an enormous alien (in Step 6, Phase 1), which later became an alien dinosaur (in Step 8, Phase 1) and then a child alien and a dinosaur alien (in Step 11, Phase 2). Further on in the process the image had become a baby alien, then a Hulk like a giant who can hold a house in his hands (in Step 17, Phase 2). In the end the figure became a child-alien-dinosaur (in Step 29, Phase 3).

*Helpful and considerate:* In the painting episode, Oddur was helpful and considerate toward the other children; most of the time he was prepared to change colors with the others and at one point in the painting episode he pointed that out for Irma (in Step 9, Phase 1). Several times he tried to support Dagur, who sat by his side: he handed him a color (in Step 10, Phase 1), and asked Dagur politely if he could have the color Dagur was holding (in Step 15, Phase 2). In this way Oddur most of the time was considerate toward the other children—if he wanted something, he waited patiently for his turn, as he did when Kolka helped herself to the yellow color, even though it was clear to both of them that he was waiting for it (in

Step 15, Phase 2). When he himself wanted something he asked politely, waited patiently, and even repeated his wish, as he did when talking to Villi, asking twice if Villi knew what Oddur was doing (in Step 8, Phase 1). He several times seemed to compromise his wishes for others, but through the development of the painting project he managed to hold on to his ideas, such as the idea of playing the child-alien-dinosaur. In the end, all the way through the acting he held the role of this figure he had developed (in Step 38, Phase 4).

#### 5.4.2.4 Villi's stories

Villi's stories showed his strengths when participating could be characterized by what he did and how he did it. Four of the characteristics found in Villi's stories are described below. He was seen to be *confident*, *expressed his views clearly*, *supported other's views*, and seemed to be *respected by the other children*.

*Confidence:* Villi appeared to be confident, and secure enough to tell the other children what he saw as right or wrong. In one of the observations from the teacher he told another boy several times: "This is not right." Similar occasions could be seen a few times during the painting project, for example when Oddur pointed out a shark in the painting and Villi decisively said: "This is no shark" (in Step 25, Phase 3). He also often supported others' ideas or suggestions, as could be seen through the painting project, for example as he accepted Oddur's (imaginative) ideas (in Step 6, Phase 1). Villi often took the initiative or was the first to make a move when the children were starting an activity, as in the beginning of the painting project when the teacher had made a dot and encouraged the children to start painting. Villi was the first to start painting as he drew a circle around the point (in Step 1, Phase 1).

*Clear expression:* Villi expressed his views clearly as to what he wanted or needed. In the painting project, when he wanted another color he said decisively that he needed that color (in Steps 3 and 5, Phase 1). The children's reactions when Villi said what he wanted was several times to hand him the color; Kolka did this a few times (in Step 19, Phase 2), as did Dagur (in Step 12, Phase 2). Even though Villi said in a precise manner what he needed, thought, or wanted, he also could be helpful and considerate toward others. When he was asked to exchange colors, his reaction often was to answer that he needed to finish something and after he had finished he handed the color over to the child who had asked (in Step 23, Phase 2). Once when Oddur had asked for the blue color from Villi, he painted a bit

more and then rose, walked over to Oddur, and handed him the color (in Step 13, Phase 2).

*Support others' views:* Villi sometimes could be seen to support others' views; he could ask the other children about their opinions, listen to others' ideas and react, for example by repeating in a positive tone what the other child had said. This happened several times during the painting project. Twice he came to Oddur's defense when Irma laughed at his ideas, first when Oddur told the others he was painting a dinosaur-alien and a child-alien, getting Irma's laughter in response. Villi supported Oddur by repeating the idea with a tone in his voice expressing interest (in Step 8, Phase 1). A bit later when Oddur said he liked gold, Irma laughed again and Villi said: "...he might like gold."

*Respected:* Villi seemed to be respected by the other children. He often got positive feedback from the others and they seemed to want his approval. Other children seemed to look up to him—they asked for his opinion or looked at him questioningly as if they wanted him to accept their ideas. In the painting project all four children, each in their own way, could be seen doing this. Both girls, Irma and Kolka, asked Villi about his painting, Irma several times (in Steps 5 and 7, Phase 1). They also picked up colors he had asked for and handed them to him, especially Kolka (in Step 4, Phase 1; Step 19, Phase 2). In the first part, Oddur was eager to tell Villi what he was painting and seemed as if he wanted to impress him (in Step 8, Phase 1). Dagur, who most of the time was absorbed in his own painting, sometimes looked at Villi, as if he wanted to get in contact with him. At one time he reacted quickly when Villi wanted a color he was using, and stood up and put the color down by Villi's side (in Step 20, Phase 2).

#### 5.4.2.5 Kolka's stories

Kolka's stories showed that her strengths when participating could be characterized by what she did and how she did it. Four of the characteristics found in Kolka's stories are described below. She was seen to take the *initiative*, and she made plans, found solutions and acted on others' and her own behalf. When *collaborating*, she often seemed to have her own agenda when supporting the group's play or activities. She tended to take the role of *the helper; informing, giving advice or explaining* to others, and she also could *follow her own ideas or wishes*.

*Initiative:* Kolka often took the initiative. She observed what was happening—sometimes it seemed as if she was more active on the inside, as she was carefully looking at what the other children were doing, but

every now and then she would cut in. Her actions most of the time appeared to be in harmony with what the other children were doing. This could be seen in an observation when she took part in role play with several other children (see narrative 5b, section 5.3.1). In the group, she functioned as an architect and a builder, suggested solutions and executed them. She supported the other children in what they wanted to do, had her own opinions on how to find solutions, and built the house more or less by herself from chairs and mattresses. She seemed to see herself as supporting the other children's play, which could be reflected by her words when she said they needed to move away so she could help them build the house. In her words: "If you would like me to help you with this you will need to move away." When putting on the play during the painting project, she was active in developing and discussing the play's theme: she said they needed a narrator and to rehearse the play, and "...then we can put on the play." Rosa asked what they could have as the background of the play and Kolka answered: "We need to try to have a stage...as if we were outside or something" (in Step 27, Phase 4). Later she said they needed to have a place to live in, a house (in Step 46, Phase 5). The group looked for a house, finding it under a table situated beside where the stage was.

*Collaborative:* Kolka's participation when collaborating seemed like a reciprocal interaction between her and the other children in the group: she observed what the others were doing and sometimes waited for a while before she did anything to influence the play process, which she did by using words and actions. In the painting project, when discussing and planning the theme of the play, Kolka sometimes functioned as the storyteller; she seemed to have a view of the course of events and said what was going to happen next. This was apparent when she played the cat, walked on the stage around the house and said the cat was sneaking toward their house and then peeked through the windows and was spying on them. She went on and said she (the cat) was going to knock on their door and see if they were good or bad (the aliens). After the group's discussion on whether the aliens were really good or bad, Kolka suggested that they now should start to act. When that idea had been accepted, she said that Villi should start and be playing out in the sea.

*Helpful organizer:* Kolka often chose a role as someone who helped, informed, advised, or explained things to others, both children and adults. She told me and the other children what was for dinner, and explained to me what the children's portfolios were. When Oddur had accidentally gotten paint on his foot, she gave him the advice to use his foot as a stamp (in Step 18, Phase 2). When Irma had been using the pink color for a long

time, she advised Irma to exchange colors, as it would not be fair if she was the only one who got to use the pink color (in Step 4, Phase 1). During the painting project when Villi said he needed yellow, she told him he didn't want the yellow one but "this one" and handed him green (in Step 4, Phase 1).

*Follow own wishes:* Kolka could follow her own ideas or wishes, as when she went to pick up the yellow color from Dagur even though she knew Oddur was waiting for it. When she had used the yellow one, she handed it to Oddur and said: "You can have it now" (in Steps 15 and 16, Phase 2). Kolka was willing to work with others and could be diplomatic in her interactions. After having told Irma she wanted to use the pink color, which Irma had used for a while, she announced: "Soon I will need the pink color." A little later she asked for the pink color and when Irma handed it to her, she thanked Irma for it very politely (in Step 9, Phase 1).

## **5.5 Children's participation at Seaside**

In this section, the documentations of children's learning processes when participating in the group are discussed in relation to *learning dispositions*. First, the learning dispositions seen through three lenses are discussed: children's *communication and involvement (Lens 1)* in the group, children's *well-being and belonging (Lens 2)* and finally how the children *contribute and take responsibility (Lens 3)* within the preschool context (5.5.1). After this, there is a discussion on the factors influencing children's participation in the preschool context at Seaside (5.5.2).

### **5.5.1 The children participating in a group**

From the episode describing the painting project, the individual children's strengths when participating could be characterized in relation to what happened in the episode when painting and in other observations from the study. Through the episode when the children were taking part in the painting project, the children often found ways to interact and bring together their views and ideas. On the other hand, the analysis process also revealed learning dispositions that would be seen as the reverse of what was aimed for in the preschool context. This was seen in relation to individual children's and at least one boy in this group, Dagur, might not at all times have sensed belonging to the group in this particular episode.

### 5.5.1.1 *Communication and involvement*

The children *communicated* and were *involved* in many ways by using multiple means of expression. The data show that through the painting episode, four of the children were frequently communicating and they often seemed to understand situations, to tackle difficulties, and to solve problems. When *communicating* and interacting in the painting project the children frequently found solutions, such as when someone wanted to change colors. Most of the time Oddur, Irma, and Kolka changed colors promptly, while Villi, Irma, and Kolka all said at some point that they would change color in a moment, when they had finished. Later, when developing the play, the children *communicated* and developed their own and others *involvement*, such as when the group seemed open for new ideas and found ways to include different roles in the play. At first they saw their own ideas from the painting, but gradually they started to mention other and different roles. For a while they had to tackle how to develop the play's theme, and had to unite roles building on the folk-tale and the more imaginative roles from their painting and reflection. From the beginning, Dagur had turned himself away from the group as if he was not ready to fully take part (in Step 3, Phase 1). His standing in the group seemed weak; the other children very seldom made contact with him or commented on his work. When he sat down and turned away from the other children, he might have been giving the others a sign that he really did not want to be a part of this group. He might have read the situation such that he was not prepared to take the risk of being rejected by the group. Apart from the teacher's attempts to support Dagur in taking a more active part in the group's activities and interactions, Oddur was the only one who tried to relate to Dagur. He handed him colors and used an extra-friendly tone of voice when he asked him to change colors (in Step 15, Phase 2), with little response from Dagur. Villi mostly ignored Dagur, apart from the one time when the teacher asked Dagur about his painting and Villi came up with a joke answer, saying Dagur was painting his (Villi's) toe (in Step 14, Phase 2). Even though Villi might have seen this just as something funny to say, Dagur might have experienced it as degrading, although no one present reacted in any way. Although the teachers made frequent attempts to support Dagur's more active participation, such as suggesting a role for him in putting on the play and the teacher being his partner, the problem of how to include Dagur in this group during these situations was an unsolved difficulty.

The children could be seen to be *involved* in the first part of the project, as all five children were engrossed in the painting, and four of them—Irma,

Kolka, Villi, and Oddur—interacted freely with each other. Dagur kept to the side and got little reaction from the other children, but all the time they were painting he was focused on his painting. The teachers made attempts to support Dagur in expressing himself and in participating more actively (in Steps 14 and 21, Phase 2) with no real result. In Phase 3 when the children were putting on the play, Dagur spent most of the time sitting on the teacher’s lap. Even though the teacher, in the latter half of the project when they were acting, encouraged him to take part, he was passive and did not express himself at all. He looked as if he was not *interested* and it seemed as his *involvement* was minimal (not visible on the outside), in the end he tried several times to stand up and go, which he did as soon as he was allowed to.

#### 5.5.1.2 *Well-being and belonging*

The children most of the time seemed to feel *well-being* and *belonging* in the group, seen through the roles they chose, how they expressed their ideas and their engagement in play and other activities. In the painting project, the children often showed signs of *well-being* and *belonging*, by seeming interested, focused, and sometimes engrossed in the activity at hand. The children used their own individual methods to interact with each other, found solutions, and developed their ideas and activities. The children all painted characters and images which they also included when the children put on the play in the second part of the project. Three of the children—Villi, Irma, and Kolka—were close friends, and seemed to be in a strong position in the large group, as well as in the group for the painting project. They were popular among the other children, who asked for their opinions or consent and wanted to play with them. These three children also, at least at some moments, seemed to have power to make decisions on the group’s behalf, as when Villi rejected Oddur’s idea about there being a shark in the painting (in Step 25, Phase 3). When painting, Villi and Irma sat beside each other, interacting in a lively way, while Irma was talking fluently most of the time. Kolka was situated on the other side of the manila paper and intervened every now and then, which she also exhibited in other situations and seemed to be her way of participating. Oddur was on the “third” side of the painting, with Dagur at one side and Kolka a bit further from him on the other side (see figure 5.A). Oddur was active and seemed interested in taking part in the project. He often looked at Villi when talking and sometimes addressed him when speaking. Villi returned his interest by supporting Oddur’s ideas and views (in Steps 6 and 8, Phase 1).

Throughout the painting project, at least four of the children seemed to show a sense of *belonging* when they collaborated with each other in the group and again in the second step of the painting project while planning a theme for the play. When collaborating the children exhibited that they seemed to sense *belonging*, seen in how they took part in the activities, express their ideas freely, and interacted with each other. At certain moments, especially when putting on the play, their *belonging* was explicit in their interactions that could be described as co-construction, where each put their ideas forward and they together found ways to develop the play including the many ideas and views. While the group was putting on the play, Dagur sat on the teacher's lap, he had a role, but still was not involved in the acting. Through the main part of the painting project, Dagur might not have felt a sense of *belonging* to this group.

### 5.5.1.3 *Contribution and taking responsibility*

The children *contributed to*, and sometimes were seen to take *responsibility* for what happened in the group. Most of the time the children *contributed* to making the interactions in the group smooth. When asked, all the children changed colors quickly and sometimes stood up to be able to hand over a particular color. Kolka, Villi, and Irma all could be seen to meet others' needs and at the same time to follow their own intentions, as they all said at some point something like, "Yes, you can have the color I am using when I have finished using it" (in Step 23, Phase 2).

The children were sometimes seen to take *responsibility* for self and others. This, for example, appeared once the group had started to put on the play and Irma first suggested they should build the play on an Icelandic folk-tale. In the painting they had seen many possible roles, some very imaginative. When they started to suggest roles they soon found it problematic to build the play on both what they had seen in the painting and the folk-tale (in Steps 29 and 30, Phase 3). The children tackled the complex situation by suggesting roles and starting to develop a thread for the story (in Steps 35 and 36, Phase 4) which in the end included nearly all of the ideas which were put forward. In this process they seemed to support each other in choosing roles and developing the plot. At first Kolka struggled and wanted to hold onto the roles of the folk-tale, but as the other children started to talk more and more about their own imaginary roles, she finally did the same (in Step 35, Phase 4).

The children also sometimes were seen to take *responsibility* individually. Villi, for example, appeared to be secure and decisive; he expressed what he liked and wanted for himself and others, but he could

also be considerate toward others and take their point of view. Several times Villi supported Oddur's ideas and feelings, such as when Villi expressed that he liked Oddur's imaginative figures (in Step 6, Phase 1), and again, after Irma had been scornful toward Oddur's idea, Villi, in his defense, said maybe Oddur liked that (in Step 8, Phase 1).

Even though Oddur tried to support others and see others' views, and was considerate toward others, he seemed as if he was not always fair to himself, as he often waited patiently while others used the colors he was waiting for, even when his turn had been passed over (in Steps 13 and 15, Phase 2).

## **5.5.2 Factors influencing children's participation at Seaside**

In this section, children's opportunities to learn in the preschool context at Seaside are discussed in relation to the curriculum, environment, pedagogy, and peer culture. Curriculum is discussed as the goals and content, while the environment is considered the inside and outside material and routines. The term pedagogy applies to the teachers' beliefs and methods, while peer culture refers to the group of children who daily spend time together in the preschool and share activities, values, and concerns in interaction with each other.

### *5.5.2.1 Curriculum and environment*

Both the indoor and outdoor environment of Seaside were planned with the aim of encouraging children to be active and able to make decisions and find solutions for themselves. The teachers planned a rich environment, with relational and evocative spaces, that encouraged communication and collaboration and with visible and accessible play material. In Seaside the environment was meant to encourage children's imagination, evoke their curiosity, and support them in exploring, asking questions, and finding solutions, which often could be seen. The children's stories revealed that the children seemed to like being active and try things out for themselves. An example of this could be seen in narrative 5b, when the children were taking part in role-play (see section 5.3.1). The children developed their participation in the play by using the visible material in the environment, such as the masks, ears, and tails, to imitate different animals. This appeared, for example, when Erla switched from one role to the other and later when Ragnar used the tiger tails to signal that he was the tiger, which opened up a way for him to be included in the play.

The teachers often planned walks and visits to the areas surrounding the preschool, as well as to the stores and galleries in the nearby community. These visits aimed to support children in interacting with the community where the preschool was situated. Often these activities functioned as clues for the teachers, helping them to read into children's interests, and sometimes the children's ideas were developed and included in projects or other activities. This could be seen when the children visited the art gallery and saw an exhibition on Irish culture (see section 5.2.2). A rowing boat seemed to evoke the children's interest, so the idea of a boat was later included in one of the painting projects and the preschool teacher planned a project around this boat.

#### *5.5.2.2 Pedagogy and peer culture*

The preschool teachers planned the daily schedule, alternating between group work and choice time. They planned for long periods of time, explaining the importance of giving the groups space to immerse themselves into projects or to reflect and find solutions.

*Group time for enquiry:* During group time, the teachers worked with the same group of children throughout the school year and sought to listen to the children in order to gain knowledge about what was of interest to them and to support their enquiry. The teachers planned project work in both their own reflection meetings and together with the children. They asked the children questions and encouraged them to ask questions, for example by using cues or suggesting the use of a model. The painting project (see section 5.4.1) was an example of how the teachers planned long periods for the different steps of the project with a time frame that allowed space for the children to take part in and extended process, where ideas were revisited and they were given sufficient time to explore, ask questions, and look for answers.

*Choice time for negotiations:* In choice time, the preschool teachers organized the children's choosing in an informal way and the interaction methods they used were meant to encourage children to discuss and negotiate. The children could choose what they wanted to do; a child might, for example, make the same choice for a long period of time, but in order to follow and maintain children's interests the teachers frequently changed the materials in the areas. When the children came to some of the areas, they needed to choose which of the different play materials they wanted to play with, which called for negotiation with the peers who were in the same area. Further, if a child wanted to choose an area which was already full, the teachers sometimes discussed solutions to this problem

with them; for instance, the teacher might ask the child to consider another choice or ask the current group of children if they could solve this in some way. When putting on the play mentioned above (see Phase 4 in section 5.4.1), the groups of children taking part in this study discussed and reflected together with the teachers on the project about how to plan the play theme, who should play the different roles, and so forth.

*Teachers' methods and the influence of individual children in the peer group:* The teachers aimed to support the children's interaction with each other and to encourage them to listen to others and assist their peers, as could be seen in the painting project. In the episodes and narratives in this study, the group of children appeared to be influenced by the individuals taking part in the group. The children used their own ways of participating: each child, in his or her own way, often used similar methods from one situation to the other, but sometimes a child would use a different method in different situations. In the group of children, each child took part in the reciprocal interaction, building the peer culture.

The preschool teachers encouraged the children to negotiate and listen to each other and supported the children in finding solutions. This could be seen when the children were putting on the play and the roles which they had chosen from their own painting or had seen in the large collective painting were in conflict with the set roles of the folk-tale. With the teacher's support the children managed to tackle the situation and developed a thread for the story which was a mixture of both the painting and the folk-tale, taking into account the different wishes and views of the children.

*The peer cultures and power relations in the group:* Throughout the painting project Irma, Kolka, Oddur, and Villi mostly ignored Dagur. They acted as if only they were the group, interacted with each other, and seemed as if they were feeling at ease as shown when they collaborated, expressed themselves, and listened to each other. These children often managed to find a way to solve situations, follow their own ideas, and listen to others, which could be seen through the process of the painting project. However, throughout the whole project one issue seemed unsolved: including Dagur in the group. The situation in the group seemed to be connected to the power relations in the group, and appeared to a difficult task for both the children and the teachers to tackle.

*Children's reflection:* Even though the children at Seaside were used to reflection, they seemed to like to be active and to try out new things. In the following example, they showed that they preferred to do things rather

than discuss or reflect on their doing. When the teachers were reflecting with the children, several times throughout the process of the project they asked the teachers when they could continue to work. Also, in the reflection meeting looking at the video, after a while they wanted to put on the play again. The reflection meetings with the children were planned by the adults (teachers and me) and could be seen as coming from the adults' ideas and initiative. Several times when the children and teachers had been reflecting on their doings, a child or children would suggest that they should now go back to what they had been doing, such as painting or playing.

## **5.6 Summary**

This chapter gives insight into the preschool context at Seaside, a preschool working in the spirit of Reggio Emilia, including the outdoor and indoor environment, routines, social conventions, and the two main activities of the daily schedule, choice time and group time. It describes the daily life of children in the preschool, displaying children stories, including children's learning processes, the peer cultures, and the teachers' methods. An episode from a group of children taking part in a painting project is described, followed by the children's stories I constructed from observations of each of the children taking part in the episode. After this, the children's learning processes when participating in the preschool context are discussed. Finally, the support children are provided with as they participate in the preschool context of Seaside is discussed.

The main findings reveal how the curriculum in Seaside was put into practice and illuminates the multiple factors influencing children's learning processes. In Seaside the children were provided with choice time and group time, where there were ample opportunities to play, and the teachers used deliberate methods to get closer to children's views and their interests. The children were encouraged to negotiate and listen to each other and were supported to have influence in their daily lives. The teachers made their documentations and read into children's expressions, in order to gain knowledge about what was of interest for the children. Furthermore, the rich and evocative environment the preschool teachers planned was seen to support children's interest and their finding solutions to problems and questions.

Most of the time, the children communicated within the preschool context, were involved, took responsibility, and found ways to influence what happened in the different situations. All the children used individual ways of expressing themselves, to find answers to questions and work out

problems in their daily lives. During their learning processes the children most of the time seemed open for new ideas, often related to each other's ideas, and followed up on their own ideas. They seemed to be able to change roles, go in and out of roles, and hold more than one role at the same time. Nevertheless, the children's participation in the group sometimes revealed an unequal power balance within the group, in diverse ways in the different situations. Three of the children, Villi, Irma, and Kolka, seemed to have a strong position within the group and thus sometimes to have a stronger influence on what was happening. Even though one boy, Dagur, often was ignored by the other children and excluded from the group, he was active and took part in play and other activities, he sometimes expressed new ideas, and at some moments related to the other children. It has to be noted that Dagur exhibited a totally different and more active interaction processes in situations with other children than those taking part in the painting project.

The next chapter describes the data generation process in Lava Ledge, a preschool using the Hjalli pedagogy approach.

## **6 Findings: Lava Ledge – Hjalli pedagogy**

### **6.1 Introduction**

In this chapter the results from Lava Ledge, the Hjalli preschool, will be described, organized in a similar manner as in chapter 5 (see section 5.1). I include two play episodes, one from the girls' group and another one from the boys' group, followed by children's stories of three girls and four boys taking part in these groups in Lava Ledge.

This chapter uncovers the preschool context in Lava Ledge, a Hjalli preschool which uses an Icelandic approach where girls and boys are in separate classrooms (referred to as "cores" in this preschool). As noted above, the specific aims are that children behave according to rules, are active in what is seen as typically strong in the opposite sex, develop positive thinking, and make democratic decisions (by voting). First this chapter provides a description of the preschool's setting, including the physical environment, routines, and social conventions of the preschool, the curriculum, and the pedagogy (see section 6.2). Next there is an exploration of the daily lives of children in the setting, including how they participate in peer groups and with teachers (see section 6.3). This is followed with an episode from the girls' group when they were playing with open-ended materials, and children's stories from each of the girls taking part in the episode (see section 6.4). Then, a description of an episode where the boys are playing with open-ended materials is given, followed by children's stories from each of the boys taking part in the experience (see section 6.5). Finally, the girls' and boys' learning processes within the groups are discussed (see section 6.6).

*In this chapter, the sections written in italic font are from my research notes, observations, and reflections.*

### **6.2 The preschool**

Lava Ledge is a preschool working according to Hjalli pedagogy. At the time of the fieldwork approximately 150 children were enrolled in seven gender-divided cores. Within each core, the children are divided into three age groups with one adult leading each group.

### 6.2.1 Participants in this study

Fieldwork took place in two cores (classrooms), one with girls and another with boys. The girls' core included 26 girls, a preschool teacher, and two assistant teachers, while the boys' core included 25 boys, a preschool teacher, and three assistant teachers. Data generation builds on observations of eleven girls from the oldest group of the core (see table 6.A) and their preschool teacher, John, and ten of the oldest boys in the core and their teacher, Suzy. From the field notes, I made children's stories from 13 children, six girls and seven boys, and chose two episodes from the girls' group and two episodes from the boys' group to give a picture of the social context where these stories took place. The data generation took place in the autumn term of the year in which the children turned five years old. The following autumn they would start primary school. The data discussed in the latter half of this chapter (see sections 6.4 and 6.5) represent two episodes, one with three girls and another one with four boys (marked with an asterisk in the table below).

**Table 6.A Children whose children's stories were developed**

Girls	Boys
Hera* (5 years)	Finnur* (5 years)
Katla* (5 years)	Hallur* (5 years)
Vala* (4 years)	Omar* (5 years)
Arna (5 years)	Axel* (5 years)
Freyja (5 years)	Daniel (5 years)
Inga (5 years)(	Freyr (5 years)
	Ari (5 years)
* Episodes and children's stories that are discussed in the latter half of this chapter, in sections 6.4 and 6.5, are marked with an asterisk (*).	

