



Article

Co-Creation of Navigational Spaces When Facilitating Children's Play

Marion Oen

Western Norway University of Applied Sciences

Email: marion.oen@bergen.kommune.no

Abstract

Facilitating children's play is an important but potentially frustrating task for teachers in the field of Early Childhood Education and Care. Play is often understood as essential for children, and frequently being excluded from play is often experienced as problematic; Still, teachers are often uncertain about how to do play and there is a growing concern about the disappearance of play.

This study aims to explore and identify navigational spaces for teachers to exercise agency when facilitating children's play, and this article presents the co-creation of four such spaces. The co-creation has been done through a series of workshops and play initiations over six months, explored by ECEC teachers in conjunction with the author. The workshops are anchored