John and Suzy were the preschool teachers' team leaders in their core. They and the other preschool teachers had four hours of paid preparation time each week, apart from their daily working hours (eight hours per day, five days a week, for fulltime work). According to Hjalli policy, all staff should spend as much time as possible with the children, thus meetings during the

children's school time were limited. Staff meetings and professional development were mostly planned in the three preparation days a year each preschool in Iceland is allowed, or on weekends, often in a conference attended by staff from all the Hjalli schools in Iceland, a total of 12 pre- and primary schools at the time of this study.

*Daily schedule and working methods:*

The preschool opens at 7:30

Most children arrive before 9:00

Breakfast 8:30 – 9:00

Group time 9:00 – 10:30

Choice time 10:30 – 12:00

Lunch 12:00 – 13:00

Group time 13:00 – 14:00

Choice time 14:00 – 15:00

Tea breaks 15:00 – 15:30

Choice time or free activities 15:30 – 17:00

Children are 'picked up' by their parents, from about 16:00

The preschool closes at 17:30

## **6.2.2 The preschool context**

In this section the Hjalli environment setting is described, including the *outdoor* and *indoor environment*, and the *daily schedule*. The content and methods of the two main activities of the daily schedule, *choice time* and *group time*, is discussed.

The *outdoor environment* consisted of a large garden, which was divided into two main parts, with fences or dry stone walls: the upper garden which was nearest the house, and the lower garden, farther from the house. In daily practice the different parts of the garden were allocated to certain cores. The girls and boys taking part in this study had one space in the upper garden close to their entrances and another in the lower garden. If they wanted to access other parts of the garden they (or their preschool teachers) negotiated with teachers and children from other cores.

*When the boys were going out to the garden they asked Suzy if they could possibly play in the area in which the girls in John's group normally played. Suzy said that once out in the garden they could ask the other*

*group, which they did. The girls agreed that the boys would have a part of their area, which the boys happily accepted.*

The preschool was situated in a beautiful surrounding, close to a public garden and an open area. It was a short walk from a center with boutiques, a library, and cafés. One of the main values of the Hjali pedagogy is focused on nature, aiming to teach children to value the natural environment and to learn to enjoy being outside. Thus in choice time the children could always choose to go into the garden. Also in group time the teachers often took the children out into the garden or for a walk to the park, to the valley by the preschool, or to one of the playgrounds close by.

*I went with John and the girls to a small park near the preschool. We stopped by a pond where there was a high hill on one side. John told the girls we would stay there for about half an hour and they could climb as high up as they wanted, if they would just be so kind as to remain where he could see them. A girl asked if they also could play by the pond and John said that would not be convenient at this time, as it would be very cold if they had to walk back to school with wet clothes.*

*During group time I joined Suzy and the boys when they went to the park, another spot in the garden. When we arrived, Suzy divided the boys into two groups and they went to play in different areas of the park. On one side was a lava hill where the boys climbed as far as they dared and on the other side there was a playground with swings, seesaws, and a play pen. After about 25 minutes the groups switched places.*

The objects in the indoor environment were standardized, similar in all cores and with specific purposes in mind. Material for the six prepared areas used in choice time was visible, fitted into, or near to, the areas.

The first room in the core contained cupboards for children's clothes. The main room was the biggest of three rooms and had a large table with matching high chairs, where the oldest children sat at lunch and tea time. In each core there were doors with windows at children's height leading into two smaller rooms. One had soft cushions and mattresses, for use in choice time, and a high table and chairs. The other had a mat on the floor, where a large square with numbered cubes up to 28 were drawn, and each child having his or her own numbered place. This square served as the meeting place for the large group, in the beginning and end of the day and also in choice time. In this room there also were hollow blocks, stacked against a wall, serving as one area in choice time. Two other high tables were in each of the two inner rooms. They were mainly used at mealtimes and at other

times they were pushed against a wall with the chairs stacked to make more space for children's play.

To make the rules *clear and visible* to children and adults, low shelves and tape on the floor divided the large room into different areas. By the side of each area were cross marks (an x made with tape) on the floor where the children were asked to sit down when they had tidied up at the end of choice time.

*Most children arrived about 8:30 to 9:00 in the morning and started by having breakfast. At 9:00 the large group (all the children in the core) gathered on the carpet with the numbered squares where they each had a seat. The preschool teacher marked children's attendance, ticking off on a list those children who were there. If a child was not at preschool, the group sent good thoughts or wishes to the particular child. Often each child was given a chance to say a few words, sometimes about what they had been doing at home or what they had done in preschool yesterday or some comment on what they were preparing to do. This was especially the routine on Monday mornings; everyone would share something from their weekend, for example, about their family or an activity in which they took part.*

The environment was organized to be *simple* with as few visible artifacts as possible, with the aim to keep children focused and calm, but also to support them in using their own imagination when finding ways of playing with the material. There were no decorations or displays, and only a few practical items had been hung on the walls: a large clock, a guitar, a map of Iceland, a small information board, and a large cork board, normally used by the teacher to pin up material related to the group time.

In the autumn term both teachers put the letters of the alphabet on the board, with the number of letters gradually growing as the children's learning progressed. They also put up lists of words, following the children's suggestions for words related to particular letters which had been introduced in group time.

*Most of the time there were few drawings, pictures, or artwork on the walls. The children mainly kept their drawings in their personal drawers, but they were sometimes hung on the wall. The children and the teachers together decided where and how the drawings were put on the wall. When the girls made self-portraits, John and the girls decided to put their drawings on the walls, inside the unit block area, and the girls negotiated with each other on the positioning of their drawings. In the*

*boys' core, they put their self-portraits on the board. The drawings in both cores remained hanging for a few days.*

The *daily schedule* was framed by the usual daily routines: children arriving, breakfast, lunch, tea break, and children going home. In between there were two routine arrangements, *group time* and *choice time*, which took place before and after lunch.

#### 6.2.2.1 *Choice time*

In choice time the children sit in a circle in their numbered places and choose one at a time: the child who chose first on that particular day was second yesterday and becomes the last to choose tomorrow. Typically, the teacher places the choosing cards on the floor, two cards for water play, two for clay, four for drawing, two for unit blocks, four for hollow blocks, four for soft cubes and mattresses, and finally up to eight for the outdoor area. The teacher starts by asking the children who should be first to choose on that day. When a child makes her/his choice, the matching card is put aside, to make it clear which places were left for the remaining children to choose.

As one of the main aims of the curriculum is to support children's independence, the teacher must have an overview of what is happening in all areas. Teachers observed, following the children and intervening if a group of children did not solve their disagreements, if they asked for the teacher's assistance, or if the teacher thought someone was doing something hurtful or wrong.

*In both the boys' and girls' core, the last area to be chosen was often the outside area. Suzy explained to me that for the boys in her core there was a reason they were less interested in the outside area. The boys shared the outside area close to the house with a group of the youngest boys, which meant that the area was made secure for younger children and thus was not as challenging for the older boys. At times when the boys knew they would need to stay in their upper area, they tended not to choose the outside area. Suzy told me she was seeking a solution so the boys would have access to an area more interesting for them. When they could stay in their lower area in choice time, the boys tended to be more interested in going outside.*

*It also happened that the children saw an opportunity in choosing the outside area to be able to choose to play with a friend. This was seen several times in the observations. For example, Katla and Hera chose the outside area to be able to play together.*

### 6.2.2.2 *Group time*

In the *group time* each preschool teacher was with her or his group of children. During the fieldwork, examples of what the preschool teachers planned in group times were related to the themes of the gendered curriculum (see section 6.3.2), from introducing and working with letters of the alphabet to developing children's self-image.

When putting the pedagogy into practice, the preschool teachers had freedom to decide how they implemented the aims of the curriculum. In the beginning of each group time the preschool teachers told the children what they were going to do and sometimes discussed with them what they wanted to do.

The two groups of oldest children often went for walks or played in the outside area, either in the lower part of the garden or walking to places nearby.

The oldest group of children had a special program to prepare them for starting primary school the following year. In addition to the particular aims of the curriculum, they were learning the alphabet. The teachers planned to finish introducing all the letters before Christmas, and in the spring they would be working more closely with numbers. Mostly the teachers used a part of the group time (about 10-15 minutes) to work with letters, doing it in various ways and in different places, for example, outside in the garden or in different places inside. The methods often took the form of games or playing with the words the children themselves suggested in connection with the letter explored.

*In group time John told the girls to put on their outdoor clothes. Once outside, he gathered the group to sit down on the pavement just outside the house. He brought cards with the next letter to introduce to the girls. They all vocalized the letter and then, one girl at a time, they found a word starting with the letter or having it in the middle or end of a word. John wrote down on paper the words each girl had suggested, and the list was put up on the board in the large room after the group time. Suzy worked in a very similar way with her group of boys.*

## 6.3 Describing and discussing participation in the groups

This section discusses children's participation in a group of children and teachers. Firstly (see sections 6.3.1 and 6.3.2), an attempt is made to describe the children's learning processes in the preschool context, the environment, teachers' methods, and peer cultures. Secondly (see sections

6.4 and 6.5), two episodes from one group of girls and another one of boys is described, followed by children's stories from each of the children taking part in the episodes. Finally, (see section 6.5), the children's learning processes as they are taking part in their preschool groups are discussed. While analyzing children's learning processes I focused on children's strengths, often detecting strengths even when the children were tackling challenging situations; however, what I saw was not always about children's strengths. The research notes also showed that some children in some situations expressed what might be seen as negative learning dispositions or the group of children did not manage to solve challenging situations.

### **6.3.1 Children's learning processes**

The data from this group of children was generated by a variety of methods, the same as used at Seaside: written notes, photographs, audio- and video recordings, and reflection on the data with the participants. In Lava Ledge, staff meetings during the children's school time were limited, thus the reflection was mainly my own, but informal discussion with the preschool teachers took place when there was opportunity to talk without disturbing the work with the children. Twice there were reflection meetings with the two groups of children. In the first meeting with the group of boys the children first reflected on photographs from when the children were working on their self-portraits, and later the two groups of children and their teachers discussed video clips from the children's play. The views and information from these discussions were included as part of the data.

What was observed and documented took place at different times in the preschool's daily program, usually in *choice time* and *group time*. The following narratives from the girls' and the boys' group, are from my notes, and are an example of the complex learning processes that took place in children's play and participation in the preschool activities, the different roles they chose, and how they expressed themselves.

#### **Narrative 6a**

*When the children were choosing, I saw Hera and Katla give each other a sign to choose the same area, the water play area. I asked them whether I could join them and take photos when they were in the water play area. They agreed and got ready: they took most of their clothes off and put on aprons.*

*Katla said: "Hera, we are teenage girls...or...no, we are seven-year-old girls." She went ahead, "We are chicks...don't you agree that we are*

*singing in a concert? We are the best singers.” As Hera accepted these ideas, she was pouring water from one plastic cup to the other and said she was baking a cake for the tournament (which became a gymnastic practice at some point in the play). She said she was the mom. Katla said she was the older sister, and for a while they both were baking, using the plastic toys, pouring water back and forth. Katla then suggested a song they would sing on stage in a concert. The girls started to sing, holding cones from the water-play material to their mouths as microphones. Now they were singing as singers on a stage. Katla started new songs, and the girls seemed to know the lyrics and the melody of many songs. After several songs Katla used the microphone, the cone, as a monocular, peeped through it and said in a teasing voice that she was spying on the children playing in other areas.*

In this narrative the girls chose to play together, and once in the water-play area, found ways to develop a play theme. They held several roles: they were singers, a mother and sister, and a spy. The girls used the simple materials in the water-play area creatively, to bake, sing with microphones, and spy on others. Both girls used their individual methods of participating. Katla expressed herself by using words, put her ideas forward in a questioning form, and at the same time asked for Hera’s acceptance. Hera also expressed herself by using words, chose the role of the mother, and was at the same time doing things actively, as when she was “baking.”

Hera and Katla’s play developed smoothly. They seemed to be prepared to weave their play themes together, each putting ideas forward, accepting other ideas, and adding new ideas. In the observations in this study this happened frequently when children were playing. In some groups this did not happen or it took some time before the play theme started to develop more effortlessly, i.e., children putting their own ideas forward, listening to others, and developing a common thread.

In an observation from the boys’ group when Hallur, Finnur, and Omar were playing spacemen and a dog in the soft cube area, it took a while until they had found some balance in developing the play theme.

### **Narrative 6b**

*Omar had crawled under the chairs, which were stacked against the wall. He said he (the dog) was stuck inside his cage; he barked and shouted to the other two boys that he was stuck and they needed to rescue him. Finnur and Hallur came to his rescue. Hallur said, “This was locked and I forgot the key,” Finnur ran back to the spaceship, grabbed*

*the pretend key and came back to release Omar, who said two legs were still stuck. Hallur said to Finnur, "Spaceman, I will go and get the golden key." Finnur threw his arms in the air and called out for rescue equipment, which he received; at the same time Hallur got the golden key. Both Finnur and Hallur rescued Omar, Finnur by telling Omar he had rescued him with the rescue equipment and Hallur by handing him the golden key. The three of them walked to the spaceship. Omar opened the ship by moving a mattress and Finnur right away told him the game wasn't like that.*

*For a while the boys were travelling in space. Finnur said they heard some loud music and when Omar jumped down from the spaceship acting as if he were going to solve the problem, Finnur said he had pushed the button to turn this off. Now Omar was in his own ship, a mattress on the floor. He rocked the mattress and produced squeaking sounds and several times said, "Mine was going really fast." When he did not get a response, he started to bark, louder and louder. Omar finally said, "Mine could sound so loud that yours did hear him." Again Finnur and Hallur came to Omar's rescue. Finnur had taken on the cover of Sportacus, and called for a ladder. When Omar said he could not reach the ladder, Hallur came and they all had a common project to help the dog (Omar) to get into the spaceship. Finally, the dog managed to get on board the airship and the three of them flew away. Finnur said, "This is like Lazy Town." Omar took a blanket, put it around his shoulders and said, "Mine thought the blanket was a cloak. "Finnur accepted Omar's ideas and said, "This was a cloak." Hallur nodded and said "Yes."*

In the boys' play it took a while for them to manage to develop the play theme together, listen to each other's ideas, and include all three of them. Finnur seemed to want to be in control and find solutions, and it took a while for him to be able to adapt to the other boys' ideas. In the beginning of the narrative Omar played a dog that needed help, which at first seemed to work to organize the play. However, during the play, his ideas were not accepted initially, but he did not give up and finally brought the three of them together by again becoming the dog who needed rescuing.

### **6.3.2 The preschool teachers' working methods**

In this section the adults' roles and teachers' use of methods of the Hjalli pedagogy are described in relation to the *rules and routines* in the cores, and how the teachers planned *learning centers* and themes related to the *gendered curriculum*.

The preschool teachers used the working methods of the Hjalldi pedagogy, which was seen as teaching children how to behave according to rules in a just and democratic society.

In the preschool practice *rules and routines* were systematically used, and made clear by visible signs, such as lines in the floor mediating messages such as where to walk or to play within a specific area, in the inside environment. In most of the daily plans, such as in choice time, the children were given very formal instructions on the procedures. The use of routines was also a part of the practice, not always exactly the same in each core, but generally used as a framing of each event in the daily schedule, such as when children meet in the large group, for group time and choice time. At these times they always started and finished each type of activity in the same way. An example of this was in the beginning of choice time. In the girls' core they together said a mantra, starting with, "The choice time is coming, coming..." and finishing with another mantra. The procedure was the same in the boys' core, but the mantra was not exactly the same. The framework for group discussions was another tool in the Hjalldi pedagogy, a systematic way of giving one child at a time the opportunity to express her/himself. This was often seen in the large group and in the group time, where the teachers ensured that everyone was given the opportunity to express her/himself. At these times the teachers often delineated "the scores" for the children; for example, how many had the same opinions or wanted to do the same activity, or the teachers just made it clear what everyone had said *by repeating and reviewing*.

The teachers organized *learning centers*, sometimes in collaboration with the children, as a systematic way of handling the group of children, but also with the aim of teaching children what is just and fair. Once, in group time, John told the girls he was going to invite them to have learning centers, and asked each of the girls to come up with a suggestion of activities for the three centers. Each girl suggested one activity. These were: (1) *water*, (2) *water and apples* (where pieces of apples are put in a bowl of water and children try to catch the apples without using their hands), (3) *computers* (John says that is not possible now), (4) *water and apples*, (5) *playing in the unit block area with additional materials*, (6) *drawing*, (7) *hairdressing parlor in the bathroom*, (8) *go outside and walk barefoot*, (9) *water and apples*, and (10) *hairdressing parlor in the bathroom*. When all the girls had expressed their suggestions, John summed up: "Most girls said water and apples and a few said hairdressing. We need to come to an agreement on the third activity, choosing from the unit block area with extra materials, drawing, and, finally, going outside barefoot. What do you

think?" The girls now, one at a time, said which of the three they chose, and all but one wanted to go out barefoot. John again summed up: "Eight want to go out barefoot and one wants drawing; what do we do?" The girls responded, "Girls go out barefoot, which was the most." John replied, "Hera, aren't you the assistant today? Would you count, please?" Hera counted, repeated one, two, and three until every girl had a number and they all were included in one of the three groups. In these situations, John often discussed what was fair and related to what the majority wanted.

The *gendered curriculum*, the part of the curriculum that was different for girls and boys, included the same aims but with different emphases. For example, the emphases were stronger on girls practicing *daring* and boys practicing *caring*. In the boys' core, when practicing caring Suzy created a relaxing atmosphere by playing music and dimming the lights.

### **Narrative 6c**

*Before they started Suzy asked the boys if they remembered where not to rub each other's body. The boys responded, "Not eyes, nose or mouth and not the sole of the feet because some people tickle there." The boys worked together in pairs and exchanged roles. One at a time they lay on the mattress, while the other one was on the side helping his friend relax. By following Suzy's calm directions, they brushed the friend's face with a paint brush, and rubbed his shoulders, hands, and toes. They then played the game of "making a ginger man." First they kneaded the dough (rubbing the friend's stomach) and then they made the gingerbread man. His hands, arms, feet, middle and head finishing by making five toes, eyes, nose ears and hair, putting the ginger man in the oven, baking and "trickery troll", the ginger man became alive. Finally, the boys rubbed some hand cream on each other's hands.*

In the gendered curriculum the girls were practicing *daring*, which could, for example, be daring to go outside in the snow barefoot or jumping from heights. Once when they were working in learning centers, one of the stations had the assignment to run outside barefooted, in cold and wet weather. The girls climbed out of the window and ran a few meters on tiptoe and went in through the garden door, coming back to the room, and going out through the window again, several times.

### **Narrative 6d**

*The girls also practiced daring by being encouraged by the teacher and each other to jump from heights or between two high places. These*

*practices could be seen to influence the girls' play in the soft cube area. They, for example, often were practicing to dare. They made a spot where they piled up mattresses and soft cubes and practiced jumping from the high table to the pile of mattresses and cubes.*

### **6.3.3 The preschool teachers' methods of intervention**

Most of the time children were given time to find ways of starting an activity with the main thought of supporting their self-regulation. If the preschool teacher thought the children had difficulties in starting to play, she/he might ask if they wanted some additional material or if the children asked for help or the teacher thought they needed assistance in finding a solution or coming to an agreement.

During the fieldwork period, the teachers rarely intervened in children's play; moving a child from a particular situation occurred infrequently. Below is an example of how John used the Hjalli pedagogy practice systematically to intervene when four girls were playing in the soft cubes area.

#### **Narrative 6e**

*Four girls were playing in the soft cube area, Vala and Katrin from the oldest group and two younger girls. Once in the area the girls played in pairs, the older and the younger together. The younger girls had started to build a house from the mattresses and cubes. The older girls said they needed two of the mattresses from the younger ones, even though they had more mattresses themselves. Several times the younger girls went to get John and asked for his help. In his interaction with the girls John was always calm and gentle. He first came, stood in the door and watched, saying nothing. The next time he came, watched and said, "I am just looking to see how things are going here." The third time he came into the room and asked the girls what was bothering them and if he could help in some way. The younger girls told him that the older girls would not let them use the mattresses. John asked the younger girls, "Have you told them?" The younger girls told the older girls they needed two mattresses, which were handed over by the older girls. John went out and shortly the girls had another disagreement. In the end of this play session John came in for the fourth time, took Vala by the hand and asked her to assist him in preparing the meal.*

John later explained to me that Vala sometimes felt unwell, probably due to something happening in her family. He said that a time away from the

group often helped her to regain equilibrium. Such situations were infrequent, but these interactions are described here as an example of how this particular teacher, when needed, followed the Hjalli methods for tackling problems in the group or with regard to individual children.

Another example from the boys' core was when Suzy intervened in the boys' play when Omar, Axel, Hallur, and Finnur were playing spacemen and dogs in the soft cube area.

### **Narrative 6f**

*Suzy came in and asked, "Isn't everyone happy here?" Finnur answered, "No, Axel is. Axel was playing a game where he was changing into a cheetah." Suzy said, "But, he might want that." Finnur replied, "But we aren't playing that sort of a game." Suzy: "Are you deciding what the game is or is everyone?" Finnur: "He is playing with us." The teacher: "Yes, isn't that great?" Finnur demurred, but the teacher said, "Boys, just try to play in a manner that makes everyone happy." Then Hallur said, "But there is no cheetah," Suzy said: "No, but Axel might want to be a cheetah, huh?" As Finnur, Omar and Hallur turned their back to the teacher, she addressed Axel: "But, Axel, if you want to join them in this play, why don't you try to be...maybe a cheetah does not fit?"*

*Suzy left the room and closed the door. Axel lay on a mattress, and in a while asked, "Is a cheetah bad?" He did not get an answer from the other boys. Finnur and Hallur were in the spaceship and Omar and Axel, who were under the chairs by the other wall, seemed to be having a disagreement. Suddenly Omar called out to Finnur and Hallur, "Yours ran and saved mine." Axel opened the door to the other room. Suzy came and Axel told her Omar was kicking him. Suzy said, "Then stop clambering on these chairs were Omar is; try to be somewhere else. Listen to me; are you taking part in the play? I think I should invite you to come to the other room. Please come with me; we will find something else to do." Suzy took Axel by the hand; they went out and closed the door.*

When discussing these interactions with me, Suzy explained that she had a special agenda for Axel, trying to support him in interacting with the other boys and being included in the group. In her view she not only needed to support the other boys to be more open toward Axel's ideas, but also to support him in adapting to the others ideas. This example reveals how teachers, in this case Suzy, could have a special agenda for an individual child or the group. It is important to keep in mind that an outsider in the

preschool community, like me, never has all the background information needed to understand fully the complex situation in the preschool context.

## 6.4 Girls' participation when playing house

In this section an episode from one group of girls is described (see section 6.4.1), followed by children's stories from each of the three girls taking part in the episode (see sections 6.4.2).

From the episodes describing the children's choice time, three girls were playing in the hollow blocks and four boys were playing in the soft cubes with minimum intervention from the teachers. In situations observed in the girls' and boys' cores they chose roles which seemed to be of personal interest and also related to the particular group and the interactions in it.

In Lava Ledge the girls' learning stories were generated from the everyday events in the core. The play episode and learning stories presented in this section originated in the girls' choice time when they were playing in a group with open-ended material, in the hollow block area. The preschool teachers were on the sideline, intervening and interacting with the girls when asked to or when they themselves thought it necessary, but all the time they observed, following the girls' play in small groups in the different areas.

### 6.4.1 Episode—girls' play house

In this episode Hera, Vala, and Katla were playing house in an area with a stack of hollow blocks, four blankets, a high table, and a stack of high chairs.



Figure 6.A The girls have built a house

Below is a description of the episode when girls were playing house. The episode is presented in two phases with 21 numbered steps, which later are referred to when discussing children’s stories.

**Table 6.B Episode—girls play house**

**Phase 1:**

No.	Activity in emerging play script
1	Hera and Vala were stacking the blocks up, building a house; Katla was strolling around. She occasionally gave the other girls a hand, but mostly discussed or suggested the roles she wanted them to have. For example, she said: “Mine is the unborn baby...I mean yours is the unborn baby.”
2	In the building Hera took the lead, and several times said “no, no, no,” when she did not like what Vala had built. Vala conformed and stopped doing what Hera didn’t want her to do and went on to build differently.
3	When they had put a roof on the house Vala suggested they should have a camera on top. Hera liked the idea, accepted it, and the two of them constructed a camera on top of the building.
4	Hera suggested they should build another camera and finally said they needed a cage around the cameras. Katla, in the role of the baby, stood with her hand on her hip, looked at Hera and said, “How is mine going to do this?” As Hera continued to build she said: “This is okay.” Katla asked, “Will you just help me and do it for me?”
5	Vala still was building and said, “Ours had an attic.” Hera said to Katla, “...and yours was able to walk up to the attic.” Katla responded, “Yes, because there was a staircase. You needed to hold my hand when climbing up.”

A little later, the house had been raised from the wall of the room, two sidewalls were built with a roof on top, and the green blankets had been put as drapes in front, being the door to the house (see figure 6.A). A high table was by the opposite wall and on the side of the table the high chairs were stacked. Most of the time Vala was under the table, until Hera helped her to go up to the attic of the house (see figure 6.B).



**Figure 6.B Katla and Hera are inside the house**

**Phase 2:**

Developing the plot

6	Katla (the baby) went into the house and said to Hera (the mother), "Didn't yours need to continue to build even though it was night?"
7	Vala (the puppy) turned the light off and said: "Mine was born in the night." Katla responded, "Mine too...ours were both born in the night. Now mine is asleep." Vala said, "Mine is also asleep now."
8	After a while Vala came from under the table and said, "Okay, now I can decide when it is day, because I am close to the switch." She carefully looked in the direction of the house where the girls were and waited. She stood up, put her hand on the light switch and said, "I am going to have day now." She still looked in the direction of the house and waited to be sure they were okay with her decision.
9	Vala went to the light switch and asked: "Can I now make the day?" Hera:" "No, we haven't yet gone to sleep." Vala waited and shortly after turned the light on. Hera said, "Why do you have the night so short?" Vala responded, "Just because." Hera said, "I don't want to have such a short sleep." Then Vala again turned the light off and said, "I make the night now."
10	For a while they were in the dark (Hera and Katla inside the house and Vala under the table), and then Vala said, "Mine was also playing the thief." She sneaked toward the house and removed the cameras from the roof.
11	Hera said, "No, we don't want to have thieves; we don't want to

	be playing gangsters." Vala, on her knees in front of the house explained, "This is a play were there are gangsters." Hera: "I don't want to have gangsters." Vala responded, "But, Hera, I want there to be gangsters in this play."
12	Vala waited, finally stood up and said, "There weren't any gangsters or thieves." She put the cameras back. Hera, still inside the house, said, "I just want to play house or to play sisters."
13	Vala cheerfully said: "Yes, okay we are playing house, I am the kitten." She crawled under the table and a moment later went to the switch, turned the light on and crowed.
14	From inside the house Katla said "hers" was allowed to sleep longer and Hera added, "Mine needed to sleep a bit longer; don't turn on the light in this part of the room, because we are sleeping a bit longer...because babies sleep longer."
15	Vala went to the house, took the blanket to the side (opened the door) and peeked in. Suddenly she drew herself back and said, "Babies don't eat animals." Katla responded, "But they pinch animals." Vala, with an angry voice, said, "No." Hera said, "They just pinch a little. The animals are not hurt by it."
16	Vala crawled back toward the table and said, "Now mine was lost and yours needed to go out in the woods to look for her. Mine was lost, but saw a house. She did not dare go into the house." Hera put the blanket (the door) to the side and said, "Come on then." But Katla said, "There isn't room for you here." Vala came closer to the house and said, "Ours had an attic." Katla said, "You can just go up to the attic."
17	Hera went out of the house and softly said to Vala, "Come to the attic; I will move our cameras." Hera and Vala prepared "the attic" so Vala could go up there.
18	Inside the house Katla, the baby, was crying. Hera softly said, "There, there, don't cry little baby. Just wait a little...mother is coming." Hera went back to the baby, into the house and Vala went on the roof (in the attic).
19	A little later Vala wanted Hera, the mom, to buy "hers" (meaning the cat she was playing) and other animals so they could keep a zoo. Hera was determined and spoke in a negative tone, "No...we are not going to buy animals. The child can bite

	yours...the animals.”
20	Vala said, “But, Hera, then I will quit; I won’t play anymore.” Katla supported Hera, looked at Vala and said, “Hera might not want to buy animals.”
21	When there was no response to her comment, Vala tried to tell the other girls that she and Hera had built the house, and thus she had the right to be taking part in the play. She said in a normal tone, “I’m not playing anymore.” The other girls did not react, just continued playing. She stood by the window with her arms crossed and stared out.

In the coming section these episodes will be further explored, discussing these three girls’ ways of participating, as appearing in the episode above and in other observations from their preschool group. With the purpose of revealing the learning processes happening within the preschool context and to explore how the children were learning, I wrote the children’s stories. As writing children’s stories for each child, I had four issues in mind for the same purposes and using the same procedures as with the previous groups (see the four issues at the end of section 5.4.1).

## 6.4.2 Individual children’s stories-girls

### 6.4.2.1 Hera’s stories

Hera’s stories showed her strengths when participating could be characterized by what she did and how she did it (her actions); four of the characteristics found in Hera’s stories are described below. She was seen to be *active in doing*, such as building; to take the *initiative* and carry forward the building project; to choose *powerful roles*, as the mother, often being the one who accepted or rejected others’ ideas; and finally she could often be seen as *decisive*, taking a stand and expressing herself clearly.

*Active:* Hera was very active most of the time, working with her hands and using verbal expressions, playing a builder when she made the house for herself and the other girls (in Step 1, Phase 1). Even Katla saw her as an active builder (in Step 6, Phase 2).

*Initiative:* Hera often took the initiative and connected the other girls (in their roles) together, influencing the development of the play theme. This could, for example, be seen when Vala was the kitten (or a pet) and Katla the baby and Hera saw to it that they connected with each other (in Step 5, Phase 1). She held the play together by looking after the kitten and the

baby, who both needed her help in the play. She mediated between the other girls, attended to the hungry kitten, and at the same time said in a soothing tone, to the baby: “There, there, don’t cry little baby. Just wait a little...mother is coming” (in Steps 17 and 18, Phase 2).

Hera picked up ideas from the other girls and developed them, as when she was playing with Vala who suggested they would have a camera on the roof of their house. Hera accepted that and when Vala put the camera on the roof, Hera suggested they would have two cameras and built a cage around the cameras for protection, which they did together (in Step 3, Phase 1).

*Power:* In most situations Hera tended to choose family roles, which most of the time were central to the play, and involved having power, such as being the mother. Even when she was playing with Katla in the water play, playing teenage girls who were singers, Hera also was the mother who baked cakes for the girls to bring to their gymnastics practice (see narrative 6a in section 6.2.1). She also tended to reject more fanciful roles, like she did when Vala suggested there were thieves coming into the house. Hera rejected the idea firmly, saying she did not want to have any thieves in this play (in Step 11, Phase 1) and underlined that they were playing at being a family. Similarly, Hera rejected Vala’s suggestions of including wild animals like tigers in the play or running a zoo (in Step 19, Phase 2).

*Decisions:* Hera often made decisions, for example, about what ideas were accepted into the plot of the play, and the other girls applied to her for approval when they wanted something to be done. Most of the time Hera’s view was accepted by the others (in Steps 4, Phase 1 and Step 12, Phase 2). When Hera rejected ideas from other girls she said “No,” decisively, often using full sentences as when she said to Vala, “No, we don’t want to have thieves...” She could also explain why she rejected an idea or an activity from another girl as when she did not want Vala to “make the night” because they had not gone to sleep yet and a bit later stated that she did not want such a short sleep (in Step 9, Phase 2).

On some occasions when she had rejected an idea from another girl, she seemed to rethink and adapt her view to the other girl’s idea. This happened in another game when she was the mother and Katla was the child who wanted to buy a pink playground slide for their garden. Hera first said, “No, we don’t buy anything now.” A little later she said, “No, not today... only later this evening. It soon will be Christmas ...actually tonight it was Christmas.” A little later they went to buy the pink slide.

#### 6.4.2.2 Katla's stories

Katla's stories showed her strengths when participating could be characterized by what she did and how she did it (her actions); four of the characteristics found in Katla's stories are described below. She used many *verbal expressions* to describe her ideas; she used *language as influence*, for example, to develop the play theme; she often *asked for others' acceptance*, such as in putting her own ideas forward; and finally, she seemed *not to need others' approval* of being right or about her ideas being accepted into the play.

*Verbal expression:* Most of the time Katla cheerful and spontaneously told stories about her family, such as discussing what she had done over the weekend and the food she liked. In the episode with Hera and Vala she expressed her ideas verbally, talked, and suggested roles and themes for play. When needed, she occasionally gave the other girls a hand, but she did not do much of the building job. Her way of taking part in the building process involved influencing the development of the building and developing the play theme, watching the girls work, walking around and discussing what to do and the roles they should play, and offering suggestions in relation to the play theme (in Step 1, Phase 1).

*Language as influence:* Katla used language to influence the development of the play. As seen in the episode with Hera and Vala, she suggested roles and relations (in Step 1, Phase 1). This happened in the beginning of the episode when playing with Hera and Vala, and similarly could be seen in other observations. When playing with Hera in the water, Katla suggested activities and roles for their play by simultaneously putting forward her ideas while developing the play theme. Her verbal expressions revealed this: "Hera, we are teenage girls...or...no, we are seven-year-old girls." She continued, "We are chicks...are we not singing in a concert? We are the best singers, aren't we?" (see narrative 6a in section 6.3.1).

*Asked for others' acceptance:* Not only did she use words to suggest roles and play themes, but she also asked the girls she was playing with for acceptance by every now and then inserting a sentence like this: "Isn't that so, Hera?" She often put her ideas forward in a questioning tone, suggesting something and at the same time asking for others' acceptance (in Step 6, Phase 2). This could also be seen in many other situations when she said to Hera, "Mine was stealing in the night; isn't that so, Hera? Wasn't it day now? Was mine not going to drive yours?"

*Not needing others' approval:* Katla easily adapted to others' ideas, and was mainly interested in family play where she chose roles like being the

baby, the teenager, a princess, or a singer. When she suggested an idea, she asked for the other girls' agreement, but she seemed not to need approval from the other girls to determine that her ideas were good or right. This happened, for example, when she was pretending to be the baby. She suggested that the mother should go and buy baby powder, and added: "I know what powder is." The mother (Hera) said, "It is a cream." Katla calmly said, "It is dust something which has been pulverized, which you put on toddlers' red bottoms." Occasionally Katla could support another girl's view, as she did when playing with Hera and Vala, when Vala wanted the mother, Hera, to buy animals and even have a whole zoo, which Hera disapproved of and got Katla's support (in Step 20, Phase 2).

#### 6.4.2.3 Vala's stories

Vala's stories showed her strengths when participating could be characterized by what she did and how she did it (her actions); five of the characteristics found in Vala's stories are described below. She was seen to be *active in doing*, as a builder building the house; to be *imaginative*, as her ideas often were not as conventional as the ideas of some of the other girls. Her ideas often *influenced the theme of the play*; she *adapted to others' ideas* if her own ideas had been rejected, even though she sometimes could become *upset* when things were not going her way.

*Active:* Vala was an active builder. She was the one who took part in the actual building needed for the play, putting up the house and inserting new things to develop the play as it went along (in Step 1, Phase 1; Step 5, Phase 1; Step 16, Phase 2).

*Imaginative:* Vala was imaginative and chose a variety of roles for herself, such as being a princess, a king, a queen, a gangster, a cat, or a dog, the last two being frequently chosen. Further, she would choose roles from Icelandic folklore or other fairytales, such as being a tiger, a wild cat, a Christmas cat, 'Leppalúði' (a lazy, ugly, and bad troll from Icelandic folklore), Jólaveinn (an Icelandic Santa Claus who is a prankster), or Grýla (a female troll that is ugly and bad). In the episode when playing with Hera and Katla she several times introduced new roles into the development, such as having thieves in the play or buying a zoo (in Steps 10 and 19, Phase 2).

*Influenced the theme of the play:* Vala's ideas often influenced the development of the play theme. When playing with Hera and Katla, she suggested the idea of putting a camera on the roof of the house, Hera accepted the idea, and after that they developed the idea together (in Steps 3 and 4, Phase 1). A bit later Vala suggested, "Ours had an attic" (in Step 5,

Phase 2), and for most of the play she was the pet in the attic or under the table, while the other girls' played the baby and the mother and were inside the house below her. Vala made connections with the girls inside the house, for example, by being the puppy, which was born in the night. Katla responded by saying she was the baby, also born in the night (in Step 7, Phase 2). Most of the time, when Hera and Katla were inside the house, Vala influenced the play by finding ways to relate her roles to theirs. This was apparent when Hera and Katla said they (the baby and the mother) were both sleeping longer (in Step 14, Phase 2). Vala went to the house as if she wanted to join the other girls, but the baby nipped at her (In Step 15, Phase 2). She became a bit hurt and drew back under the table. However, soon after she once again suggested an idea, stating that she (the cat) was lost and saw a house that she did not dare to go into. Hera then invited her inside, and Katla objected. This led to Hera making room for Vala in the attic (in Step 16, Phase 2).

*Adapted to others' ideas:* Vala's ideas were often accepted by the other girls, but she could also be flexible and tolerant in adapting her ideas to others,' as in when she conformed to Hera's thoughts as they carried their play theme forward (in Step 2, Phase 1). This could also be seen when she took on the role of turning the light on and off, as a sign of the time of day in the play. She was careful and considerate toward the other girls, and waited and listened to be sure they accepted her decision (in Steps 8 and 9, Phase 2). Vala often had the courage to suggest different roles but could also accept the more conventional roles if the other girls did not accept her choice. An example of how she could conform to others' ideas was when she suggested she was a thief, which Hera did not accept so Vala went back to being a kitten (in Step 13, Phase 2).

*Upset:* When Vala was leading in deciding the play theme, her ideas were sometimes rejected. When this happened, she usually managed to negotiate with the girls as shown immediately above, but at other times she reacted by being either angry or sad, as in the episode when she wanted to buy a zoo (in Step 21, Phase 2).

In the episodes above, where Hera, Katla, and Vala were playing, each of the girls had their way of participating in the play. Hera, as the mother, made most of the decisions. She and Katla seemed to be a unit, with Katla playing the baby. Vala in the role of a cat or another animal was often struggling to belong to the group, to have her ideas and interests included in the play. The girls' collaboration could be seen as reflecting the power relations in the group, the took part using methods revealing their

individual characteristics and skills, as well as often making explicit that they seemed to belong to the group.

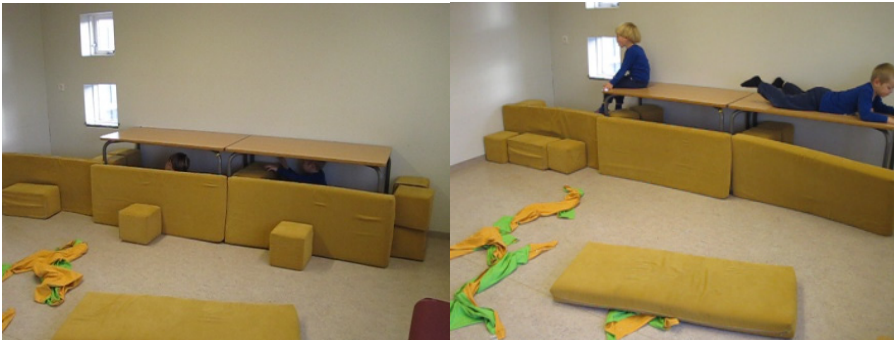
## **6.5 Boys' participate when playing travelling in space**

In this section an episode from one group of boys is described (see section 6.5.1), followed by learning stories from each of the boys taking part in the episode (see sections 6.5.2).

In the Lava Ledge preschool, the boys' stories were generated in their everyday lives in the core. The play episode and learning stories put forward and discussed in this section originated in the boys' choice time when they were playing in a group with open-ended material, playing travelling in space in the soft cube area. The preschool teachers on the sidelines intervened or interacted with the boys when asked or when they themselves thought it necessary, but all the time being observant, following the boys' play in small groups in the different areas.

### **6.5.1 Episode—boys travelling in space**

In this episode the boys, Hallur, Omar, Finnur, and Axel were playing. They interacted with each other, chose roles, and developed play themes. The boys expressed themselves using different means—words, tone of voice, or gestures. They also stated their views through actions, by doing, such as being a builder.



**Figure 6.C** The boys have built a spaceship

Below is a description of the episode when boys were playing house. The episode is put forward in two phases with 31 numbered steps, which later are referred to when discussing children's stories.

**Table 6.C Episode—boys play travelling in space**

**Phase 1:**

The four boys, *Hallur*, *Omar*, *Finnur*, and *Axel*, were playing travelling in space in an area with two high tables, four mattresses, soft cubes, and a stack of high chairs behind the door on the opposite wall.

No.	Activity in emerging play script
1	Finnur asked Hallur, "Should we make a ghost house?" Hallur accepted the suggestion, but Omar said in a decisive tone, "No, a spaceship." Hallur and Finnur cheerfully accepted the idea.
2	Omar went around in the room and pointed out several places for the spaceship, and continued to plan the play as Hallur and Finnur watched. Finnur occasionally added an idea.
3	Finnur said, emphasizing each word, "Yes, we only need one alien and two dogs." All three boys said, one after the other, "I want to be a dog."
4	Hallur looked at the others for a while and said: "Okay, there are only two dogs." He climbed onto the spaceship on the table top, raised his hand, and said he was the man. Finnur corrected him and said there was no man, only an alien, which Hallur accepted.
5	Now Axel came into the room and started to move around quickly. Hallur told the boys to come into the spaceship. They did not react. Omar still was under the spaceship (the table), and Finnur was inside it (on the tabletop) looking at Axel.
6	Finnur went out of the spaceship (down from the table), tried to say something to Axel, at the same time Hallur, standing on the table watching, repeated, "Dogs, dogs, come to the spaceship now."
7	Finnur said to Axel, "No Axel, Axel, Axel." Axel acted as if he didn't hear Finnur, and went on moving briskly through the room.
8	Finnur sharpened his voice and said in a loud and determined voice, "Axel," who now answered "What?" Finnur, who appeared a bit irritated, explained to Axel, "We are making a spaceship...that is how this play is."
9	Axel did not respond to this and started to run around again. Finnur followed him and said, "No, no, don't run; it is not allowed to destroy."

10	Axel went inside the spaceship (up on the tabletop) and Omar started to tell him what was allowed in this play. "Not to use the soft cubes; only as I do it, like this. And we also can do like this (he was swinging under the table), and you can try to swing all the way up to the table top."
11	Omar ended by saying, "And jump down from here." He jumped down from the table and Axel jumped after him, Omar fetched a mattress to make a softer ground as they jumped. Axel and Omar several times went up to the table and jumped down, until Axel asked, "What are we actually playing?"
12	Finnur started to answer, but did not finish his sentences. He walked to Hallur, who had been up on the table watching since Axel arrived, and told Hallur the two of them were aliens, and Axel and Omar were the dogs.
13	Right away Axel said, "But I'm going to be a cat." Finnur told him no, and Omar explained there only were dogs because they needed to be able to jump from the spaceship. While speaking, Omar added more mattresses to jump onto.
14	Finnur had been listening to Omar and didn't hear Hallur who was calling out to Finnur, "Come alien; come alien." Finnur said to Omar and Hallur, "We cannot have it like this," and Omar answered, "Sure, we can." Finnur responded, "No."
15	Hallur called out to Finnur once more, "Come alien." Finnur went to Hallur and said, "This is our home, ours lived here beside the spaceship," which Hallur accepted.
16	Omar and Axel had climbed into the spaceship (on the tabletop). Omar called out and pointed down to the mattresses on the floor, "Here is a spaceship; here is a spaceship."
17	Axel who was on the table said once more, "I am going to be a cat." Finnur, annoyed, answered, "No Axel, there can't be a cat, or else you will just be disqualified."
18	For a while the atmosphere was chaotic; then Omar started to talk. "Mine wanted to go to his..." Finnur interrupted him, and said in an angry tone, "No, we can only have one spaceship." Omar sat down on a mattress on the floor. "Mine' just wanted to go to his plane."



**Figure 6.D The boys play in the spaceship and smaller ones are introduced**

**Phase 2:**

In this situation the boys were having disputes about how many spaceships there were and if there were cats or dogs in the play.

No.	Activity in emerging play script
19	Hallur came to me and asked for my assistance. He said the problem was Axel who wanted to be a cat in a play where there were no cats. Also Omar and Finnur weren't able to agree on how many spaceships there should be.
20	After a period of chaos, Finnur started talking as if he were talking to himself. "If someone like Freyr came here, because he knows..." He walked around, and said to Axel, "You can't move anything else; the spaceship will be destroyed."
21	Hallur explained to Axel, "Axel, the alien men are only to go up here (on the tabletop)."
22	A little later Axel once more said, "I am going to be a cat."
23	Omar lying on the mattress answered, "No." Finnur said, still more as if he were talking to himself, "We can only have one, but then this play will be...uh...yes, Jacob then could...he could become a cat and Freyr a dog." (Jacob and Freyr are boys in their core/large group.)
24	Finnur and Hallur went into the spaceship and talked about "theirs" being superior to the other two boys (Axel and Omar) "because they had been in space for so long."
25	Axel once again said, "Mine is the cat." Omar said. "No, no cat." But Finnur said (now changing his mind, making a new decision), "Yes, we now have changed views, Jacob, he could..."

26	Hallur interrupted him, saying in a loud voice, “Up to space...” Omar said, “Yes,” and Axel responded, “Mine was the cat.” Then Omar said, “I want to go to my spaceship,” referring to the ship he had earlier in the play on a mattress on the floor.
27	Finnur started to talk about himself as being a strong superhero who could jump from the spaceship to the floor. (It seemed as he finally had accepted Omar’s idea of his own spaceship.) Omar became a superhero dog, Hallur an alien superhero, and they all started to chase after meteoroids.
28	In the meantime, Axel was under the chairs, making the cat’s house; several times he tried to get the other boys’ attention by telling them he was making a house under the chairs.
29	Axel went over to the other boys and told them he now was playing a cheetah. He added, “A bad cheetah.”
30	Axel several times repeated he was a cheetah, and Finnur said there was no such thing happening in this play, and that this was not that kind of a game. Further into the dispute Finnur added that if Axel was a cheetah, he was a dead cheetah.
31	Omar and Hallur did not take part in this squabble, but finally Hallur, standing in the spaceship, said, “I am just in my spaceship, flying away.”

In the coming section these episodes will be further explored, discussing these four boys’ ways of participating, as appearing in the episode above and in other observations from their preschool group. With the purpose to reveal the learning processes happening within the preschool context and to explore how the children were learning, I wrote the children’s stories. As writing children’s stories for each child, I had four issues in mind for the same purposes and using the same procedures as with the previous groups (see the four issues at the end of section 5.4.1).

## 6.5.2 Individual children’s stories – boys’

### 6.5.2.1 Finnur’s stories

Finnur’s stories showed his strengths when participating could be characterized by his actions (what he did and how he did it); three of the characteristics found in Finnur’s stories are described below. He seemed to want to *make decisions*, and tended to choose roles with power. He could be viewed as *persistent*; he knew how he wanted things to be and was

prepared to push it. Nevertheless, he could, maybe after some confrontations, *re-evaluate his stand* and the situation.

*Make decisions:* Finnur wanted to make decisions and chose roles with power, such as the man, the astronaut, or the driver. Right from the start in this episode he knew which roles he wanted there to be in the play and he stated it clearly (in Step 3, Phase 1). He was active in developing the play theme, simultaneously building and talking, using words to describe, for example, what was going to happen next. He could get so excited that he could not finish his sentences. He often led the group, as he did part of the time in the episode travelling in space. Finnur was prepared to fight for his views or to get to make decisions, as when he was fighting with Axel who wanted to be a cat in a play where Finnur said there were no cats (in Step 13, Phase 1). Finnur often wanted to be the one with new ideas. Sometimes he would jump to say or do something another boy was doing or just had mentioned. This was evident several times in the episode of travelling in space. For example, when he and Hallur were saving Omar, who was stuck under the chairs, Hallur said he was going to fetch a key to unlock him. Finnur then ran toward the spaceship and hurried to get a tool to release Omar (in Step 43, Phase 4).

*Persistent:* Finnur could be persistent; he had his own ideas of how the roles and the theme of the play should develop. He often had a favorite play partner; in this episode it was Hallur. The two of them were in control in this situation, and ideas from the other two boys did not have much of a chance. When Axel entered the room, Finnur appeared as if he did not want to include him in the play and did not want to accept his ideas about being a cat or later a cheetah (in Steps, 5, 6, 7 and 8, Phase 1). Similarly, Finnur did not always give Omar much chance to influence the play. He sometimes ignored his comments and ideas but also could suddenly start to listen to him, as he did in the beginning of the episode (in Step 2, Phase 1 and Step 27, Phase 2).

*Re-evaluate his stance:* Even though Finnur often seemed uncompromising, given time, he could change his mind and re-evaluate his stand. However, he seemed to need a challenge to be able to see that he could do something to change the situation (in Step 22, Phase 2). It sometimes appeared that he saw the play theme as a repetition of a previous play in which he had participated. This might have made him even more uncompromising, i.e., not ready to change the main theme or roles. He seemed to want this play to be similar to a play with other boys. When he started to change his mind about Axel's role, he remembered the boys

from the other play episode had included a cat. At first he thought if only those boys were here now, but ended by giving into Axel's demand on being a cat (in Steps 23 and 25, Phase 2). This could be seen as a sign of how he rationalized and persuaded himself to change his mind. At this point he might have seen himself as a learner. Finnur could not see room for a cat in the play, until he remembered there had been a cat in another play with other boys (in Steps 20 and 22, Phase 2). He suddenly started to refer to boys who weren't there (in Step 23, Phase 2), and was able to see possibilities of having a cat in the play and a bit later having more than one spaceship, which had been a suggestion from Omar that he had earlier rejected.

#### 6.5.2.2 *Hallur's stories*

Hallur's stories showed his strengths when participating could be characterized by his actions; four of the characteristics found in Hallur's stories are described below. He *adapted* to what was happening in the play; often appeared as an *imaginative narrator*, and used his verbal skills; he sometimes *waited and watched*, as if he were trying to map the situation and seemed to *avoid being an active part in a conflict*.

*Adapted to the play:* Hallur often adapted to what was happening in the play, and chose different roles like being a man, a captain (on a ship) a driver, an alien or an astronaut. However, he was, most of the time, open toward the roles he played; he could be a tiger, a young tiger, or a whale. In the play with the boys travelling in space he wanted to be a dog, but when the others also wanted to be dogs and they had agreed there needed to be an alien, he volunteered to be what he first referred to as the man, and immediately accepted as an alien when it was pointed out to him as being the role they had planned (in Step 4, Phase 1).

*Imaginative narrator:* When choosing roles, Hallur could be an imaginative narrator. He used his verbal skills to develop the process of the play. As the narrator he sometimes had the leading role as forming the play theme, by describing his ideas. Most of the time he was describing what happened in the pretend world they were creating (in Step 15, Phase 1 and Step 26, Phase 2). Hallur most of the time did not take part in the dispute between Axel and Finnur. He observed and went to his spaceship to fly away (in Step 31, Phase 2). He influenced the play theme by describing what was happening in the spaceship. (This might have demonstrated his enthusiasm to let the play go on rather than allowing the solving of disagreements to take over.)

*Waited and watched:* Even though Hallur most of the time seemed to want the play to continue, he sometimes stood still, did nothing, waited and watched what the other boys were doing, as if he were mapping the situation. In this way he might have been preparing to adapt to others' ideas, and as well to evaluate how to develop his own ideas. This could be seen several times when the boys were travelling in space. Immediately after Axel arrived in the group, an example of this appeared (in Steps 6 and 12, Phase 1). For some time, Hallur did not interfere in Finnur's and Axel's disagreement. He just listened and watched, until he decided to make an attempt to let the play go on. At that point he got the spaceship ready, called Finnur, the other alien, and told him to come to the ship (in Step 14, Phase 1).

*Avoided conflict:* In this way Hallur most of the time avoided conflict, drew back, waited and observed. In the observations in this study, only a few times was he seen to make remarks or obviously take sides when others had disagreements. This happened when Finnur and Axel had argued for a long time. Hallur added to Finnur's argument by telling Axel that only the aliens/spacemen should go this way up to the spaceship, not the other way, which was the way that Axel was coming up (In Step 21, Phase 2). In the same episode Hallur also expressed the view that he supported Finnur in his argument rather than Axel when he came to me seeking support (In Step 19, Phase 2).

### 6.5.2.3 Omar's stories

Omar's stories showed his strengths when participating could be characterized by his actions; four of the characteristics found in Omar's stories are described below. He was seen as an *active builder*, influencing the play through his actions. He often came up with *new ideas*, introducing new items or themes into the play. Sometimes he influenced and *developed the play through the role he had*. Finally, could be seen as *sensitive toward situations*, able to support those who needed help and follow his own interests.

*Active builder:* Omar was an active builder and most of the time influenced the development of the play. He was focused and often he appeared to feel secure enough to put his ideas forward. He also seemed to see himself as a clever builder, often showing others his building and explaining how he had designed and developed it. He used verbal expressions and said clearly what he wanted, often talking and building at the same time. This could, for example, be seen in the beginning of the play with the boys travelling in space. Omar was the one who first mentioned

building a spaceship. After the other boys accepted the idea, Omar developed the stage for the play and at the same time discussed how to develop the play theme (in Steps 1 and 2, Phase 1).

*New ideas:* Omar could come up with new ideas that were often accepted by the others and, therefore, became influential in the development of the play theme. In the play when travelling in space, he suggested they should have a spaceship (in Steps 1 and 2, Phase 1). Later in this play he mentioned meteoroids, which for a while Finnur and Hallur were chasing. At one point in the episode he made his own spaceship, was playing in it and developing the stage for it, even though the other boys ignored his doings and at one point openly rejected his idea (in Step 18, Phase 1; Steps 19, Phase 2).

*Developed the play through roles:* To have impact on the development of the play theme, Omar followed his ideas through. He often influenced and developed the play through his particular role. In the episode, boys travelling in space, he barked to get the others' attention, acted as the dog that needed help, and the aliens/spacemen had to come to his rescue. This led to the boys working together, finding solutions and developing the play theme (see narrative 6b in section 6.3.1).

*Sensitive toward situations:* Omar often could be seen to read situations, to understand what was happening and react to what he saw. He supported others who needed help and could follow through on his own ideas. In the beginning of the episode of boys travelling in space, when Axel came into the room, Omar had been active in building and developing roles and playing them. The boys were not prepared to rearrange the play, at least not Finnur. Omar was more approachable and welcoming toward Axel (in Step 11, Phase 1), but he also supported Finnur who was very restricted (even hostile) toward Axel's participation, as Axel was not even allowed to decide what role he wanted to play (in Step 23, Phase 2). Omar agreed with Finn's view but guided Axel through what was allowed and not allowed to do in the play, as if he were trying to help Axel adapt to the situation (in Step 10, Phase 1). In this way Omar was mediating between two parts, trying to be fair to the newcomer and to himself and the group who already had started something. Omar could also find the right moments to reiterate his ideas or views, as he did in the episode of the boys travelling in space. When Finnur, who was stopping Axel from becoming a cat, and Omar, who wanted to have his own spaceship, finally had accepted Axel's idea of being a cat, Omar used the opportunity to repeat that he wanted to have his own spaceship, which Finnur accepted (in Step 26, Phase 2).

#### 6.5.2.4 *Axel's stories*

Alex's stories showed his strengths when participating could be characterized by his actions; four of the characteristics found in Axel's stories are described below. He was seen to be physically active and joyous, and he clearly *expressed his ideas verbally*. He could be *persistent*, repeating what he wanted. However, he sometimes was not totally *included* in the group of these boys, and needed to tackle situations where he was on the verge of being excluded by them.

*Physically active and joyous:* Axel was physically active and most of the time he was joyous. He liked to joke and tell jokes. He tended to move quickly around in the room and expressed himself by words and sounds. In the observations in this study he was seldom active in the actual building, did not take the initiative to build, but did assist other boys. Once, when playing with two other boys building a chicken farm, he took part by moving around, handing cubes to them, sometimes singing a song they often sang in the large group, a song which also was a fun game where the boys moved their whole body as they sang. In some situations, Axel was at the center of the group and could be popular among the others; for example, in the outside area, where he really enjoyed himself and collaborated with the other boys. At other times he had to fight to be allowed to take part in developing the play, choose his own roles or influence the play theme, as appeared in the episode when he first wanted to be a cat and later a cheetah (in Step 13, Phase 1; Step 27, Phase 2).

*Verbal expression of ideas:* Axel verbally expressed his ideas very clearly. After he had become a cat in the episode travelling in space, he played alone for a while, but in intervals, he told the other boys what he was doing and how things were in his house. He got no reaction from them (in Step 27, Phase 2). After a while he walked over to the other boys' building (spaceship) and told them that he was now a cheetah, which started a new dispute, mostly between him and Finnur (in Steps 27 and 28, Phase 2).

*Persistent:* Axel's ideas sometimes were not accepted by the other boys and he reacted by being persistent. He would put his ideas forward, and if they were rejected, he repeated himself time and again, as when he wanted to be a cat in the play. The other boys, mostly Finnur, said there were no cats in this play, only dogs. During the play Axel often repeated that he wanted to be a cat (in Steps 13 and 17, Phase 1; Steps 21, Phase 2). Finally, Finnur agreed to let Axel be the cat (in Step 24, Phase 2). The same process started later in the play when Axel announced he wanted to be a cheetah (in Steps 27 and 29, Phase 2).

*Not always included in the group:* Axel sometimes had difficulty as he was not included in the boys' play. He was present and took part, but his participation could be restricted by the other boys, as when he finally got to be the cat in the play travelling in space. He played alone in one part of the room and the three other boys were together in their spaceship (in Step 27, Phase 2). In the episode boys travelling in spaces, he came late, which might have put him in a difficult situation from the beginning. The boys were neither prepared to let him decide his own role nor to influence the play in any other way. They wanted him to follow their rules and plans without adding or changing anything.

In the episodes above, where Hallur, Omar, Finnur, and Axel were playing, each of the boys had their way of participating in the play. Finnur wanted to make the decisions and often had friction with some of the other boys, mostly with Axel or Omar. In this play Finnur and Hallur were a team. Hallur wanted the play to proceed and avoided intervening in the conflicts. Omar suggested ideas, some of which were accepted and others rejected. He could act as a go-between and tried to facilitate continuance of the play. Axel clearly said what he wanted and did not give up, continuing to try to get his ideas accepted into the play; he was struggling to belong in the group. The boys' collaboration was strongly influenced by the conflict between Finnur, who wanted to make decisions, and the other boys. The play reflected the power relations in the group, how the boys used methods revealing their individual characteristics, and how at least three of them, at some moments, seemed to belong to the group.

## **6.6 Children's participation at Lava Ledge**

In this section, the documentations of children's learning processes when participating in the group are discussed, in relation to *learning dispositions*. First I address the learning processes in the group of girls' when participating (see section 6.6.1), then the boys' (see section 6.6.2). In each section, the learning dispositions seen through three lenses are discussed: children's *communication and involvement* in the group, children's *well-being and belonging*, and finally how the children *contribute and take responsibility* within the preschool context. After this, there is a discussion on the factors influencing children's participation in the preschool context at Lava Ledge (see section 6.6.3).

### 6.6.1 The girls' participation in a group

From the episode describing the girls' playing house, the individual girls' strengths when participating could be characterized in relation to what happened in the episode and in other observations from the study. Through the episode when the girls were playing house, the three girls often found ways to interact and bring together their views and ideas. However, the analysis process also revealed individual girls' negative learning dispositions and at least one girl, Vala, might not at all times have sensed belonging to the group, when the girls were playing in this particular episode.

#### 6.6.1.1 Communication and involvement

The girls' *communicated* and were *involved* by using multiple means of expression and often seemed to understand situations, to tackle difficulties, and to solve problems. In the first part when the girls were playing house, they *communicated* by expressing themselves using individual methods. Vala and Hera used similar methods and were active in the actual building; the two of them built the house, which meant they were in a good position to influence the development of the play theme. Katla's *communication* and *involvement* was characterized by her moving around the room discussing her ideas about the roles and the play theme. Usually, the other two girls adopted her ideas, but also followed their own ideas in their action. Hera, who had from the beginning been active in the building, was decisive, took the initiative, and chose powerful roles for herself. Katla expressed herself verbally, and included her ideas in the play through using language. Often she suggested an idea and asked for approval at the same time, but did not always need others' approval. Vala, as did Hera, expressed herself through being active in building; she was imaginative and thorough. She also influenced the play theme. She adapted to others' ideas when needed, but could become upset when her ideas were rejected. Katla's and Hera's *communication* and *involvement* was characterized by smooth interactions and they supported each other's ideas. Katla usually suggested ideas and asked for acceptance at the same time, often directing her questions to Hera. Vala took part in carrying the play theme forward by expressing ideas, often new and different ones, and in that way she influenced the play, even though not all her ideas were accepted. In this situation her communication methods were characterized by her not give up, putting her own ideas forward. She was also the one who adapted to the others' activities, reactions, and ideas. By using their different methods, the girls developed a smooth system of *communication*. The girls' *involvement* appeared differently. Hera held the reins and made decisions.

Katla followed her ideas and influenced the play by talking mainly through Hera. Vala was the one who was diplomatic, made many moves to be able to find ways of including her ideas, and in that way influenced the play. The girls' ways of *communicating* and being *involved* in the group, were reflected through how they expressed themselves with words, tone of voice, and gestures, and stated their views through actions, by doing, such as building. Through these processes the girls together developed methods to find solutions to problems.

#### 6.6.1.2 *Well-being and belonging*

The girls seemed to feel *well-being* and *belonging* in the group, seen through the roles they chose, how they expressed their ideas, and when they were active in play and other activities. Most of the time they appeared to feel safe, expressing their views and being active in finding solutions. The girls' *well-being* and *belonging* appeared in the group through their interactions: they often were seen to negotiate, to reach an agreement, and to share ideas and artifacts, as they together constructed their own opportunities to play and be active. The girls appeared to feel *well-being* and *belonging* seen in the way they influenced the play through the roles they chose. Hera was the mother, most of the time being responsible for herself and the other girls; Katla, the child, often expressing a need for care; and Vala, often choosing other and sometimes less traditional roles, such as being an animal, a cat, or a dog. Vala's ideas were plentiful, and they often were accepted and included in the play, but her ideas were also frequently rejected. When that happened, Vala usually accepted the rejection and compromised so that the play could continue. In these situations, Vala most of the time was persistent and seemed to be trying to be a part of the group, to *belong* to the group in the current situation. The girls' *well-being* and *belonging* could also be reflected in how they seemed confident and believed in their ability to find ways to make the play work, such as when Hera and Vala together built an attic on top of the house so there would be space for Vala inside the house. Although there could be some hesitation as they considered how to go on, they found a way to proceed. In this sense the girls most of the time seemed to feel *well-being* and *belonging*, each in their own way, as they appeared: to relate to the situation, be interested, and to view themselves as a part of the group. Even though Vala often needed to adapt to the other girls' views, she most of the time seemed to see herself as belonging to the group as she continued to put forward new ideas or to develop ideas in a way the other girls might accept them (for example when she wanted to

decide when there was night and day in the play). On the surface the play went smoothly, but Vala might not have felt *well-being* or *belonging* all of the time; she many times had to struggle to get her ideas included in the development of the play theme and so she might not have felt she was a full participant in the group all the time. This could be reflected in how she was physically situated, either under the table on the other side of the room or in the attic rather than inside the house they had built where the other two girls remained most of the time.

### 6.6.1.3 Contributions and taking responsibility

The girls *contributed* to and sometimes were seen to take *responsibility* for what happened in the group; they sometimes appeared as if they were sensing justice and taking responsibility for self and others. Hera most of the time maintained a central role, making decisions on how the girls should develop the play. In this way she *contributed* to how the play process' developed. Hera also demonstrated that she took *responsibility* for others involvement; for example, when Hera did not accept an idea from another girl, it appeared as if she saw, sometimes a bit later, that she had not been quite fair to the other girl. Hera then explained to the other girl why she had made the decision and even why she now had changed her mind. Katla's *contribution* was revealed through her participation as she most of the time expressed her ideas and took part in developing others' ideas (mostly Hera's). She tried to be fair to the other girls as she put her ideas forward, often simultaneously asking for their acceptance. She could be seen to take *responsibility* on behalf of others' such as when she talked on behalf of others and supported their ideas, as she did for Hera in the playing house episode. Vala *contributed* to and took *responsibility* for what happened in the group, she shared her often imaginative ideas, and also seemed prepared to adapt to the others' ideas and actions, even though some of her own ideas had not been accepted. Her taking *responsibility* was reflected in how she often appeared to understand the other girls' expressions, and to read into embodied signs, such as tone of voice or a movement. She tried to connect to their play inside the house while she was situated outside of it. In this situation, Hera took *responsibility* for including Vala in the group. For example, when there was no room for Vala inside the house, she found a space in the attic of the house where Vala could stay. Hera's *contribution* and her sense of taking *responsibility* appeared as if they were entwined when the girls were playing, when Hera took the lead and made many decisions by being active in building and expressing her ideas verbally. She was also prepared to take the risk of

rejecting or accepting the other girls' ideas. Vala *contributed* to the group and at the same time took *responsibility* for her own and the others interactions, by negotiating with the other two girls, and asking for their acceptance both when she wanted to do something and also when she added new ideas into the play. She also adapted to the other girls' ideas by looking carefully at their reactions and asking for their permission. How the girls took *responsibility* was reflected in each girl having her own way of tackling difficulty, Hera by taking the lead and mediating between the others, Katla by being jolly and avoiding conflicts, and Vala by putting forward many new ideas, which she was prepared to have accepted or rejected, and also by carefully considering the others' views before acting.

## **6.6.2 The boys' participation in a group**

From the episode describing the boys' travelling in space, their individual strengths when participating could be characterized in relation to what happened in the episode when travelling in space and in other observations from the study. Nevertheless, the analysis process, using the learning dispositional concepts, also revealed individual boys' negative learning dispositions and through the episode when the boys were traveling in space, the group of boys never really managed to find solutions where they could bring together views and ideas from each of them, which resulted in at least one of the boy's appearing as if he did not belong to the group.

### *6.6.2.1 Communication and involvement*

The boys *communicated* and were *involved* using multiple means of expression and often appeared to understand situations, to tackle difficulty and solve problems. In the episode, travelling in space, the four boys *communicated* by using different ways of expressing their ideas and feelings, and understood situations differently. Finnur used verbal expression. If he was annoyed, he often had an angry or irritated tone in his voice. When he accepted others' ideas, he often hurriedly carried out the suggestion. Hallur *communicated* by using words and being an imaginative narrator, molding the play theme as it went along. At time he observed, appearing to carefully evaluating the situation before making suggestions. He adapted to others' ideas and rarely interfered in disputes. Omar *communicated* with others by putting ideas forward, using words and actions to express his ideas. He also used other means, such as giving signs (as when he acted as the dog who wanted something, he barked). He often functioned as a mediator, who tried to explain more than one view of the situation, as he did when he supported Axel's inclusion into the group.

Omar explained to Axel the rules and the decisions they had already made. Axel expressed his ideas clearly mostly with words, and if needed he repeated his ideas often, persistently going on and on.

In the episode travelling in space, Axel came into a difficult situation. Through his *involvement* in the group he seemed to meet with many hindrances as the other boys gave him a variety of signs that he would have to adapt to their play and he would not be allowed to influence what was going on. The *communication* in this episode was strongly influenced by Finnur. When Axel was in the room, Finnur made several attempts to exclude him and got support from the other boys, even though Omar tried to support Axel's *involvement* by explaining to Axel what he needed to do to be included. Hallur more or less ignored the friction between the others. When Axel left the room, there was a period where Finnur, Omar, and Hallur interacted in such a way that they managed to include ideas from all three boys. Most of the time Finnur took the lead and the others followed (see narrative 6b in section 6.3.1). Omar sometimes had difficulties in getting his ideas accepted, but when this happened he continued trying, and sometimes needed to make several attempts to put his ideas forward. In the episode he was excluded and did not accept that.

#### 6.6.2.2 *Well-being and belonging*

The boys often appeared to feel *well-being* and *belonging* in the group, seen through the roles they chose, how they expressed their ideas, and how they were active in play and other activities. They sometimes appeared to feel safe, expressing their views and being active in finding solutions. When playing travelling in space, all four boys, Axel, Finnur, Hallur, and Omar, at some moments they appeared as feeling *well-being* and to *belong* to the group; at least they all of the time demonstrated they were interested in being active and taking part in the play. They all appeared as if they were *belonging* to the group on occasion, as when they expressed ideas on roles and themes for the play and seemed to see themselves as a part of this group with the right to be included. Omar suggested the idea of having a spaceship, which the others accepted, and Omar was active in planning the stage for the play. Finnur said there were roles of dogs and aliens, which the others accepted, and when they all wanted to be dogs, Hallur volunteered to be the alien. When all had been settled, Hallur and Finnur were the aliens, which at times in the play were spacemen or super heroes, and Omar was the dog. At this point Axel entered the room and expressed his wish to be a cat, which the others (especially Finnur) rejected, but Axel was persistent in taking part in the play and getting his choice of

role accepted by the other boys; he continued to insist on having his idea included in the play. Even though his idea of being a cat was eventually accepted, he might not have felt as he *belonged* to the group as, after accepting Axel's idea of being a cat, the other boys were all in the space ship while Axel was alone, playing in an opposite corner in the room. Axel did not give up though, and claimed another role, a more powerful one, the cheetah, which might suggest he wanted to *belong* to the group and he might even have seen himself as having the right to be a part of the group and his ideas included.

### 6.6.2.3 *Contribution and taking responsibility*

The boys *contributed* to and sometimes were seen to take *responsibility* for what happened in the group; they sometimes seemed to sense justice and take responsibility for self and others. When the boys were playing and interacting in the episode of playing dogs and their owner in this play situation, Omar acted as the mediator. He took *responsibility* for the interactions, and seemed to be able to see others' points of view, as evidenced when Axel came into the room and he tried to explain to him what this play was about and what he was allowed to do in it. In this situation Omar seemed to be trying to take *responsibility* for the situation by informing Axel about what was going on, but at the same time supported the ideas the three boys had previously agreed upon. In this way Omar was mediating between two different views (where Alex was on one side and Finnur on the other), trying to be fair to the newcomer, but also to himself and the group that had already started their play. In the dispute with Axel, Finnur sometimes referred to what they (the three of them who had first planned the play) had planned and wanted. In that sense he seemed to see himself as their spokesman, explaining one view, but there was no sign of his understanding Axel's view. He seemed to view it as a problem to include him in the play. Hallur did not support Axel and most of the time he avoided taking part in others' arguments. When he supported others' views he did so mainly by observing, giving others space, and adapting to others or the current situation.

In the episode travelling in space, Axel most of the time was excluded but by using his method of not giving in (repeating what he wanted), he managed to follow his own ideas, not caving to the adversity he met in this particular situation. In that way he took *responsibility* and was fair to himself, but he did not often take another point of view, which might be explained by the situation he was in, as his main challenge became the

need to defend himself. Thus, he did not get a proper chance to fully participate.

Among the reasons why Axel never became a full participant in this play was that Finnur strongly objected to including his ideas, and the conflict between Finnur and Axel continued. In the observations in this research, Finnur could be uncompromising, and he also tended to want things to be the same, which in the teacher's, Suzy's, view was not unusual for him. She had been supporting him in becoming more tolerant toward others and more open-minded regarding changes. Most of the time in this play episode Finnur seemed not to want to include Axel in the play. Suzy twice came into the room and tried to help the boys to negotiate, which ended by her inviting Axel to play in another area. Suzy saw Axel as a clever boy, who sometimes was not fully accepted by the others. Axel himself did not accept this exclusion, did not stop trying, repeated himself, and did not give up. Suzy wanted to help him find other ways of working this out (in Steps 5, 6, 7 and 8, Phase 1). In this particular play episode, neither Suzy nor the boys found a solution to include Axel in the play.

### **6.6.3 The factors influencing children's participation at Lava Ledge**

In this section children's opportunities to learn in the preschool context in Lava Ledge are discussed in relation to: curriculum and environment; and pedagogy and peer culture. As was so with the description of Seaside, curriculum is discussed as the goals and content, and environment as inside and outside artifacts and routines. The pedagogy involves teachers' beliefs and methods, and peer culture refers to the group of children who spend time together daily in the preschool, and share activities, values, and concerns in interactions with each other.

#### *6.6.3.1 Curricula and environment*

In Lava Ledge the use of the outdoor environment was referred to as "nature," one of the main 'rules' (principles) of the Hjalli pedagogy. The teachers provided opportunities for children to move freely in nature, though within a framework of rules. When the children were playing in the outside area, each core had its own area framed by paths, bushes, and other landmarks. Sometimes the teachers added instructions. The children were, for example, allowed to play in either the upper or the lower area. The preschool teachers might also divide the group and each group would have one area for a certain time and then they would change. The visits to the surroundings outside the preschool garden were organized in a similar

manner. This could be seen when John and Suzy were in the park with their group of girls and boys. When they arrived at the park or playground the children were divided into groups that played in different places and switched areas, all having equal time in each area.

In Lava Ledge the indoor environment was standardized and simple. A large part of the play material was open-ended with the aim of encouraging children to be creative and discovering ways to play with their own ideas using the material creatively. This could, for example, be detected when Katla and Hera were playing in the water play area (see narrative 6a in section 6.3.1). They used the simple play material creatively, took on many roles, and used the material to pretend and develop a play theme.

Most of the time the main rules were observed by teachers and children, but the teachers sometimes made an exception, deciding to pass on a rule, such as when the group went for a walk or a trip in the neighborhood that needed more time, the day's schedule might be changed for the time being. Furthermore, children and adults could put a suggestion forward about changing a rule; then preferably on behalf of everyone, the group would negotiate with those involved, as when the boys wanted to play in the girls' part of the garden. This could also be on a larger scale, something to be negotiated with the group of teachers, as when Suzy discussed with the other teachers if her older boys could have access to another space in the garden.

### *6.6.3.2 Pedagogy and peer culture*

The routines in Lava Ledge were framed by the usual daily activities. The daily schedule had two different arrangements, choice time and group time, each having a one-and-one-half-hour time slot in the morning and a one-hour slot in the afternoon.

*Choice time for children's self-regulation:* In Lava Ledge, choice time was seen as the children's time to play in the group and to practice making their own decisions, keep to their decisions, and give children space to collaborate with their peers and find solutions together.

When the children took part in the meeting for choice time, it was clear what was offered, and it could not be negotiated or changed. The aim was for children to learn to follow rules and accept what was possible. Even though these were the aims, the children found ways to negotiate the rules. In the observations, friends were seen to choose in a way that they could play together, as Hera and Katla did when they signaled each other to choose the same area (see narrative 6a in section 6.3.1).

In choice time, the children played and interacted with their peers with minimum intervention from the teachers. The children had opportunities to develop their play, interact, and find solutions with regard to all sorts of practical problems like how a house should be built, or which roles should be included in the play. This could, for example, be seen in the episode from the girls playing house. The girls developed a play theme together, with all three girls having their views included. When they disagreed, they resolved the problems themselves without asking for help from the teacher. In the episode when the boys were travelling in space, they sometimes had difficulty finding solutions to their disagreements. They sought help from the teacher who supported them by asking questions and putting suggestions forward. She gave the boys the opportunity to try to solve the problem.

The methods the teachers used in choice time, having the aim to be observant and notice what was happening in the groups in each area and to intervene when the children asked for assistance or when they themselves thought it was necessary, could be seen in the research notes (see narratives 6e and 6f in section 6.3.3). Teacher interventions were infrequent and most of the time children were given space and time to develop the play, find solutions to disagreements and the different practical problems arising during the play, and include everyone (see narrative 6b in section 6.3.1). When the teachers needed to intervene, they sometimes used special methods of the curriculum, as John did when he tried to support four girls who were having an argument about the use of the material in the soft cube area. John intervened in steps: he started by merely being present; the next time he added that he was just looking; the third time he asked if he could help them; and he suggested what they could do the fourth time. On this occasion John removed one girl from the group. During the three-month period I was in the preschool, similar methods were not often seen but a few times I saw such methods used by the teachers (see narrative 6e in section 6.3.3).

*In group time the teachers follow the aims of the curriculum:* In Lava Ledge the teachers planned the group time mostly related to the aims of the curriculum: the main rules, the gendered curriculum, and the yearly plan, which for the oldest children included a program preparing them for primary school. During the autumn term in which this study took place, the teachers focused on the letters of the alphabet in group time.

The teachers frequently gave the children a chance to say a few words, and each child in the group would express themselves about issues like:

what they did in the weekend or what was of interest for them now, which mostly happened in group time but also often in the large group. This could also be seen when the teachers were organizing learning centers together with the children, deciding the activities they would have. In these circumstances the teachers and the children often discussed what was fair; referred to what the majority wanted; and teachers, girls, or boys discussed which choices would be just.

The practice of the gendered curriculum could be seen to influence the children's play. In group time the activities were sometimes related to the gendered curriculum, such as when Suzy was practicing caring with her boys. Also when John and the girls were in learning centers, in one station the girls were practicing being daring. In the girls' core the influence from practicing daring with the teacher often appeared in the girls' play in choice time, especially when they were playing in the soft-cube area. There they would practice jumping from heights and challenge themselves and the other girls to jump from greater heights.

*Teachers' methods and the influence of individual children in the peer group:* The teachers' methods had different aims depending on the activity; in choice time children were playing with little involvement from teachers, and in group time, the teachers were in control. In choice time the teachers were observant, and intervened when they saw a need for it or when the children asked for assistance. Many of the observations in this study reveal that the children had opportunities to develop their play in collaboration with other children; they might thus have had opportunities to practice self-regulation, one of the aims of the school curricula. The children were at least given time to find solutions to problems and disagreements, and rarely did they seek assistance from the teachers.

Group time was the teachers' time in which they put the aims of the curriculum into practice. Most of the time the teachers had planned the group time related to the aims of the gendered curriculum or related to the main rules, but sometimes they discussed with the children what they wanted to do and gave the children a chance to influence the agenda.

*The peer cultures and power relations in the group:* In both the girls' and the boys' groups, the power relations were obvious. Some children had to struggle to get their views included, as seen with Vala in the girls' group and Axel in the boys' group. Others seemed to make decisions easily as Hera did when playing house with the other two girls, Vala and Katla. There were also children who were demanding in their attempts to influence the play, as with Finnur who wanted to make most of the decisions in the play.

*Children's reflections:* Children's reflection meetings, which were a part of the research process, seemed to be of interest to the children. They liked to look at the video and in the discussion afterwards they reviewed what they had seen themselves do. However, I was not able to read into their expressions in a way that added more information to the study, which also was the case in Seaside.

## **6.7 Summary**

This chapter gives an insight into the social context in Lava Ledge, which uses an Icelandic preschool curriculum including the outdoor and indoor environment, routines, social conventions, and the two main activities of the day schedule, choice time and group time. It describes the daily lives of children in the preschool, children's learning processes, peer cultures, and teachers' methods. Episodes from children's play in choice time are described. One group of girls played with hollow blocks and one group of boys played with mattresses and soft cubes. After the descriptions from the episodes, children's stories from each of the children taking part are discussed and the documentation from children's approaches to play and taking part in other activities is related to learning dispositions. Finally, children's opportunities to learn in the preschool context of Lava Ledge are discussed.

The main findings reveal how the curriculum in Lava Ledge was put into practice, and highlights factors influencing children's learning processes. In Lava Ledge the children were provided with choice time, where they followed clear rules during the choice process, but once the children had arrived to the chosen area, they could play freely with minimum intervention from teachers. In the group time, the teachers followed up on the aims of the school curricula; in these situations, and others, the teachers often gave each child a chance to say a few words to explain their views or interests, and, for example, in this way take part in decision-making. Furthermore, the environment planned to always be the same was seen to support children in following rules, independently without the adults having to say so.

Most of the time, the children, communicated within the frames of the preschool context, they were involved, took responsibility and were given opportunities to express their views and wishes at certain times and through this to influence what happened in the different situations. All the children used individual ways of expressing themselves, to find answers to questions and work out problems in their daily lives. During their learning

processes the children seemed open for new ideas, often related to each other's ideas and followed up on own ideas. They seemed to be able to: change roles, go in and out of roles, and hold more than one role at the same time. Nevertheless, the children's participation in the group sometimes revealed an unequal power balance within the group, in diverse ways in the different situations. In the girls' group, Hera and Katla seemed close and during the play they often worked as a pair, while Vala sometimes was more alone, and seemed to struggle to belong to the group. In the boys' group Finnur was a large part of the time controlling the communication, with a short period where there seemed to be a more equal power balance in the interactions between him, Oddur, and Hallur. All the time Axel was in the room he struggled to get his ideas accepted, but never really became a part of the group. He was excluded by the other boys, mainly Finnur.

Within the two preschool contexts, children's learning process were differently supported, and reflected the differences in the curriculum, pedagogy, main goals, learning environment and children's ways of learning. Descriptive for these differences was how the learning processes revealed different ways of enhancement of children's participation. In Lava Ledge the children were supported to express their views and interests, and to understand that their views might be listened to if these ideas were in accordance with the views of the majority of the group. In contrast, in Seaside children were supported to express their views and ideas, and to influence their participation in the preschool group through dialogue, negotiations and co-construction of meaning. In this way the preschool context influenced the children's learning processes differently. At the same time the data describes children's participation as partly different, but also having similar characteristics. In terms of guided participation (Rogoff, 2003), the teachers' support in the two preschools took different forms that at times revealed differences in how the children's learning processes appeared (see section 7.5.1.1).

The different characteristics in the two preschools also might be related to how children meet the different aims and might appear in their participation. A part from the children's individual characteristics as taking part in play and other activities, it is interesting to discuss issues from the data showing what might be seen as opposite to these aims. Such as, in Lava Ledge, how traditional the roles children choose seem in the observations, and in Seaside how the aims related to children working collaboratively appeared. Even though the teachers used democratic methods which are thought to be related to justice, a child was seen to be

excluded. These issues are closely related to children's rights to be a part of a group and to be supported to be active agents in their lives (Mayall, 2003; United Nations, 1989). This is further discussed in the next chapter (see sections 7.5.1.2 and 7.5.1.3).

The next chapter discusses the findings from the two preschools taking part in this study, starting by discussing the results and relating to literature from both Seaside and Lava Ledge.



## 7 Discussion

### 7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the findings from the two preschools described in chapters 5 and 6 are discussed in terms of the theories and literature reviewed in chapters 2 and 3, as well as used to develop answers to the study's two main research questions:

1. What are the factors that influence children's learning processes when they participate in preschool groups?
2. How are the children learning?

### 7.2 Goals of the two preschools

The two preschools participating in this study are situated within the same national context and build their practice on the national curriculum in Iceland. Despite the distinctly different primary goals described in their school curricula, both schools also have common aims probably shared with most preschools in Iceland and other Western countries. In this section, the *curricular contexts* of both schools are discussed in terms of *policy* (such as the national curriculum and the school curriculum), including aims and content; *pedagogy*, including teachers' views, methods, and the planning of the environment, and children's experience in the *peer culture* of the specific preschool context. Here, pedagogy refers to how the preschool teachers have implemented the aims, beliefs, and learning opportunities of the two approaches. Accordingly, the first part of this chapter discusses the two preschools in relation to the aims, teachers' methods, and the preschool environment. After this, the two preschools' shared goals and plans are discussed, visualizing how the children's learning processes are differently supported. Next there is a discussion on the different methods used in the two preschools to support children's learning processes. This is followed by a discussion on the pedagogy employed in the two preschools, in order to clarify the power relations at the two preschools in terms of the distribution of power and the principle of control and the degrees of participation that children are allowed in decision making.

Table 7.A sets out the shared and specific aims of the two pedagogies, described as either invisible/implicit or visible/explicit, as well as how they manifest in the methods used. Invisible/implicit pedagogy builds upon

Bernstein's weak classification and framing of curricula in which children have more apparent control over communication and its social base. The visible/explicit pedagogy is seen to derive from strong classification and framing, in which preschool teachers have more apparent control over communication and the social base (Bernstein, 1977).

In the table (7.A), I start from the bottom of the page with the shared aims of the two preschools, also found in the *National Curriculum Guide*, the foundation all preschools in Iceland are meant to follow. According to these aims children are supported to be active and to take part in interacting with other children and teachers, valuing friendship, finding solutions and developing a positive self-image. From this foundation, in the middle section, the two preschools set out different and specific aims in their *school curricula*. In Seaside children are encouraged to develop ideas and hypotheses; they are seen as actors participating in a democratic society and are supported in co-constructing meaning and creative thought as individuals and in groups (further described in chapter 3). In Lava Ledge the aim is to teach children to behave according to rules, be positive, learn to make decisions in a group, acting independently and finally, the main focus is to teach children to be active in developing what is seen as strong in the opposite gender.

Finally, the top section in table 7.A relates the methods the teachers in the two school curricula were seen to use, as they followed up on the specific aims of the respective school curricula, to Bernstein's conceptions of control over communication and the social base. From the data in the current study the teachers' methods have been interpreted as being invisible, implicit pedagogy in Seaside and visible, explicit pedagogy in Lava Ledge. In Seaside the environment the teachers planned for children was seen to be evocative and relational; it contained many and very diverse artifacts often seen to catch children's attention and evoke new ideas and thinking, and at the same time to support reciprocal interaction among children and between children and teachers.' The data revealed beautiful artifacts, interesting artwork and play materials that were visible and attracted children's attentions. Furthermore, the data showed children moving freely in the rooms and choosing from materials of interest for them (further described in chapter 3 and section 7.3.2.1). In Lava Ledge the data revealed areas containing the same basic, open-ended materials through the period of the data gathering, and clear rules that were expressed and often made visible by signs in the environment. The data showed that the daily schedule was nearly always followed, providing alternating times where children played freely with minimum intervention

from teachers or time where teachers were planning the activities and leading the group. Children were seen to follow the signs in the environment, indicating for the children what they should do; for example, cross marks on the floor in places they were meant to wait for the next activity to start and lines on the floor to mark paths to walk and to rope in each learning area (further described in chapter 3 and in section 7.3.2.2).

**Table 7.A The aims and pedagogies of the two curricula**

<p><b><i>Invisible, implicit pedagogy</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evocative and relational environment</li> <li>• Reciprocal interaction between children and teachers, in group time and when planning the choice time; children playing without teachers' support once they had arrived in the chosen area</li> </ul>	<p><b><i>Visible, explicit pedagogy</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The same basic open-ended material and clear rules</li> <li>• Alternating group time, where the teacher was in control and choice time where children played without teachers' support</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing ideas and hypotheses</li> <li>• Co-constructing meaning and exhibiting creativity through projects</li> <li>• Participating in a democratic society, as active agents</li> <li>• Expressing their views and making meaning, both individually and in groups</li> <li>• Sustaining spontaneity and curiosity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning to follow rules</li> <li>• Being active in what is seen as strong in the opposite gender</li> <li>• Making democratic decisions (by voting)</li> <li>• Developing positive thinking</li> <li>• Being independent, creative, and imaginative</li> </ul>
<p><b>Specific aims</b> were to support children in the above:</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Seaside - School curriculum</b></p>	<p><b>Specific aims</b> were to support children in the above:</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Lava Ledge - School curriculum</b></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Playing and being active in what is of interest for them</li> <li>○ Co-operating with peer groups and teachers</li> <li>○ Developing friendships</li> <li>○ Finding solutions for themselves and others</li> <li>○ Developing positive self-images</li> </ul>	
<p>The <b>shared aims</b> of the two curricular contexts were to support children in meeting the aims of the:</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>National curriculum</i></p>	

### **7.3 Curriculum – methods and environment**

The curriculum and environment of each preschool reflects the preschool's goals for the children, and thereby acts as a 'message system' (Bernstein, 2000) about what is valued at the school. To help me focus on what actually happens in the two preschools, I start, in this section, by discussing the goals of the two preschools, their school curricula, and their environments in terms of these themes:

The teachers' methods, including the environment, supporting children's learning processes while participating in preschool contexts (Rogoff, 2003); and

The commitment within the two contexts to multiplicity or totality (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005).

In the next sections the shared, goals, plans, and methods of the two preschools are discussed followed by a section on the different methods used in the preschools to support children's learning processes.

#### **7.3.1 Shared goals and plans, children's participation differently supported**

This section discusses how children's participation is supported in relation to the shared goals (from the national curriculum) in the two preschool contexts. To examine how the goals shared by the two preschools reflect different levels of participation, in this section the process of children's participation in these preschools is described, as is their engagement in the cultural practices and activities of their communities focused on co-constructing meaning with peers and teachers (Rogoff, 2003).

The aims common to both preschools in this research are similar to those in most Western countries (see table 7.A): At both schools the children were supported in playing and being active in pursuing their interests, cooperating in their peer groups and with teachers, developing friendships, finding solutions for themselves and others, and developing positive self-images. Although both preschools shared these goals, the processes of fostering children's participation differed. For example, how children participated in the cultural practices and activities of their communities toward co-constructing meaning with peers and teachers clearly were distinctly different in the differently framed educational settings. Research notes have underscored differences in children's play

and activities between the preschools, although at both schools the children's play was valued and their influence in the educational context supported. How these differences appeared in the data is described below in section 7.3.2.

The daily schedules, or timeframes, of the two preschools were superficially similar. At both, the daily schedule included sessions lasting an hour to 90 minutes that alternated between group time and choice time. To this extent, both daily schedules were strongly classified (e.g., by the timetabled boundaries between sessions) and framed (e.g., by the activities permitted during each session). In both preschools, choice time was similar. Once children arrived in their chosen area, they played, experimented, and negotiated in their groups of peers with minimal intervention from teachers. At both preschools, the children played with materials they had chosen in collaboration with other children, developed their own play themes, and found solutions to problems. In these situations, children had opportunities to develop friendships and acquire positive self-images, although the opposite was also possible, since some children at times seemed to be insecure and even might have felt excluded. The differences observed between periods of choice time in the preschools both stemmed from the environment and its available materials, as discussed above, and were shaped by the different methods that the teachers used. At Seaside, the range of materials from which children could choose was extensive, and children had the opportunity to influence both which material was allowed in areas and the process of the informal selection procedure. At Lava Ledge, by contrast, the emphasis was on children learning to follow rules and on a daily basis they were not supposed to change the organization or framework.

During group time, although at both schools each teacher had a small group of children, the time was spent quite differently, given the significant influence of the different curricular and school goals. The activities carried out at the different schools during group time could nevertheless be similar—for example, taking walks, playing in the outside area, and engaging in activities in the preschool, either in their allocated spaces or in common areas. However, during these activities, the preschool teachers supported children's participation differently. At Seaside, groups collaborated on projects or other activities, and the teachers supported children's participation in cooperating, developing ideas, and finding solutions. Via reciprocal interaction, the teachers also encouraged children to discuss their ideas, ask questions, and put their personal interests first while at the same time considering others' wishes and feelings. During

group time at Lava Ledge, by contrast, the teachers planned what would be done and practiced the specific aims of Hjalli pedagogy: they supported children’s collaboration, informed them that all group members were friends, and worked toward achieving the aims of the gender-focused curriculum and toward encouraging children to be independent and believe in their competences. They also sometimes provided opportunities for children to influence agenda setting and asked them to find solutions.

### **7.3.2 The different methods used to support children’s learning processes**

In the previous section I explored the shared goals and methods in the two preschools. This section discusses the pedagogy used in the two preschools in terms of how they support children’s learning processes.

#### *7.3.2.1 Seaside—Supporting children’s exploration and co-construction of meaning*

The main aims at Seaside were to support children in developing ideas and hypotheses in co-constructing meaning, and in creative thinking and activities by participating in projects (see table 7.A). At Seaside, special methods were developed to encourage children’s co-construction of meaning, for example. The teachers planned projects in a process that clearly valued and accommodated children’s interests, including their ideas through the process. Furthermore, teachers in their daily interactions with children encouraged them to formulate plans together and find solutions to problems. This trend was evident, for instance, when the teachers and children put on a play; they collaborated in drafting the script, in coordinating their acting, and in directing the production. In effect, by listening to children’s different ideas and supporting their expansion of those ideas, the teachers drew upon children’s ideas in developing the curriculum.

#### *7.3.2.2 Lava Ledge—Supporting children to follow rules and the gendered curricula*

The primary aims at Lava Ledge were to support children in acquiring the key knowledge and skills prescribed by Hjalli curriculum: to behave according to rules and to be active in what is seen to be strong in the opposite gender (see table 7.A). At the school, the teachers believed that children needed a strong framework and used the formal methods and suggestions of the Hjalli pedagogy handbook to support children’s “good” behavior and adherence to rules. For example, they clearly told children

what was allowed and accepted at the preschool and made these and other rules explicit in clear signals in the environment, including lines on the floor to mark spaces where children were allowed to play and to indicate the correct walking direction in certain places.

Children were, moreover, supported in practicing what often is seen to be stronger in the opposite gender: girls were encouraged to be more physically active, assertive, and show initiative, and boys were encouraged to become sensitive and non-aggressive (further described in chapters 3 and 6). These aims became clear in teachers' agendas during group times, when girls, for example, were taught to be daring by jumping from heights or by going barefoot in the snow and boys to be caring by practicing to relax and care for each other. In achieving these aims, teachers were responsible for nearly all teaching and learning decisions.

### **7.3.3 Environment: Materials and arrangement of space**

Regarding the environment provided to children, data from the two preschools reveal very different environments in general, including artifacts and uses of space. In discussing these differences, this section discusses an *evocative and relational* environment, with spaces that encourage communication and collaboration, and cultivate children's imaginations, as described in the preschools of Reggio Emilia and *the same basic open-ended material and clear rules* as describe in the Hjalli pedagogy. In "rich" environments, diverse artifacts are constantly changing as teachers and children bring into their classrooms items of interest to them. In these environments, spaces are organized to encourage collaboration and to evoke children's reactions, pique their interests, and promote their curiosity (Gandini, 1998). By contrast, the same basic environments minimize stimuli and present children with spaces that are easy to read and in which children can quickly learn to manage themselves. The play material is standardized, always the same, and mostly open-ended so that children can interpret the material for themselves (Sigurðardóttir & Ólafsdóttir, 2008).

#### *7.3.3.1 Seaside—Relational and evocative environment*

At Seaside, the environment was planned to provoke children's reactions, pique their interests and curiosity, and cultivate their imaginations. Beautiful and interesting artwork, artifacts, and play material used to attract children's attention were situated in the preschool surroundings and often made accessible to the children. Throughout each day, children could

move freely in the rooms and choose among various play materials; for example, items for role-play such as masks, ears, and tails were hung on a wall within children's reach. Additional material was available in transparent boxes so that children could see each box's contents, though fetching the material at times required asking for a teacher's assistance. The children at Seaside also had access to visible artifacts in the environment, which they used to develop new ideas, often with the support of teachers. For instance, children brought in stones from the beach that they fashioned into trolls, which for some weeks were set on the classroom's window shelf as decorations. At the same time, in the spacious garden, with a mixture of play equipment and the natural environment, children could move freely, pursue their personal interests, and play with friends from their group or other groups. In this sense, each teacher's role involved supporting children when they asked for help or when the preschool teachers saw opportunity to promote children's learning processes, as well as observing and documenting children's interests.

#### *7.3.3.2 Lava Ledge—Same basic open-ended materials and clear rules*

In Lava Ledge's the environment had clear messages for children, with few artifacts; the aim was to keep children focused and calm, yet also to offer children opportunities to use their imaginations in interpreting open-ended material. Usually no drawings, pictures, or children's artwork of any kind decorated the walls; nevertheless, sometimes the teacher and the children decided to put the children's drawings on the walls, but most of the time they only were there for a few days. Each material was designated a specific place, and children were expected to follow rules concerning when materials could be used; usually at choice time when children made a choice of an area to play in, but also sometimes in group time or free time either allowed by teachers or decisions made by the teacher and group of children together.

The daily routines were structured by rules regarding how children could progress from one activity to another; the children waited in designated places or else stood in rows until their teacher signaled that they could proceed to the next activity. Close to the house and with a large garden, the outdoor environment was part of a natural environment with lava rocks. Children's use of the large garden was organized by dividing the garden space into areas allocated to core groups within which the groups were free to play. If any children wished to move into another group's space, they

needed to obtain help from their teachers to negotiate the proposal with the teacher of the other core group.

Within these contrasting environments, the preschool teachers at both schools controlled decision making yet also provided opportunities for children to have their say and choose among options. The methods used in the two preschools had some similarities, although the methods used in each preschool also appeared differently, but according to each of the school curricula, where the methods revealed differing levels of adult control.

### **7.3.4 Differences in multiplicity and totality at the two preschools**

To clarify the actual practices implemented during sessions at the different preschools, Dahlberg and Moss's concepts of multiplicity (i.e., diversity) and totality (i.e., unity) can be applied. Regarding preschool practices, *multiplicity* refers to contexts in which different views are valued and children are provided with opportunities to discuss different answers and understandings, based on the notion that children and adults can develop different meanings, that many solutions are possible, and that there is no right answer. Proponents of multiplicity believe "in the possibility of rational consensus arrived at through free, unconstrained public deliberation between free and equal citizens" (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 152). By contrast, *totality* describes practices supported by the view that there is only one correct way of doing things and only one correct answer to any problem. In preschools where the view of totality is valued, this means that when people hold opposing views and become antagonists who need to confront each other, a decision is made by the party that wins (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). In preschools, such practices emerge in establishing and enforcing rules and actions (e.g., voting) that mitigate, if not negate, opposing views.

#### *7.3.4.1 Seaside—Choice time valuing many possible solutions and different understandings*

At Seaside, in choice time the interactions between children and teachers was influenced by methods valuing democracy; children being a part of decision-making and finding solutions which exhibited weak framing, especially in the first part of choice time (i.e., planning) typically occurred during small-group meetings. During these meetings, children could influence the choosing process and were encouraged to discuss rules, find solutions, and solve problems by collaborating with others. Such trends

were apparent, for example, when a child could not choose his or her preferred activity because too many children already occupied the area. Groups of children were encouraged to discuss and find solutions, and attempts were made to meet the wishes of other children so that all children involved participated in finding solutions acceptable to everyone. These methods valued different views and the possibility of various solutions, as well as endorsed the power of bringing together the diverse views and feelings of group members. The methods used at Seaside reflected a belief in the participation of free and equal citizens, having the possibility of arriving at consensus by valuing and including different views.

#### *7.3.4.2 Lava Ledge—Formal choice time with one right way of doing things*

Lava Ledge's formal choice meeting in the large group exhibited strong framing in the selection process and the use of limited, standardized play materials. Children sat in their designated seats and took turns being allowed to choose first among areas that did not change from day to day. If children wanted to choose areas that were already fully occupied by other children, then they were thought to have learned an important lesson—namely, that they cannot always get what they want. In response, teachers offered the children comments such as 'Better luck next time'. During the selection process, teachers and children in Lava Ledge followed the rules without debate; equality among everyone was seen as approaching choice in the correct way, using methods which reflect a belief in the importance of solutions being either right or wrong.

#### *7.3.4.3 Summary: Curriculum and environment*

The structure of the daily realities encountered by children in the two different settings shared some aims and pedagogical aspects while differing in others. Table 7.B summarizes the underlying views toward children and the pedagogy reflected in teachers' methods as I understood them.

**Table 7.B Aims and pedagogy**

Teachers' methods	Seaside	Lava Ledge
A Following the aims of the curriculum	Teachers and children were equal partners in co-constructing meaning	Teachers followed the curriculum's suggested organized methods, in which teachers have the authority to make final decisions
B Supporting children in challenging situations	Teachers participated in children's play as partners and supported children in finding solutions	Teachers told children decisively what was correct and incorrect and how to behave toward others

To comprehend more fully children's interests and viewpoints, teachers at Seaside reflected on their interactions with children in developing methods for collaborating with them. This co-construction of meaning (A1) was intended to strike as much of a balance of power as possible between children and teachers. The teachers supported children asking questions and collaboratively finding answers, and, in this way, their methods were emergent: they stemmed from children's interests and ideas with the goal of facilitating children's participation. In contrast, teachers at Lava Ledge conscientiously followed the suggested methods outlined in the curricular handbooks in teaching children to behave appropriately and follow rules, as well as compensatory methods (A2) to teach children the dominant traits and roles of the opposite gender (Sigurðardóttir & Ólafsdóttir, 2008; Ólafsdóttir, 2014). At Lava Ledge, teachers used systematic, formal methods (e.g., voting) to give all children a chance to have their say, yet retained the ultimate authority to make decisions. Strong framing was evident, and children's participation could be constrained by these rules and methods. At Seaside, teachers valued different views, used methods to encourage children to express their views and take part in decision making through consensus. Weak framing was evident, and in different situations, children were supported to be active participants.

Evidence of the preschools' different approaches surfaced when teachers at both preschools attempted to support children at risk of being marginalized in their respective groups. At Seaside, when the teachers were supporting children in finding solutions (B1) they intervened by

participating in the children's play or activity and by holding discussions with them on as equal terms as possible to support children's appreciation of others' views and to cultivate shared understanding in the group (Malaguzzi, 1998). At Lava Ledge, in contrast, teachers intervened in more directive ways when telling children how to behave toward others (B2)—for example, by telling the children what was right and wrong, asking them whether they thought certain actions were fair, and discussing with them what they might do to resolve the situation (Ólafsdóttir, 1992; Ólafsdóttir, 2014).

At both preschools, daily schedules were superficially similar and involved alternating between group time and choice time, a type of timeframe that until recently has been common in Icelandic preschools. Nevertheless, the methods at both preschools were fundamentally different, especially concerning group time and during choice time, in the selection process itself. At these times the power balance between teachers and children and the participation level children were allowed was different, which is discussed in the next section.

## **7.4 Pedagogy**

This section discusses the pedagogy employed at the two preschools—namely, the methods teachers use to support children's learning processes as they take part in the respective preschool groups. The perspectives of two researchers and theorists are first introduced to clarify the power relations (Bernstein's conceptions are also discussed above in section 7.2 and further elaborated upon here) at the two preschools in terms of the following:

The distribution of power and the principles of control of strong and weak curricular framing (Bernstein, 2000); and

The degrees of participation that children are allowed in decision making (Lansdown, 2005).

### **7.4.1 Classification and framing in the two preschools**

To understand the power balance within the pedagogies of the two preschools, the practices governing teachers' methods and children's participation can be described in terms of the strength of their classification and framing (Bernstein, 1977).

#### *7.4.1.1 Seaside—Weak classification and framing*

As suggested in the foregoing, on the whole, classification and framing at Seaside were weak (see table 7.B). Clearly, however, the daily schedule was strongly classified; it was the same every day and planned by the children's preschool teachers and the preschool's head teacher. Furthermore, both free time and group time were structured according to a fixed schedule to which all teachers and children adhered. Within this framework, the classification and framing of activities and relationships were nevertheless weak.

The play material and planning of the preschool environment at Seaside revealed that these were carefully organized by teachers, yet were partly framed weakly. The teachers planned projects with the choice focus building on information from their documentations (mostly consisting of photographs with text) of children's interests. They also used information from their documentations to be able to support the groups' and individual children's interests and ideas. The teachers used internationally known methods (e.g., discussing different ideas and possible solutions) to support children as active participants that were able to influence their preschool context. Children at times influenced the addition of new play materials and artifacts, such as by bringing in outside material of interest into the classroom. They even could bring material from the outside area when they wanted to.

Communication principles exhibited at Seaside often mixed strong and weak elements. Interactions were at times initiated by teachers who stimulated children by making suggestions or asking questions. At the same time, these methods were intended to support children in developing their own ideas and methods and encourage them to express themselves, ask questions, and find solutions. This appeared clearly when the children were working on the painting project. First the project was planned by the teachers; they decided the material, time, and allocation; later, when the children were active in the project, they were supported by the teachers to express themselves, make their own decisions, and support others (further described in section 5.4.1).

Elements of weak framing appeared in both free time and group time at Seaside. Instead of finding "correct" answers, children were encouraged to build knowledge by co-constructing meaning. Children often revisited their ideas, sometimes as a rejoinder to the teachers' documentation and reflection that revealed the children's interest in the project. When putting on a play, for example, teachers and children together developed the

storyline and decided roles; with this process, children became active participants in developing play themes.

**Table 7.C Classification and framing at Seaside**

<b>Seaside</b>	Strong- - - - -	Weak
	↓	↓
<i>Classification: Content and curricular aims</i>		
Daily schedule	-S-	
Play material and environment		-W/S-
Planned curriculum practice		-W-
<i>Framing: Pedagogic practice and methods</i>		
Communication principles		-S/W-
Choice time		-W-
Group time		-W-

#### 7.4.1.2 Lava Ledge—Strong classification and framing

At Lava Ledge, both the classification and framing were relatively strong (see table 7.D). The teachers were in control of implementing the daily schedule, which was always the same, as well as of standardizing the play material and organizing the environment. Teachers actively applied suggestions from the *Handbook of the Hjalli Method* in order to teach children according to the official curricular aims of the school curricula (Ólafsdóttir, 2014). In this sense, the teachers were the transmitters and the children the acquirers.

The preschool teachers encouraged children to follow rules and routines: those prioritized in Hjalli curriculum and those applied in everyday practice. In this way, children were shown boundaries intended to induce their sense of security at the preschool. As the research notes show, children at Lava Ledge nearly always followed the rules, and days proceeded smoothly. However, despite the strong framing during choice time, weak framing appeared once children arrived at their chosen activities; at that point, they initiated activities independently, played and interacted with their peers, and had the freedom to explore.

Group time at Lava Ledge also showed strong framing. The preschool teachers planned how to implement the aims of Hjalli curriculum and organized other activities. At the beginning of group time, they at times

involved children in planning the session by allowing them to choose among activities or tasks by voting for different suggestions. These methods were strongly framed, since the teachers kept count of the scores and made the final decision.

Teachers at Lava Ledge saw it as their responsibility to support the inclusion of all children, by strongly framing their teaching according to what was deemed appropriate behavior. They conveyed this message by telling children what was allowed instead of what was not allowed and avoided saying the words “not allowed,” as John did when he and a group of girls were at the park. He told the girls they could climb as high up as they wanted, if they would just be so kind as to remain where he could see them (see section 6.2.2).

**Table 7.D Classification and framing at Lava Ledge**

	Strong	-----	Weak
<b><i>Lava Ledge</i></b>	↓		↓
<i>Classification: Content and curricular aims</i>			
Daily schedule	-S-	-----	
Play material and environment	-S-	-----	
Planned curriculum practice	-S-	-----	
<i>Framing: Pedagogic practice and methods</i>			
Communication principles	-S-	-----	
Choice time		-----W/S-----	
Group time	-S-	-----	

### **7.4.2 The degrees of participation children were allowed**

This section describes the power relations among teachers and children, seen in the degree of participation children are allowed based on Lansdown’s (2005) typology.

With the aim to focus attention on young children’s right to be listened to and taken seriously, as confirmed in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), Lansdown (2005) developed a typology of degrees of participation having the purpose of exploring how children’s right to be agents in their daily lives are supported. Lansdown describes three degrees of participation, although the boundaries between them are rarely clear cut and many initiatives can span more than one level (Lansdown, 2005, p. 14). The first level, called *consultation processes*,

describes a relationship managed and initiated by adults, in which children's views are heard but not necessarily listened to while decisions are made. The second level, called *participatory processes*, can be initiated by adults in situations in which children are empowered in their partnerships with adults; they influence and challenge both processes and outcomes and remain actively involved throughout the activity. At Lansdown's final level, consisting of *self-initiated processes*, children themselves are empowered to take action. They decide the issues of concern and control the decision-making process, while adults facilitate instead of lead.

#### 7.4.2.1 *Participation at Seaside*

Seaside's teachers systematically invited children to decision-making meetings, where their participation was based on their interests and methods of finding solutions. Teachers often played the role of partners who encouraged children to rely on their own views and judgment, as well as aimed to work toward achieving a balance of power between themselves and children. In their efforts to these ends, they interacted with children on terms as equal as possible and encouraged them to express their ideas freely. However, it must also be noted that at the beginning the power balance among children and teachers at this preschool seemed unequal in the same way as in all other preschools, for teachers made decisions regarding the planning of the school, the environment, and other major components. Nonetheless, the children at Seaside had a fair amount of power and children's participation in decision-making often exhibited the *participatory processes* (level two) described in Lansdown's (2005) framework. Though often initiated by teachers, these processes allowed children to influence both decision-making and the processes themselves. These methods are most evident in data regarding the episode of painting and acting described in chapter 5, during which teachers encouraged groups of children to share ideas, construct shared meaning, and revisit ideas. For example, they asked questions or made comments such as, 'Oh, is that so?' 'What is he or she thinking?' 'What does he or she see?' and 'How does he or she feel?' This guidance encouraged children to take responsibility for and be fair to each other, which reflected the teachers' efforts to strike a balance of power among children and adults, as well as to respect children's right to express themselves.

At Seaside, *self-initiated processes* (level three) were manifest beginning with the second part of the painting project, during which children worked to put on the play. At some moments the children's participation was as

close as possible to resembling the self-initiated process described by Lansdown (2005). Examples of these moments were seen when a girl named Irma planned how to proceed with the project by suggesting roles for the teachers (Step 32, Phase 4), and later in the process when the children were acting, another girl, Kolka, made an effort to negotiate between the children's contrasting suggestions of roles to include in the act (Step 35, Phase 4). In both examples, the act built on the girls' initiative with support from the preschool teacher who continued to hand the decision-making to the children.

#### 7.4.2.2 *Participation at Lava Ledge*

At Lava Ledge, children were encouraged to be independent, which could be demonstrated by making their own decisions without the help of others, being self-reliant, and serving their own interests, yet always within the frame of rules established by the teachers. According to the Hjalli pedagogy, teachers are encouraged to remember that they are the adults and should take responsibility for following the school curricula, and make decisions in their practice, especially as they prepare, plan, and conduct group time. However, the teachers at Lava Ledge used methods to work against the unequal balance of power between children, and children and adults, in the preschool. For example, they systematically gave each child the opportunity to express his or her wishes and ideas. Furthermore, the research notes show that often when a child was excluded by his or her peers, the teacher clearly informed the children that this was not allowed. Sometimes the teacher talked on behalf of the child being excluded, as when Susy said to the boys that Axel might want to be a cheetah or by asking if they were allowing everyone to make their decisions (see narrative 6f in section 6.3.3). The teachers, though, maintained the traditional adult role by retaining power and control. Research notes attest to this practice by underscoring how teachers planned learning centers. In this process, children could suggest activities to be included among the choices and often voted on the possible activities, which teachers reported before issuing their ultimate decisions. Within the strong curricular framing, playing with peers during free time marked the sole occasion during which children were given the opportunity to make decisions and teachers intervened only when needed or invited.

At Lava Ledge children's participation in decision-making most often bore the marks of the *consultation processes* (level one) described in Lansdown's (2005) framework. Their participation was managed and initiated by adults, and they seldom had opportunities to be a part of

making the final decisions. The rules and routines at Lava Ledge were systematically observed at all times; when any group of children was engaged in a discussion with a teacher, only one child at a time was given the opportunity to talk. Though children’s voices were heard, all decisions remained in the hands of their teachers.

*7.4.2.3 Summary: Differences in the two pedagogies*

The two preschools demonstrated different underlying views toward children and their learning as reflected in the teachers’ methods of supporting children’s interaction and learning processes (see table 7.E).

**Table 7.E Methods of supporting children’s participation in the two preschools**

How children are supported in:	Informal methods (i.e., implicit). <i>Teachers in Seaside</i> (column 1):	Formal methods (i.e., explicit). <i>Teachers in Lava Ledge</i> (column 2):
A. Participating in discussions	Valuing children’s strengths Giving children cues Asking questions and making suggestions to facilitate children’s expression Reading into children’s different means of expression	Supporting children to follow rules Providing children with opportunities to express themselves one at a time
B. Participating in decision-making	Supporting children in asking questions and finding solutions Building knowledge by co-constructing meaning	Giving children opportunities to influence decision making by organizing voting among them Making decisions based on majority rule
C. Finding a balance of power	Seeking more equal power balances Giving children opportunities to discuss solutions and	Holding power Sending children clear messages about what is allowed by the rules and in their behavior with

	possibilities Giving children opportunities to find ways to include each other's ideas	others
D. Working toward gender equality	Using gender-neutral methods Reflecting on children's ideas and theories Influencing children's theories	Using compensatory methods to challenge children's gender-influenced behaviors

Even though the practices in the two preschools are not as clear-cut as they seem when presented in a chart like the above, in distinct ways, both preschools supported children's participation in discussions and decision making. At Seaside, when teachers were supporting children participating in discussion (A1) their methods were informal and often derived from children's ideas or interests. Teachers promoted the image of the strong child, which considers children to be competent participants in developing ideas and finding solutions, while facilitating children's involvement by attempting to read into their different means of expression (e.g., facial expression, body language, or artistic expression). At Seaside, when teachers were supporting children's participation in decision-making (B1), they encouraged children to advance their own questions, seek answers, find solutions, and collaborate with others in co-constructing knowledge. The teachers at Seaside also used methods to seek a more equal balance of power between adults and children (C1), such as by involving children in discussions aimed at finding solutions that accommodated others' views and ideas. At Seaside the methods were what Lenz Taguchi, Bodén, and Ohrlander (2011) have referred to as *gender neutral* (D1): lacking a particular focus on gender but emphasizing listening to and reflecting upon children's ideas and theories with groups of children.

At Lava Ledge, teachers' methods were formal, planned, and strongly framed. The teachers supported children's participation in discussions by using organized methods (A2); they believed that children needed support in following rules and behaving and provided children with opportunities to express their views and wishes, often in organized ways, such as by allowing only one child at a time to speak. At Lava Ledge, children also frequently took part in voting in relation to decision-making (B2), and making decisions

on the grounds of majority rule, such as to choose between play material and activities. The voting and children expressing their views in an organized way were seen by the preschool teachers as opportunities for the children to take part in decision-making. In this preschool teachers were seen as having power (C2) and needing to give children clear messages regarding what behavior toward others would be condoned. At Lava Ledge methods of working toward gender equality were compensatory (D2); teachers followed a gender-focused curriculum in which girls were encouraged to adopt typically masculine activities and vice versa (Ólafsdóttir, 2014).

The pedagogy in the two preschools offered children very different degrees of freedom and control and fostered very different levels of participation. Even though children were supported in very different ways, there were also shared aims and methods. In the two preschools there are specific methods used to support children's influence in their preschools, even though the methods used are very different. In both preschools children were provided with ample opportunities for free-play sessions, with minimum intervention from the preschool teachers. This suggests that in spite of the influence of the different cultural contexts, in both these preschools, the peer culture might be influential in children's learning and therefore leads to a need to more closely explore children's learning processes in the preschool group.

## **7.5 The identification of learning processes**

The discussion here draws upon the observations presented in chapters 5 and 6 of children's participation in project-based work and of their playing with open-ended material. This section focus on children's learning processes when they participate in peer groups in the two preschools and are discussed in terms of:

Children's participation as an interactive process between social context and the children's personal factors (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978); and

How children bridge their different perspectives by using culturally available tools (e.g., words, tone of voice, gestures, and activities) and how they structure each other's involvement to facilitate engagement in group efforts (Rogoff, 2003).

### **7.5.1 The children's learning processes as they participate**

This section explores the complex situations in preschools (the infinite range of activities, interactions, and contexts), where children were seen to be active in their own learning (Carr et al., 2010). During the data generation I explored the interactional processes taking place, mainly focusing on children's competence, how they interacted and found solutions while participating in their preschool group. Going through the analysis process I first constructed children's stories and later analyzed the data in relation to learning dispositions that I had reshaped, seen through three different and entwined lenses relevant in this study, the: social context, individual child, and interactive learning processes (explained in section 2.7.3). During the analysis process I focused on to what degree the children seemed to reveal features of the learning dispositions, foregrounding the more positive aspects, even though negative features were also included. I also included and analyzed the data in relation to when the children's stories reflected children as having difficulty, or learning dispositions as being the reverse of what I saw as competencies in children's expression, which also sometimes appeared in the observations (discussed in section 7.5.2). I was making explicit the interactions taking place and how children were learning as they participated in their preschool groups; my intention was not to look for specific skills, knowledge, or emotions, but nevertheless my own beliefs were bound to influence the analysis (researcher's bias discussed in sections 4.4.1 and 4.7.2).

At both preschools, the children's stories I made of each child showed individual characteristics—for example, one child might have primarily used verbal expression, whereas another might have expressed him or herself in actions (by doing). In the children's stories, developed for each child during this study, all children exhibited several characteristics, which most often were similar despite different contexts. In different situations, children used these methods to structure their participatory interaction within the social context that included other children and teachers. As might also be expected in other preschools, such trends were apparent for all groups of children in the study (i.e., two groups at Seaside and four groups at Lava Ledge) despite differences depending on the situation and other children's participation in the group's activities.

### *7.5.1.1 Learning processes as children participate in the social context*

At both preschools, children's stories showed how children participated in interactive processes in the social contexts. In their respective preschools children frequently:

- Seemed to understand situations, how to communicate with others, and how to participate in structuring each other's involvement; and

- Expressed their ideas and feelings using different methods of self-expression.

At Seaside, this was frequently seen in the data, for example when the children worked on a project in which teachers were also participants and were encouraging and supported children when asked to. Through the observations I saw the children develop the play's theme during the second part of the project. When the children were acting while putting on a play, each child expressed different ideas regarding the theme of the playlet. This was most readily apparent in their attempts to accommodate less traditional, more imaginative roles (e.g., a child–alien–dinosaur and a mermaid) with the established roles of a boy protagonist, cow, and giantess in an Icelandic folk story (Step 35, Phase 4). Together with a supportive preschool teacher, the children managed to develop the playlet, reconcile the diverse roles, and include all ideas, and in this way, they constructed each other's involvement and facilitated each other's engagement in a shared effort.

Similar examples could be seen in the data when children in groups at Lava Ledge played in their respective areas with minimum intervention from preschool teachers. One aim of the gendered curriculum for girls was for them to learn to be daring. The girls who participated in this study were the oldest at the preschool and had for many years experienced these exercises during group time with their teacher. As shown in the notes from fieldwork, the girls often chose to play in a way that seemed as though they were developing their daring; in narrative 6d, for example, the girls played in the soft cube area and dared each other to jump from the table onto a pile of mattresses. This is an example on how these girls communicated with each other and structured each other's involvement in order to accommodate their joint participation in the play. This also suggests what other research has shown: that the aims of the curriculum were not only carried out by what the teachers did, but also through the girls' interaction when playing, without the teacher's intervention.

In the observations there also were examples showing how the group of children never really managed to develop the communication in a way for all to be involved. As the boys played at travelling in space, they tried various methods to bridge their different perspectives. When Axel entered the room after the other boys had decided roles for the game, Omar tried to include him by telling him what he thought he could do, and by doing so Omar was helping Axel to understand the situation and to be a part of the group (Step 11, Phase 1). In this moment, Omar assumed responsibility and tried to mediate between the two parties by seeming to understand Axel's perspective. Nevertheless, his mediation did not enable Axel to become a full participant in the group in that particular situation. I can only speculate on why the boys in this particular situation did not manage to solve their differences a large part of the time. I suggest that the social interaction often revealed their lack of understanding of the situation and each other's means of expression, and, therefore, the individual methods they used to express their ideas were too different for them to find ways to bridge their meanings.

#### *7.5.1.2 Individual children's learning processes as they participate*

In the children's stories, the children at both preschools were seen to use individual methods to participate, seemed to understand situations, and expressed their interests each in their own way. The individual children:

- Most often revealed that they were interested in participating in activities and expressed themselves via different means (e.g., words, gestures, and actions);

- Tended to use similar means of expression and interaction despite different situations within the three-month period; and

- Chose similar roles from one situation to another. In this sense, they held more than one role at a time, the choice of which often seemed to be a means of expressing how they preferred to be situated in the group during playtime.

Detected in the observations at Seaside were examples from the children's methods: this, for example, appeared during the first part of the painting project. Their actions while participating in the project, suggested that most children, most of the time seemed to: know the situation well enough to be able to express themselves and react to others; be sure of their ability to paint; and feel secure in the group of children and teachers. During the second part of the project when children were acting, their choice of role seemed individual, for each child, and it seemed important for them to

have the role they already had painted in the first part of the project included in the acting. Four of the five children were active in developing the themes together, and expressed themselves through the roles they had chosen. This trend, however, was manifested differently for each individual child. For example, Oddur was creative and expressed himself by being imaginative; most often, he chose roles by combining many roles in one figure, such as, the child–alien–dinosaur (Step 29, Phase 3). Being imaginative and devising new ideas constituted a method that Oddur frequently used when interacting within the group. At the same time, Kolka often chose to be a facilitator or helper who would organize situations for other children, seen at the end of narrative 5b and when she organized how the group of children could put on the play (Step 27, Phase 4).

In this particular group in Seaside the observations revealed that Dagur's participation seemed to reflect that most of the time he was not a part of the group (not a full participant). Dagur's and the other children's expressions gave me reason to question whether he and the other children saw him as belonging to the group. Throughout the observations, Dagur seemed interested in painting, to know what he wanted to do, and was focused and absorbed in his artistic expression. Seeing this in the observations suggests that he seemed to be secure in the group. But, from the beginning he turned his side to the group (Step 3, Phase 1) and neither he nor the other children initiated much interaction during the time they were painting. At one point, Dagur approached Villi, another boy, but got no reaction from him (Step 20, Phase 2). This incident was among the few times Dagur showed his interest towards interacting with the other children, even though he, in the situation when they were painting, kept mostly to himself.

During the observations, the girls at Lava Ledge were active and focused while organizing their role-play and developing the roles that they wanted to include in their production. Their expressions revealed that they all seemed keen to take part in the play and were familiar with both the situation and the process of putting on a play. They expressed themselves through their actions, determined roles, and developed a play theme, all by using individual methods of interacting and being included. In the girls' group, Hera and Vala were active in building: when using the unit blocks, Vala devised numerous ideas, and Katla was verbal in using language to tell other girls what she wanted as a means to influence the play (Steps 1–5, Phase 1). The roles that the girls chose reflected the positioning they sought when participating in the group's activities. Specifically, Hera, acting as the mother, a role she frequently chose, might indicate that she wanted to play

a central role and even to have power in decision-making and approving conduct. Katla was the baby who, seen through the observations, seemed to want to be taken care of (Step 4, Phase 1), and Vala most often was in the role of a cat or a dog, which afforded her many possibilities to move within the play space (Step 7, Phase 2). Nevertheless, the observations revealed Vala as an active participant though out the play period, even though she often seemed to struggle to have her ideas accepted by the other girls. At times she seemed to enjoy taking part in the play and be satisfied, but the observations suggest that at times she felt rejected (Step 20, Phase 2) by the other girls and struggled with belonging to the group.

The group of boys also seemed familiar with the situation when they were playing travelling in space. Yet, despite their focus and process of finding ways to develop the play, they devoted a large part of the session to finding ways to solve their frequent disagreements instead. In this sense, the boys struggled through the better part of the time reserved for the play. Finnur wanted two types of roles only: aliens and dogs (Step 3, Phase 1). Once established that the aliens were in control, Finnur and Hallur chose these roles. By contrast, Axel struggled to belong in the group, as was clear in his way of choosing a role. He first wanted to be a cat (Steps 17 and 22), and when that role did not bring him any power to influence the game later on, he chose to be a cheetah. Choosing this fierce animal was possibly Axel's way of expressing his wish to be a participant in the group and to hold a role strong enough to influence the play. In spite of Axel's many attempts to have his say in the group, the other boys never properly included him in the group.

At both preschools, the children's stories reveal that children most often seemed to believe that they belonged to the group; as seen in the data, they appeared to be focused, were at ease, seemed interested in what they were doing and motivated, and to enjoy their participation. In the children's stories in both schools, it appeared that sometimes some children struggled to be a part of the group, which suggests that these children did not at all times feel a sense of belonging to the group. While the children were playing, acting, and finding solutions as part of negotiating various issues, often their interactions also revealed that they seemed to believe in their right and ability to influence the situation and develop their competence.

The children's stories suggest that children at Seaside, while participating in the painting project, focused on their artwork, were interested in what they and other children were doing, and seemed

absorbed in the activity. In this atmosphere, the children became more spontaneous, expressed themselves, and interacted.

Information from the observations, in both the girls' and boys' groups at Lava Ledge, suggest that the children similarly seemed to enjoy being part of the process of developing play themes, constructing play, and interacting with other children. The children also seemed confident in their ability to influence the play, as they all, at some point, came up with ideas, discovered solutions to problems, and developed both the themes and roles while simultaneously beginning to build together using the unit blocks.

#### *7.5.1.3 Children's contribution as they participate (learning processes)*

At both preschools, the children's stories showed that children listened to other children, expressed their ideas, and together they often found solutions that seemed fair to others, even though the reverse also was detected in the stories. In the episodes described, the children:

- Were seen to listen to other children and to take responsibility for themselves and others;

- Seemed to be able to use their knowledge, skills, and experience to solve problems and overcome difficulties in ways that were acceptable in the preschool community; and

- Generally, were seen to react toward others as if they were able to appreciate another point of view, and even to understand what would be equal or right for others.

During the painting project at Seaside, children were seen to overcome challenges and frequently discovered solutions to problems or issues. While putting on the playlet, the children needed to find ways to include several different, contradictory roles and managed to develop the play theme to include roles in ways that accommodated different ideas from all four children. In this situation, the children seemed able to foreground this challenging task and view it as an opportunity to understand and improve their skills instead of to gain favorable judgments from others about their competence (Step 30, Phase 3).

In the corresponding episodes involving the girls' and boys' groups at Lava Ledge, the children often seemed to find ways of listening to others and making decisions that were taking others' points of view, as well as their own, into consideration. Such trends were frequently seen, yet exhibited to varying degrees, in the actions and expressions of individual

children. For instance, Hera repeatedly would not accept any idea from another girl, yet upon realizing that she had been unfair to her, Hera found a way to accommodate the girl's wishes. When Vala wanted to join Hera and Katla inside the house, they claimed that there was no room for her. Soon after, however, Hera took responsibility for the situation in her role as mother; she made an effort to be fair to Vala and helped her to prepare a room in the attic of the house for her (Step 17, Phase 2).

### **7.5.2 Children's participation in peer culture**

This section discusses how the power relations among peer groups in the two preschools appeared in the children's stories, in terms of:

How children were seen to: share experience, foster peer culture, and attempt to gain control in preschool groups (Corsaro, 2003);

How children's friendships emerge in the children's stories, as they create meaning and shared humor (Greve, 2009); and

How children were seen to be peripheral or marginalized within their peer groups (Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2006).

The observations in both preschools revealed that children had ample opportunities to play, most often with little supervision from teachers; therefore, it is relevant to discuss situations in these peer groups in terms of peer culture and the emotional satisfaction that most children seem to gain from sharing and doing things together in a group of peers. The observations in this study revealed how children within peer groups seek to gain control and share that sense of control with each other. As the children create and control events, the positioning of individual children within each group can be strong to various degrees, and the teachers might not fully recognize these interactions in the groups. The teachers might only have superficial information, at best.

How children communicate and act in relation to their participation and power in the preschool context can produce drastically different situations, including those of friendship and of exclusion. Children's friendships appear when they prefer to play with particular peers and express the experience of having something in common when they co-create meaning and share humor (Greve, 2009, pp. 96–97). By contrast, children can also be

marginalized, ignored by other children, or prevented from participating (Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2006, p. 179).

### *7.5.2.1 Sharing and gaining control in a group of peers*

Data representing these two preschools clearly show that children used an array of communicative skills in order to collectively participate in and expand their peer culture. The narrative observations from children's participation in the group, show children that:

Most often seemed to derive emotional satisfaction from sharing and cooperating during playtime and other activities, seen in how they seemed to be interested and absorbed in their activities;

To different extents and by using different means sought to gain control in the group and often to share control with peers; and

Had different amounts of strength and influence in the group (different positioning) within their groups.

At Seaside, as expected, children were positioned differently within their groups. Villi, Irma, and Kolka maintained strong positions, which could have come from their being among the oldest children in the large group, though their friendship seemed to strengthen their positioning as well. The trio often chose to play together, and the other children frequently showed interest in playing with them and sometimes even asked for their advice. Villi especially seemed to have a stronger position in the group than other children did as he made decisions and was asked for advice by both other children and teachers. Meanwhile, Dagur arguably had an especially weak position in the group; since he painted in silence, had little interaction with others, and was passive in acting, other children did not pay him much notice. However, although Dagur's positioning within this particular group seemed weak, in another group of children taking part in a different activity, it might have appeared quite differently, as could be so for all the children taking part in this study.

Children at Lava Ledge often seemed to hold different positions within the group and were able to influence play at various levels (e.g., by choosing or changing ideas to advance play situations). This trend appeared clearly when the girls were playing house with the hollow blocks. Two girls, Hera and Katla, exhibited a strong relationship as friends, though Hera was clearly in control, for she made decisions and rejected or accepted others' ideas. By contrast, Vala often seemed to hold a weak position; not only was she stationed outside the main house that they were building, but her many creative ideas were also often rejected. Regarding positioning within

the group, Katla operated between Hera and Vala, for she had her friend Hera on her side to support most of her ideas. In spite of the shifting power balance, the girls negotiated and seemed able to develop their play and find some sort of equilibrium in their decision-making so that all had at least some ideas included.

The group of boys who played aliens and dogs at Lava Ledge spent most of their time struggling in their interactions. The dominant atmosphere throughout the development of the play appeared mostly related to the boys' trying to gain control. One boy, Finnur, was exceptionally preoccupied with making decisions as a means of gaining control over who would be included in the group and what ideas were accepted. Throughout the play period, Finnur set his own rules and was often not prepared to share roles, ideas, or materials with other boys, but wanted them to follow his rules. By contrast, Axel seemed to have a weak positioning in the group during the play period and showed difficulties with having his ideas and wishes accepted. For example, he expressed a wish to be a cat, which the others, especially Finnur, rejected; later on, he claimed to be performing as a cheetah, which the other boys also did not accept. The conflict, mostly between Finnur and Axel, was not resolved during the particular play period. Though Axel was not allowed to make decisions in this group, he continued to claim inclusion in the development of the play and the acceptance of his ideas, and his actions suggested he wanted to participate, and might even have seen himself as having the right to participate. Within this particular group, Axel was positioned on the periphery. Although Susy, the boys' teacher, made attempts to support his positioning in this particular situation, it did not change in this particular play episode. What happened in the group might be understood as a conflict between the peer culture and the culture of the school. The teacher's intervention built on rules and responsibility, also known to the children, according to which children should not exclude others from the group, while what appeared in the observations might be a part of the peer culture, revealing Alex being marginalized in the group.

#### *7.5.2.2 Belonging, friendship, and marginalization*

In both preschools, children's interactions during their play revealed leadership, friendship, and marginalization. Five of the 24 children whose children's stories I constructed were of ethnic minority groups, and these children were among those who seemed to experience social challenges more frequently than others did. Most of the time these children were able to develop play and other activities in harmony with the other children and

teachers, but they sometimes struggled to belong in their groups and encountered more obstacles.

Dagur, a boy at Seaside, was of an ethnic minority group and had recently moved into the community with his parents. Dagur was repeatedly observed to face challenges when interacting with his peer group, to maintain a weak positioning in the group, and to be clearly marginalized at times. For instance, while other children were painting, Dagur seemed involved, though his interactions with other children were minimal, and he remained passive while children put on the play during the second step of the painting project. The other children very seldom reached out to him or tried to include him in the group, not even when the preschool teachers made attempts to support his participation in the group, such as when they suggesting a role for him and supported him in taking part.

At Lava Ledge, the children in both gender groups seemed interested in participating alongside their peers. Most often, the girls seemed to enjoy developing their role-play together, and though all four boys struggled to develop their play in a similar fashion, they were all interested in taking part in the production. Regardless of group, nearly all children seemed keen to participate, were interested and focused on the activities at hand, and thus might have seen themselves as belonging to a group. Even children who at times struggled to belong to his or her group nevertheless seemed aware of his or her right to be a participant and wanted to have a say in the group's activity.

During one such event, Axel—a boy of an ethnic minority group who struggled to become a full participant in the group—expressed his right to be included and to have his say in the development of the play. He was interested and wanted to be involved in the play yet had difficulty with having his ideas accepted and included. His actions implied that he seemed to be aware of his right to be included as a participant yet he held a weak position within the group. The other boys never properly included him in their group and even set out rules explaining why his ideas could not be included. These rules were in no way the rules of the preschool community, and the preschool teachers were, at least sometimes, aware that the boys set such rules and that Axel was marginalized. It also has to be acknowledged that, during the time of the data gathering in this study, the preschool teacher supported Alex to participate in the group, and several times when the boys were playing travelling in space, she made attempts to support Axel's participation in the play.

Though such cases are built upon particular situations and here involve describing examples from only two children, they exemplify moments in the data when children of ethnic minority groups have struggled to belong in the dominant group. The cases presented here, suggest the complexity of situations children face with, in preschools. The teachers in the two preschools supported the inclusion of these boys, but the methods they used (revealed in the observations) were different and might be related to the differences in their curriculum. In Lava Ledge the preschool teacher gave clear messages to the boys, discussed with the boys and asked if they were not including everyone, and also clearly stated that all boys were allowed to make decisions and have their say in the play. In Seaside the teacher also discussed these issues with the children, using methods to involve the children in finding solutions, more often asked open-ended questions, like 'Did you hear this?' Repeating what a particular child had said, like: 'This child was saying that he/she wanted to use this color or act in a certain role.' The examples showing these interactions are few, but might help preschool teachers, researchers, and parents to understand in more detail the situations children need to address in their preschools. Furthermore, adults might use the opportunity to discuss the possibilities in how to support children's inclusion in such situations or even to remind all to raise their awareness of such incidents.

### **7.5.3 Summary: The identification of learning processes**

At both preschools, children expressed ideas in different ways, interacted with their peers in diverse situations, and on the whole seemed to understand what would work in certain situations. Most of the time the groups seemed engaged with a common aim and shared in exerting the effort, as they took part in acting, painting, or playing. Children at both preschools seemed most of the time to understand other children's views, express their own intentions, and find solutions to challenges. While taking part in these processes, they structured each other's involvement (Carr, 2001; Rogoff, 2003), and contributed to the cultural context of their preschools (Corsaro, 2015; 2012). Nevertheless, within the two preschools, the teachers' roles and methods were different and thus might have influenced the way the peer cultures thrived in the different groups. In Lava Ledge, preschool teachers had a stronger role in structuring children's involvement in their daily lives based on rules and principles with a stronger frame (Bernstein, 1977) revealing more often the teachers' control. Whereas the roles and methods of the teachers in Seaside had a weaker frame, with the adults more often sharing control with the children.

At both preschools, children were seen to shift between roles; they sometimes played various roles at the same time, building on different perspectives, jumping in and out of these roles while taking part in the play. At some moments, they could even be heard to tell each other what was fair or right for others and themselves.

The preschools maintained different underlying views toward children and their learning, which was reflected in their pedagogies. The power relations in these preschools differed substantially in terms of strong and weak framing of pedagogy (Bernstein, 1977). In both schools, the foundation of what was organized and planned by teachers was similar on the surface, such as the alternating choice time and group time in the day schedule, but within these frames the interactions between preschool teachers and children were different, partly strong at Seaside and strong at Lava Ledge. In relation to the communication principles and how children were provided with opportunities to influence the preschool's practice, the framing was weak at Seaside, and children were often provided with opportunities to influence practice. By contrast, the framing in this sense was strong at Lava Ledge, where teachers most often held power apart from the freedom children were given to play during choice time.

In all three groups in the two preschools—that is, children at Seaside, girls at Lava Ledge, and boys at Lava Ledge—most children engaged in the flow of what was happening, were interested, focused, and involved. They attempted to negotiate complex interactions with or without the support of teachers and usually were prepared to act on challenging tasks and to find solutions.

In both preschools, children encountered distinctly different contexts, and each child used individual methods to participate in the interactive processes between the social context and his or her individual ways of doing (Vygotsky, 1933/1967).

## **7.6 Factors influencing children's learning processes**

The aim of this study was to offer insight into children's learning processes, specifically their interactions as they adopt skills, form understandings, and develop social competence, all co-constructed with peers and teachers. In the next sections I discuss what observations revealed in the pedagogy of two preschools, in relation to the: differences and similarities (7.6.1), and the strengths and weaknesses (7.6.2). Finally, in sections 7.6.3 and 7.6.4 I discuss the answers to the two research questions.

### **7.6.1 Differences between and similarities in the two preschools**

The main findings of this study generally show remarkably different cultural realities that children experience in the two preschools, the contexts of which (i.e., the environment, curriculum, and pedagogy) supported their learning processes differently. At Seaside, the Reggio Emilia-inspired preschool, children were believed to be strong, capable participants in building a democratic community. At this preschool, teachers' methods built upon a curriculum within an environment filled with diverse artifacts meant to stimulate and evoke children's ideas, and, while interacting with teachers and peers, children were encouraged to express their views and ideas and supported toward co-constructing meaning in the group. The power relations reflected a weakly framed pedagogy. At Lava Ledge, by contrast, teachers' methods built upon Hjalli pedagogy's curriculum, the methods used include stating clear rules and planning an environment with few and purposeful artifacts, and children are expected to behave according to rules and learn the specific aims of the gendered curriculum. Within a strong frame, children are provided with opportunities to be active and independent.

Nevertheless, notable similarities also characterize these two preschools. For one, all children were provided with ample time and opportunities to play freely with minimal intervention from teachers. Furthermore, the teachers at both schools used specific, even though in practice very different, methods to encourage children to express their views.

The evidence first shows distinct similarities regarding the opportunities to play that children received. In both preschools, children's play was highly valued and supported, and the children were provided with the freedom to play, interact, and find solutions to problems arising within their peer groups. Peer culture thus clearly plays a major role in the preschool pedagogies, yet also, as expected, might be beyond the reach of the teachers at these schools. In both preschools, the children also shared experiences, developed peer culture, and, in some cases, attempted to gain control within their groups. The power balance within the peer groups at both schools reflected very different participation specific to each individual and each situation. Children experienced friendship, togetherness, and belonging, as well as conflicts, social exclusion, and marginalization. It is important to note, however, that what happens in the preschool context is situated and never exactly the same; not all children have the same

experience, for it builds upon not only the participants (children and teachers) but also situational factors such as place, activities, and artifacts.

Second, the particular methods used in both preschools of encouraging children to express their views were different and also had different goals. At Seaside, teachers sought a more equal balance of power between adults and children, as shown by their listening to children's perspectives and supporting them in developing their ideas. When working on projects, for instance, children enjoyed opportunities to influence the process and at the same time were encouraged to consider others' views and to act on behalf of the group. Not only were children's different understandings, opinions, and solutions valued, but also their views and solutions were seen as important to their learning and for planning the preschool practice. Conversely, teachers at Lava Ledge were supposed to direct the activities in the preschool, and the aim was for them to clearly state to children what was allowed and what was not—for example, when they introduced children to ways of interacting and understanding other children's views. Children were taught to not only do what was seen as good and right to others and how to behave according to rules, but also to meet the specific aims of the gender-focused curriculum.

Although the methods of these two different preschools built upon highly divergent views and philosophies, there were also notable similarities especially in terms of the play opportunities children had. These practices can partly be explained by the policy for preschools in Iceland stated in the National Curriculum Guide (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011), and by the child-centered Nordic tradition found in early education in Iceland (Kristjánsson, 2006).

### **7.6.2 The possible pitfalls when putting policy into practice**

In both preschools, teachers held clear views on the best way to interact with children in their communities, which was seen as an important source of learning for children. Nonetheless, there were challenges in implementing such views into practice (according to each preschool's policy document). The pedagogies supported in these different preschools had specific strengths, though both inevitably showed unintended results for children. To be able to avoid some unintended learning, preschool teachers might find it helpful to be observant and acknowledge both the pitfalls and strengths of the preschool's pedagogy.

The possible pitfalls and strengths found in the pedagogy of the two preschools are debated below, in terms of current ideas, such as those put

forward in the National Curriculum Guide (2011). In the Guide, ideas are put forth that emphasize democracy and equality in preschools, where children's perspectives are valued and their participation as competent and active agents contributing to the preschool context is supported (Mayall, 2003; United Nations, 1989).

When analyzing the data, I saw as the most prominent strength at Seaside how children's empowerment was encouraged. These ways of empowering children seemed valuable as a way for children to contribute to the preschool community and demonstrate to themselves and others their competence. Nevertheless, though teachers at Seaside believed in children's strengths and competences and aimed to support children in finding solutions, the methods used did not always reflect these ideals. In the informal way in which choosing activities occurred at Seaside, a child's wish or interest might go unnoticed by teachers, thereby increasing the risk of children not being listened to. Under such circumstances, what was believed to offer every child a chance to express his or her interest and to find solutions may develop into a sort of 'democracy of the strong child.' If, as a result, children's strengths become significantly less visible to teachers, a system could emerge in which some children (e.g., creative ones) are more pampered than others, a situation that Kampmann argues is becoming a new form of normalization (Kampmann, 2004).

At the same time, the weak framing at Seaside, which largely left children to figure out what was expected of them, could also leave some children behind. Though the teachers' aims were to ask children about their views and listen to their suggestions, teachers might be seeking supposedly correct answers without expressing clearly what they are after. Again, such practices could make some children unable to find such answers in difficult situations or even marginalize them. This is related to the issue of cultural variation, too, as certain children, typically those of the majority culture, have access to this knowledge via their upbringing. A similar process might issue from the method frequently used at Seaside when finding solutions to discuss different views and multiple meanings with children, in which there is a risk that the relationships in the group might escape the teacher's notice. The power relations in peer groups could possibly develop into situations in which a few children take most of the initiative and have the greatest influence in making decisions thereby risking that the interests and ideas of some children, were not—or were seldom – included in the group's activities, resulting in these children not feeling included, or being marginalized in the group (Corsaro, 2015; Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2006). At the

same time, these processes are highly situational, and all teachers and children struggle at times with these issues.

From the data, what for me seemed as the most prominent strength of Lava Ledge emerged in the teachers' methods of clearly stating what was allowed and what was not, which, as seen in my observations, seemed to give the children a sense of security that was especially important for children who were marginalized and now heard the teacher take a stand on their behalf, e.g., by restating rules regarding how to behave towards another child. This strength appeared primarily in the messages that teachers gave children regarding what was not allowed, especially when clearly explaining how to behave toward other children. The possible downside of such clear messages is that if a child submits to these rules without understanding the reason for them, then there might be a risk that children begin to set their own rules unbeknownst to the teacher that possibly conflict with the preschool's rules. Similarly, the strong framework used during choice time and the emphasis, in the curricula, on teaching children to follow rules might erode in the hands of teachers. If the rules are too strict and the teacher becomes too controlling, then there is a risk that the children might develop their own rules in what Corsaro (2015) refers to as an 'underculture,' in which children bypass rules and even consult each other in making new rules not necessarily consistent with those of the preschool curricula.

Furthermore, at Lava Ledge, the choice process at times did not function as an opportunity for children to choose an activity of interest. For the children being the last to choose this might bring contradictory consequences. Firstly, for some children this would break the central aim of the choice time to serve children's interests, even though teachers at Lava Ledge held the belief that it would be an important learning for children, that you cannot always get what you want. Secondly, a child not being able to have her or his first choice can possibly use this as an opportunity to have to solve a problem, which also aligns with the Hjalli's aim of supporting children to be independent. Nevertheless, at Lava Ledge, there is the risk that too often children might be unable to play with materials of interest to them, not to mention that the choice of a favorite peer might be missed, and even that he or she needed to be calculating in order to be able to play with a favorite peer. Other researchers (e.g., Corsaro, 2015; Greve, 2009) point out that for some children these situations might be difficult to negotiate, meaning that they will need support in being led to figure things out for themselves (Löfdahl & Hägglund, 2006). This would apply for both

preschools taking part in this study, and probably many others, as these situations typify the experiences of most children in preschools.

### **7.6.3 Multiple factors influencing children's learning processes**

In this study, data generation primarily involved observing in the field while children participated in their preschool contexts. Since the aim was to examine the factors influencing children's learning processes when they participate in preschool groups, information from policy documents (mainly school curricula and the National Curriculum Guide) was used to identify the aims and the planned methods of shaping children's experiences. Both preschools in this study were chosen as representatives of these pedagogies, and had similar percentages of preschool teachers in relation to children. Exploring the learning processes in the different preschools revealed guided participation (Rogoff, 2003) in the two preschools; the teachers' support took many, but also different forms during which children were active and seemed to be learning. Following the learning process in both schools, results show two pedagogies consistent with the aims put forward and the methods revealed in the narrative reports of observations of children. It is worth noting, however, that the pedagogy in each preschool taking part in this study depends on teachers who also build on their professional background, to follow policy and interacting with children. The findings of this study suggest that the pedagogy observed in the two preschools revealed different power balances between teachers and children, as well as fostering different levels of participation, especially during group times. In the pedagogy at Seaside, the importance of cultivating an equitable power balance between teachers and children can be connected to current ideas that emphasize listening to children's perspectives and supporting their participation in and contribution to the preschool context (Bae, 2009; Lansdown, 2005; Mayall, 2003; Prout, 2011; Sommer et al., 2010; United Nations, 1989). These methods aimed to support a more equal power balance between children and teachers, and, at the same time, reflected weakly framed pedagogy, with implicit rules (Bernstein, 1977). When the pedagogy is weakly framed, children might become subject to regulation by the peer culture, rather than building on values and rules the teachers hold and present to the children in the preschool. This appeared in Seaside when the teachers attempted to support Dagur's involvement (e.g., by giving him a role) in the group (see section 5.4.2.2), which did not change his participation in this particular situation. Conversely, teachers at Lava Ledge were supposed to direct the activities in the preschool, and the aim was for them to clearly state to

children what was allowed and what was not—for example, when they introduced children to ways of interacting and understanding other children's views, seen when Axel was excluded by the other boy's (see section 6.6.2.3). Children were taught to not only do what was seen as good and right to others and how to behave according to rules, but also to meet the specific aims of the gender-focused curriculum.

Contradictory ideas appeared in both preschools when exploring normalization processes. Normalization processes, refers to a concept debated by different theoreticians (e.g., Dahlberg et al., 1999; Kampmann, 2004). Kampmann and others, as a rejoinder to some contemporary theoreticians, reject the idea from developmental psychology that conceives of children as being either normal or not normal. However, other theoreticians (Dahlberg et al., 1999) believe that normalization processes occur. These theoreticians suggest replacing the tendency to push children up developmental scales with that of the idea of strong, competent children (see e.g., Kampmann, 2004). The idea of the competent child has been criticized for resulting in each child being responsible for his or her own learning and even risking teachers' normalization of children who, not knowing what is expected of them, spend their time trying to find out.

When following the specific aims of children, such as being creative when working in projects, teachers at Seaside risked establishing a new normalization, such as children being creative enough or not creative enough. At Lava Ledge, by contrast, the teachers' message to children was clear, both about the rules to follow and about what was ethically right and wrong. The teachers told children clearly what was expected of them, and both teachers and children knew what they were supposed to do, as the teachers were clearly establishing the norms.

Therefore, the research shows different power relations in the two preschools, both in relation to teachers' control being stronger in Lava Ledge and more participatory methods in Seaside. In Lava Ledge children learn that they can express their views, and also that they are expected to express them through formal methods, but their views can be influential if they fit with the majority's expressed ideas. In Seaside children learn to express their views and take part in dialogue, negotiations, and co-construction of meaning, with teachers and other children, and to contribute in their daily lives. These different methods are among the factors influencing children's learning processes differently. Furthermore, these different leaning processes seemed to affect power relations within

the peer culture and to influence how children structured meaning and contributed in the peer group (further in the next section 7.6.4).

The findings reveal very different curricula, pedagogy, and participation. But even though children in the two preschool contexts are seen to be supported very differently, the similarities (providing children with opportunities to play and to influence their preschool context) found in both preschools might be more influential in supporting children's learning processes than the formal pedagogy used. The preschool practices observed in this study often revealed that the aims of the school curriculum were followed and put into practice. Such practices, and those where children are given opportunities to play freely and are supported in influencing the daily lives in their preschools, suggests these two factors as influential in supporting children's learning processes.

#### **7.6.4 How are the children learning?**

Children's experiences were described, mainly building on my research notes (written observations, photos, and videos) which were developed through a process of data generation where I attempted to make observations with an open mind and by foregrounding children's competence with the purpose to gain insight into children's learning processes. Building on the research notes, I constructed the children's stories and later analyzed the data in relation to learning dispositions (communication and involvement; well-being and belonging; and contribution and taking responsibility), to reveal how children were learning when they participated in their preschool group.

According to my observations in both preschools, where I focused on children's learning processes, most children appeared to enjoy their interactions in their peer groups and during playtime and other activities, as well as being a part of their peer culture. Most of the time they seemed to conceive of themselves as belonging to the group and having the right to participate, and they used different means when trying to gain control within the group—control that they most often shared with peers. The children's positioning in groups showed different power balances of individuals and in different situations; children most often discovered solutions by supporting each other's views and interests and sometimes succeeded in solving conflicts. In several situations, however, the conflicts remained unsolved, at least for the particular session observed.

The children's stories I constructed building on my observations revealed children's complex learning processes, in greater detail, how

children participated, interacted, and gained knowledge within their preschool contexts. By making these learning processes apparent I saw how the children were learning through their participation; as they took part in play or projects, with or without the teachers' intervention, they frequently managed to find solutions: they were creative, listened to others' perspectives, and expressed their own views. During this learning process they sometimes met with difficulties, and attempted to solve issues or problems. Even when meeting with adversity children used their individual characteristics as a tool to construct meaning, sometimes individually but most of the time in collaboration with others. Making these processes explicit is in my understanding, a useful method to identify children's learning, especially with regard to the socio-cultural factors of learning (e.g., Carr, 2001; Rogoff, 2003) such as emotions and social skills.

The learning processes revealed, in the children's stories (constructed by me), that the children used various methods, characterized by their individual qualities, as they communicated with others. Children were seen to express their views, and often seemed to understand and support others, tackle difficulty, and solve problems. Observations from the groups of children sometimes revealed interactions that seemed to be smooth, even though they often needed to find ways of bridging their different views and ideas, as in the episode where the girls in Lava Ledge developed their play theme (see section 6.6.1). At other times the observations revealed interactions more characterized by conflicts, as was seen when the boys in Lava ledge were playing (see section 6.6.2). Even though the boys in this situation had to handle one difficulty after the other in their interactions, and were constantly seeking solutions, they never really managed to settle their disagreements as they continued to develop their play.

In the diverse and sometimes contradictory situations observed in the two preschools, I detected children's experiences as being the vehicle for their learning. This trend was especially clear when children, via their participation, expressed themselves and were active when solving problems and developing plays, among other activities. Through their participation, children were learning to find solutions. Whether there were many or few disagreements or difficulties visible in the children's interactions, they all the time needed to tackle diverse issues or problems, and they needed to try to find solutions, sometimes succeeding but at other times not. When children needed to overcome difficulties and reconcile conflicts, their leaning processes became even more visible, as they usually vigorously attempted to solve the issues at hand. In some of the situations, in both

preschools, when children managed to solve complex situations, or attempted to do so, they found answers or methods, as was for example seen in Seaside when the children managed to unite profoundly different roles in a creative way and by this include many ideas from the children in the play (see section 5.5.1.3). Through the children's participation in play or other activities, the children's learning processes revealed that they were not only building knowledge about how to be a participant in a group (Rogoff, 2003), and learning about issues of interest for them, but they also were commonly constructing experience, learning from taking part, or 'learning to learn' (e.g., Claxton, 2002).

## **7.7 Summary**

When exploring the multiple factors influencing children's learning processes, the similarities, rather than the differences appeared relevant in relation to the two pedagogies. Even though the children were differently supported and the data revealed diverse power balance within the two preschools, similarities in both schools were detected, as throughout the preschool-day children were provided with ample opportunities to play. These results can be supported by much research corroborating play as preferable to support children's learning (e.g., Johnson et al, 2013; Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006), in diverse areas (such as socioemotional aspects and traditional school subjects), rather than learning where the teachers' goals are leading. This is to say, more learning occurs if the children's play is evolving around their interests or if a preschool teacher takes part in the play ('playpedagogy'), having aims in mind but letting children's interests lead in the play (Wood, 2014). Conversely, 'playpedagogy,' where the teacher controls the aims and outcomes (Wood, 2014), has shown to be less likely to promote children's learning.

In light of these results, how children learn and how their learning processes are supported needs to be debated in relation to certain issues in today's society. In times where part of the policy in Iceland and the most recent OECD papers suggest teaching preschool children specific academic skills, like reading, writing, and math, and even adopting the use of a recent PISA test designed to assess five-year-olds' particular skills, these issues need to be seriously considered. This is especially important as pressure from the notion of how high or low children score in international tests has tended to call for more direct teaching, resulting in less time for play and other activities where the children's interests are leading.

Another similarity of the pedagogy in the two preschools is to be found in both schools planning ways of encouraging children to express their views and to create opportunities for children to influence their daily lives. This occurs although they do it differently, reflected in the different power balance, seen in teachers' more formal control in Lava Ledge and, in Seaside, their approach being closer to participatory methods. The teachers' clear message in Lava Ledge and the more reflective questions or comments from teachers in Seaside, might be related to the contradictory role of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989), found in supporting children's rights and at the same time protecting children. Finding the balance between protecting children and supporting their rights to be competent agents contributing in their lives might be related to the different power relation in the two preschools. In Lava Ledge the stronger framing, leaving more control from adults, might be meant to protect children, while the weaker framing in Seaside presumably is an attempt to support children's rights to take part and contribute to the preschool society (see sections 7.3.4.2, 7.4.2.1, and 7.4.2.2).

The detailed ethnographic data I constructed the children's stories from suggest that in both preschools the majority of children demonstrate specific learning dispositions in relation to: individual characteristics, the social context, and children's contributions to the learning context (see section 2.7.3). In the children's stories, children's individual characteristics appeared in how they: were seen to communicate and be involved, seemed to understand situations, and expressed their ideas and feelings (see section 7.5.1.1). Children's participation in the group (the social context) revealed that most of the time children were interested in taking part in activities, they used similar means of expression during the period observations took place, and their choice of roles tended to be similar in different situations and even to reflect how they preferred to be situated in the group during playtime (see section 7.5.1.2). Finally, children were often seen to contribute to meaning-making in the group, they listened to other children, and took responsibility for what went on in the social context of their preschools. Building on the children's stories and descriptions of how they participated in their preschool groups, the findings revealed how children constructed experience and learned by co-constructing meaning with other children and preschool teachers, when taking part in play and other activities. By describing, in this way, the learning processes in both preschools, children's competencies became explicit, very often showing children as active agents in their lives (Mayall, 2003; United Nations, 1989). Even though children were seen to share experience and foster

relationships of friendship and humor, sometimes children were seen to struggle to find ways of sharing and gaining control in a group of peers, and some children were seen to be at risk of being marginalized (see section 7.5.2.2) in their respective groups.

Different learning processes appeared related to how the two pedagogies supported children's learning processes, and also the peer cultures (Corsaro, 2015) appeared to be differently affected by the diverse school aims in the preschools. In Lava Ledge where the power balance was in favor of the teachers, the tendency for children to develop an underculture with interactions reflecting values far from the preschools more often occurred, such as was explicit when Axel was playing with the other boys but never really was included in the play (see section 7.5.2.2). The preschool teachers talked to the boys openly and reminded them of the rules and everyone's right to have their say; nevertheless, the culture in this particular group continued to be the same: one boy being marginalized. Conversely, in Seaside within the weak framing, the power more often was framed within the peer culture, seen when Dagur was most of the time marginalized (see section 7.5.2.2) during the painting project, even though the teacher, through more indirect interaction, made attempts to include him. The teacher gave the boy a role and attempted to support him to act in this role, nevertheless, the other children in the group made no attempt to include him. In this particular situation the group of children either did not understand the teacher's messages about not excluding one child or they just ignored the values of the preschool culture and the rules of the peer culture, supporting other values, was dominant in their interactions.

In both preschools, the relations between the peer culture and the views and methods presented by teachers as preferable values of the preschool seemed not to be in alignment. In both preschools there were messages that all children should be included in the preschool group; nevertheless, and importantly, what teachers said and what the children did inside the peer culture sometimes tended to be in opposition.

## 8 Conclusion

### 8.1 Introduction

The aim of this study was to give insight into the factors influencing children's learning processes when they participate in two different early childhood preschool contexts and to give a detailed description of how the children are learning in the daily lives as they participate in the respective preschools. The results reveal that the curriculum and pedagogy in the two preschools offer very different degrees of freedom to the children who attend them, and foster different levels of participation, especially within their 'group times.' However, building on detailed ethnographic data, narrative observations were made which provide evidence that in both preschools children's learning processes are surprisingly similar, even though, at the same time clearly impacted by the differing preschool cultures.

This study was conducted in Iceland, where the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989), stating children's right to be heard and gradually to take responsibility for decisions in preschools as well as in society as whole, is supported. This focus also was confirmed in the Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Preschools (1999) which was applicable at the time this study was conducted. The National Curriculum Guide from 1999 emphasized: children's learning through play, and their collaboration in a group of peers, while at the same time building on each child's individual interests. The document built on developmental ideas, but also on contemporary ideas toward children and learning, such as equality and democracy, that have been further developed in the curriculum that has been used since 2011. A main issue in regard to democratic preschool practice, has to do with power balance between preschool teachers and children.

The findings of the current study, with regard to the factors influencing children's learning processes (the first research question), suggest that the pedagogy in the two preschools, which build on different views toward children and their learning, reveal a distinctively different power balance between preschool teachers and children. In Seaside, the preschool teachers at the Reggio Emilia-inspired school seek to equalize the power of teachers and children by giving children the opportunity to discuss solutions

and possibilities and to be a part of finding ways to include each other's ideas. In contrast, the preschool teachers in Lava Ledge using the Hjalli approach see it as their responsibility to hold the power and give children clear messages about what is allowed with regard to rules and behavior toward others. Consequently, there was variation in the degree of participation that the children were allowed in decision making in their daily activities and the preschool planning, especially within their 'group times.'

In most preschools, observations from both schools show preschool practice corroborating with the respective aims of the school curricula, even though, as might be expected the pedagogy occurs within very different frames.

The main findings of this study in relation to Seaside show that the Reggio Emilia-inspired preschool makes explicit the aims of providing children with opportunities to co-construct meaning and, through project work, to take part in creative activities with the help of a supportive preschool teacher. In addition, the teachers' methods involve creating an atmosphere yielding rich opportunities for children to play. Furthermore, a part of the preschool practice reveals an attempt to work toward a power balance with the children, and to support children to be agents in their daily lives.

The main findings of this study in relation to Lava Ledge show that the main aims—teaching children to behave according to rules and learn activities seen as strong in the opposite gender—are made explicit in the preschool practice. Even though the Hjalli pedagogy preschool makes the strong framing of the method explicit, it might appear stronger on the surface than in practice, inviting opportunities for the children to play freely, interact, and find solutions together with their peers. Further inference might be related to the daily schedule providing a balance of teacher-directed and child-directed activities, where the plan is alternating 'choice time' and 'group time,' where at 'choice time,' the children have opportunity to control the play situation with their peers and at 'group time' the teachers are in control. The children's interaction in the two preschools revealed experience from their participation, that were related to the different main aims in the schools. Explored in Seaside, the children seemed familiar with co-constructing play themes and working together, while the children at Lava Ledge had discussion during play time about what was fair or not fair towards themselves and other children.

The differences seen in the two preschools can be related to current theories and research. On one hand, as expected, the Reggio Emilia–inspired preschool reflects post-modern views representing children as strong and active participants in their preschool context (Dahlberg et al., 1999) and supports children to be active participants in the preschool, having the right to influence their lives and being competent learners able to engage actively and contribute to society (Lansdown, 2005; Mayall, 2003). On the other hand, the pedagogy in Hjalli reflects a different understanding of appropriate preschool aims and practices, building on clearly showing aims and rules and the belief in teachers knowing what is best for the children (Wood, 2010). Furthermore, the Hjalli pedagogy can be related to recent research confirming that to offer children a balance between teacher-initiated group work and freely chosen play activities is preferable (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004).

Even though there were distinct differences in these two preschools, clear similarities were found in the ample opportunities given the children to play and the specific, but very different, methods used in both schools to encourage children to express their views. In the study, the children were, in both preschools, observed during their free-play, when adult control was replaced by the rules of the peer culture. Their participation in free play frequently gave evidence of their ability to collaborate in highly developed play, which involved planning, communicating, solving problems, and negotiating peer relationships.

This finding is consistent with earlier work on the benefits of free play for children’s learning and provided insight into what the children in these preschool groups did. By focusing on children’s learning processes when they played, learned, and interacted in a group, the influence of the peer cultures clearly appeared. Within the group, the children built peer culture and, depending on situation and individual children, attempted to gain control in the group. Most children seemed to sense belonging most of the time and were observed to support each other’s involvement as they shared experiences with each other, even though they, at the same time, were seen to be differently situated in the group and to hold different degrees of power.

The findings suggest that this aspect of the children’s daily experience may be more influential for their learning and development than the specific pedagogy employed by the adults when working with the children. In spite of the very different practices, the detailed descriptions from the children’s narrative observations produced information about the children’s

interactions, especially featuring their strengths and the challenges they meet. Within both preschool contexts, all the children interacted and found solutions and commonly constructed experience: the children used methods characterized by their individual qualities, built knowledge about how to take part in group activities, acquired knowledge they needed to be able to influence their participation, and learned about issues of interest for them.

## **8.2 Limitations**

This study was influenced by ethnographic methods, with the aim to examine closely how two different preschool contexts support children's learning processes. However, apart from the similarities in the two preschools giving the children opportunities to play freely and influence their daily lives, the similarities might also be explained by the homogeneity found in Icelandic society and preschools in general. The similarities can be explained not only by the policy for preschools in Iceland stated in the National Curriculum Guide (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 1999; 2011) but also by the inspiration from the child-centered Nordic tradition found in early education in Iceland (Kristjánsson, 2006).

My intention when reflecting together with the children was to include their understanding and views in the data-gathering process in order to come closer to the children's views on their participation. The reflection meetings, however, worked more as a means to build trust between the children and me, which was an important ethical issue. Looking back, I suggest that planning a discussion building on the children's initiative and interest might have brought a stronger insight into the children's perspectives. Furthermore, to explore and further develop research methods to include children's views in future research, I, as a researcher, might need to develop an even closer relationship with the children and to participate with more time and intensity. The delicacy of interpreting children's different expressions when aiming to include children's views also was an issue I needed to address. I had to tread carefully and to avoid imposing my own ideas upon a child and be aware that a child's reaction might be an attempt to please me, the researcher. These issues were discussed earlier (see sections 4.3.2 and 4.7).

There also was a limitation related to the choice of methods for the data generation, being inspired by the Learning Story Approach. This choice might have favored one of the participating preschools, the Reggio Emilia-inspired one, as the ideas and methods of the Learning Story Approach and

the Reggio Emilia methods are somewhat similar, both building on socio-cultural views, while the ideas the Hjalli pedagogy builds on are largely focused on changing children's behavior. Furthermore, my own views also were closer to the Reggio Emilia-inspired preschool, which I addressed by: being as non-judgmental as possible through the data generation process, explaining my own views, and supporting the study with a theoretical frame (see sections 1.2 and 1.3). Nevertheless, a research design using a more participatory method—not only with the children but also more reciprocal interaction with the teachers as partners in generating the data, especially in the Hjalli preschool—might have provided different information. The observations on children's learning processes might have given an even closer insight into the 'children's perspectives,' especially the children's views on how they understood their own participation.

### **8.3 Policy implications**

Information from the field notes in the two preschools give insight into the children's everyday lives, revealing very different pedagogies in the two schools but also similarities manifested in the ample provision of play for children and their opportunities to influence life in preschool. In both preschools, children played and interacted with their peers and teachers—with varying level of intervention—and they expressed themselves, found solutions, and tried to understand others. The children often were able to have their say within the preschool, even though they were being listened to within very different frames, in relation to the different pedagogies and power relations. Therefore, the findings suggest that the children's daily experience in play-based activities and the opportunities they have to influence their preschool context are among the factors influential for their learning and development and may even be more important than the specific curricular strategies used in each preschool.

The implications for policy decisions in Icelandic preschool education include a strong claim for child-centered and play-based learning experiences. This was suggested in the data from the two different preschools taking part in this study, revealed in the similarities found in the two preschools. The findings of this study add to previous research stating the importance of providing children in preschools with ample opportunities to play (Johnson et al., 2013; Wood, 2014). The results also reveal children as competent when they express their ideas, interests, and views thorough participation, when they listen to other children, and when they are able to contribute to meaning-making processes in their preschool

group. By revealing children's learning processes, this study shows that children are able to be competent agents, an image of children supported by many theoreticians (e.g., Dahlberg et al., 1999; Mayall, 2003; Lansdown, 2005), and stipulated by the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989). According to the Convention, teachers, and other adults in children's lives, should support children's rights to be heard and to be participants in decision-making in preschools, as well as in society as whole. At the same time adults need to acknowledge that children have the rights to be protected against adversity; that is, their vulnerability needs to be addressed. The preschool teachers taking part in this study planned methods to support children as participants in their preschool groups, and they attempted to protect children against adversity, such as being marginalized by other children. In the observations in this study, as expected, the preschool teachers' methods were not, at all times, helpful to children, as appeared in Daniel's and Axel's cases (see section 7.5.2). Unavoidably, in the two participating schools, as probably in most other preschools, a more balanced way to support children's agency needs to be sought.

The findings of this study give reason to suggest that seeking a balance between protecting children and supporting their rights to be full participants in their own lives will appear differently in the different cultural context of each preschool, as the peer culture is constructed by those taking part in it. Thus, there will be diverse values supported within different groups, and probably often not the same as in the preschools. It is worth noting that this not only applies to the responsibility of preschool teachers and parents, but also to all those responsible for policy and putting it into practice; i.e., the government and municipalities.

Furthermore, in order to protect preschool education and ensure that five-year-old children are provided with play-based education, the preschools' stakeholders might want to address several challenges.

The first challenge addressed here is related to the importance of prohibiting the 'flow' of *primary school ideology and methods* into the preschools. Preschools in Iceland, as in other Western countries, have not escaped the tendency of primary school ideology and methods being imposed on the preschool (Einarsdóttir, 2013). Not only does the National Curriculum Guide (2011) in Iceland state the importance of children learning through play and experiencing well-being and agency in their schools, but these issues are also relevant for countries that have adopted *The Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989), as Iceland

has. In order to align with Icelandic policies and the results of research, the current one and others, those responsible for preschool practice in Iceland might want to safeguard children's opportunities to play and to be heard and have agency in their preschools. In line with this, the responsible authorities might consider guaranteeing a provision for five-year-olds that provides children with a play-based curriculum.

The second challenge is related to the view that all children have the right to be well educated, which also is according to Icelandic policy, even though there is a debate about what that means. Some views are related to the ongoing debate that *children need to be 'properly' taught in a direct-teaching manner*, even young children. In Iceland, as in many other countries, the ongoing public debate focuses on children's educational outcomes. This sometimes can be related to results from PISA, testing children, or requesting more concrete proof of children's learning (Moss et al., 2016) which has provoked a discussion in which a part of the population wants children to be traditionally taught. Some of these views are related to methods developed and used in past primary schools, where sociocultural situations were profoundly different and education was built on different beliefs and even had different aims. Methods used according to these views might call for teaching and learning for children in preschools, where most of children's time in school would be taken up in formal learning and setting aside the claim for providing children with opportunities to play and influence their daily activities, which would be opposing what the current study, and many others suggest. Furthermore, the current study reveals how children, given the opportunity to play and interact with their peers, sought and sometimes managed to find solutions, and constructed and shared knowledge with peers. Also, this study reveals how the children used methods characterized by their individual qualities, suggesting that observing and documenting children's activities might be helpful for preschool teaches as a way to support children's learning based on what is of interest for them. These suggestions also might comply with the policy put forward in the current Icelandic National Curriculum Guide (2011), such as valuing play as both an aim and a method, emphasizing democracy, well-being, equality, and interpersonal relationships in preschool education.

The third challenge is related to the debate about *what kind of level of schooling for five-year-old children is appropriate*. The results of the current study show that among the important factors influencing children's learning processes in preschools are giving children opportunities to play freely, with the support of a teacher, and to influence their preschool contexts.

Research results suggest Icelandic preschools and primary schools are quite different, children in primary schools typically being provided with strong frames and work on teacher-controlled assignments, while children in preschools have play-based opportunities to interact, learn and in general have more power (Einarsdóttir, 2007b; 2004). Furthermore, research on play and learning suggests that teaching young children by direct methods has little value, as they learn less than in play-based situations (Johnson et al., 2013). This means that provision for five-year-old children in Iceland should be places where they are given opportunity to play, to be active in what interests them. Therefore, the challenge for those who already have planned or are planning to move five-year-olds to the next level of schooling (from pre- to primary school) is to develop pedagogy that values children's right to play and influence their own daily lives so that children can be supported to learn by being active taking part in activities of interest for them, in interaction with other children and teachers. This study shows that there are many benefits to providing five-year-old children with play-based learning. In order to develop such practice, it might be helpful for stakeholders including teachers, parents, and policymakers to re-examine their views towards children and their learning. But most importantly, schooling for this age group, as for children in general, would gain from listening to and valuing children's perspectives.

#### **8.4 Implications for preschool communities**

The implications for Icelandic and international preschools is related to protecting children's opportunities to play, developing play-based learning, and creating methods to make children's learning through play and creativity visible or measurable. One way of doing so is to use observations of preschool practice in order to give insight into how children take part and interact in the preschool group, and another is to explore the teachers' participation as children play and take part in other activities. Furthermore, information from the current study and the information coming from preschool teachers' observations can be an inspiration to critically discuss and plan opportunities children are given to have their say and to exercise agency in their lives.

The data generation in the current study focused on children's learning processes. Children's stories, constructed from observations in the field, provided and made explicit details of what happened in the children's everyday lives. There is a question if insights into the particularities (e.g., Mac Naughton, 2005; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005) in the two different

preschool communities taking part in this study might be a support for preschool teachers wanting to come closer to children's perspectives and perhaps be an encouragement to those wanting to look further than the general and traditional views toward children and their learning has allowed (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). This is why I want to propose a discussion building on exploring the particularities of what can be observed when children participate in preschool contexts (perhaps starting with the data revealed in the two preschools taking part in the current study). I also would like to ask if this kind of discussion could be among as many of the stakeholders as possible, including preschool teachers, parents, children and policymakers. My hope is that building on discussions about the particularities in preschools could support the development of preschool practice valuing children's rights to be active participants in their social contexts, as the Icelandic National Curriculum Guide (2011) and policy in many other countries suggest. Perhaps, this kind of discussion could also result in the children themselves and the adults in their lives becoming more aware of what children are capable of, both individually and in a group.

One of the findings from the current study suggests that preschools and preschool teachers develop pedagogy which takes into an account the nature of children's peer culture. In this study, the teachers used different methods to support children's interaction in peer groups, with more explicit methods in Lava Ledge and more implicit methods in Seaside. Nonetheless, the preschool teachers in both schools wanted to improve the methods they used when interacting with the group of children. This appeared in observations from both preschools; in Seaside, for example, when the teacher made an attempt to support the boy, Dagur, to express his views when the children were looking at their painting through cones (in Step 31, Phase 3). Other examples also were seen in Lava Ledge, as when Suzy, the teacher, came into a room where the boys were playing and Axel was excluded, her comments were meant to encourage the other boys to listen to Axel's wishes (see narrative 6f, section 6.3.3). Perhaps by looking more closely into these complex interactions, the teachers might be able to find ways to help children develop more inclusive interactions within their peer group. Which, in addition, is in line with the provided curriculum guidelines in Iceland, maintaining that children should be supported in having positive and constructive interaction within the group of children (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2011). In order to better understand the complexities of play, teachers might gain more from exploring children's play and activities; such as by listening closely to the children's

explanations, about how the play scenario is planned by the children. Furthermore, to meet the children and the cultural values in their peer culture, rather than try to impose the school culture's rules to the children's play situation.

## **8.5 Research on pedagogy**

From the beginning, the intention of this study was to make visible how the two different contexts influenced children's learning processes. Another important issue was to envisage children's learning processes in the different preschools, to look into their interaction when participating in the group of children in the preschool they attended. Rather than foregrounding the practice of the preschool teachers, an effort was made to focus on what happened in the group of children, trying to come closer to the children's perspectives, which in the view of Sommer et al. (2010) means focusing on children's experiences, perceptions, understanding and self-knowledge.

Through the data generation I expected children's participation to appear differently in the two preschools—not only to see different pedagogy, but also to detect some differences in relation to the children's learning processes. Thus, through the data generation it came as a surprise that much of what the children were provided with in terms of opportunities to play, be active, and interact with other children, was similar and a part of the aims of the two pedagogies was the same, i.e., playing and being active, co-operation with other children and teachers, developing friendships, finding solutions for themselves and others, developing a positive self-image (see table 7.A). In addition, the evidence of the children's participation, seen in the children's stories, also was surprisingly similar. When children took part and communicated they had: individual ways of interacting in different situations; nearly always seemed interested in the activity at hand; expressed their views and wishes; and frequently supported another child. This was more evident during choice time, although in the group time, which was often more structured, similar interaction methods also appeared.

Among the contribution of this study is evidence making explicit that the pedagogy planned and used in preschools does not always on the surface appear the same as in practice and seen from the children's perspective. In this case, a pedagogy that on the surface appeared to be under strong control from the preschool teachers was not at all times so in practice (Lava Ledge, the Hjalli pedagogy). The children's learning processes where

differently supported in the two preschools, revealing in Lava Ledge a more strongly framed control from the teachers, while in Seaside the weak framing was more common. In Lava Ledge, the interaction and opportunities found within the strong framing—not only in the planned opportunities for children, to play freely, interact, and find solutions together with their peers, but also in the support by the pedagogy the teachers used in the group time. Similarly, a pedagogy supported by emergent curriculum (Seaside, the Reggio Emilia pedagogy), with aims to include children’s views and support their participation in a preschool valuing democracy, often did so. Still, there also were organized frames and teacher-led times, which were not specifically stated in the school curriculum. Furthermore, the weak framing required the children to figure out for themselves the teachers’ expectations and therefore might make some children feel insecure and unsupported by the teachers.’ These findings are witness to the well-known gap often existing between the aims and practices in preschools.

## **8.6 Further research**

Further research might be related to several issues such as: power relations in peer groups, gender aspects, and how preschool teachers and assistant teachers with different backgrounds put curricular aims into practice.

The current study revealed power relations within the group of children, where children supported each other but also sometimes excluded other children. As the research notes show, some children were seen to struggle to belong to the group. This appeared particularly with regard to children with non-Icelandic cultural backgrounds. As the number of these children in this study was low, further research including more children or a more thorough study, focusing in more detail on the participation of children from non-dominant ethnic backgrounds, might be informative. Other research has confirmed that children from minority cultural backgrounds struggle as the power balance within the group of children tends to be to their disadvantage (e.g., Þórðardóttir, 2012). Nevertheless, in Iceland more research should be conducted with the aim of gaining a better understanding about these interactions, which would both be interesting and useful for the preschool teachers supporting these children.

Even though one of the preschools taking part in this study had as one of the main aims to work with gender equality, gender aspects were not included in the focus of the current study. What was detected from the data did not provide reasons to address gender issues in particular, which

might be explained by the research methods and the theoretical perspectives used. This study's design included a focus on children's strengths and their co-construction in a preschool group, and did not particularly focus on differences related to the children's gender. Research that would bring forward a stronger focus on the gender issue, on girls' and boys' learning processes, might give insight into if and in what way/s, the gendered curriculum influenced the children's play and learning.

The preschool teachers taking part in the current study were chosen by their head teachers as being experienced and skilled professionals; thus, planning a research project where the participants were a mixture of preschool teachers and other staff might provide information on how or if the curricular aims were differently put into practice depending on issues such as experience, education, and other personal factors.

## **8.7 Summary**

The curriculum and pedagogy in the two preschools were quite different, offering contrasting degrees of freedom and control to the children. Yet evidence of the children's processes as they participate in a group were surprisingly similar in the two preschools, as revealed in the children's stories I constructed and analyzed in terms of learning dispositions. Observations from both preschools give evidence of how the children frequently collaborated in highly developed play involving planning, communication, solving problems, and negotiating peer relationships. The findings suggest that the children's daily experience in play-based activities may be more influential for their learning processes than the specific curricular strategies in each preschool.

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## Appendix – Letters of information and approval

Reykjavík 2009 - 2010

### Til rekstraraðila/leikskólastjóra/leikskólakennara/foreldra

Tilgangur þessa bréfs er að leita eftir samþykki þínu/ykkar til að vinna að rannsókn í leikskólanum.

Ég heiti Kristín Karlsdóttir og starfa við Menntavísindasvið Háskóla Íslands þar sem ég kenni verðandi leikskólakennurum og vinn að rannsóknnum tengdum leikskólastarfi. Auk þess er ég nemandi við Institute of Education í London þar sem ég stunda doktorsnám.

Markmið rannsóknar minnar er að meta félagslega og tilfinningalega þætti í námi leikskólabarna. Gagnaöflun felst í því að ég, í samvinnu við leikskólakennara, skrái námssögur barna, skoða þær og greini samskipti á milli barna og á milli barna og fullorðinna í daglegu starfi. Skráning námssagna fer fram með fjölbreyttum hætti, skriflega, myndir teknar, myndverk barna skoðuð ásamt myndbandsupptökum.

Leitað verður til tveggja leikskóla á höfuðborgarsvæðinu, einn starfar í anda Reggio Emilia og annar samkvæmt Hjallastefnunni. Megintilgangur rannsóknarinnar er að að meta vellíðan og félagslegan styrk barna á leikskólaaldri. Það skal áréttað að markmiðið er ekki að bera þessar ólíku starfsaðferðir saman heldur að meta hvað börnin geta og gera þegar markmið og leiðir eru að nokkru ólík, eins og er um þessar aðferðir.

Markmiðið er að hefja samstarf við þá leikskóla sem verða fyrir valinu í október 2009. Á tímabilinu september til desember mun ég vinna að gagnaöflun, ásamt starfsfólki og börnum í leikskólanum. Undirritaður verður samningur um samstarf við alla þá sem taka virkan þátt í gagnaöflun þ.e. við leikskólakennara og foreldra barna sem taka þátt í rannsókninni. Um meðferð gagna gilda sömu reglur og almennt í þeim leikskólum sem rannsóknin fer fram í og verður fyllsta trúnaðar gætt varðandi upplýsingar er varða einstök börn, fjölskyldur þeirra og leikskólana sem taka þátt.

Ef þú óskar eftir frekari upplýsingum varðandi verkefnið eða vilt koma á framfæri atriðum varðandi rannsóknina er þér velkomið að hafa samband í gegnum síma eða tölvupóst.

Bestu þakkir fyrir jákvæð viðbrögð við samvinnu.

Kristín Karlsdóttir, lektor

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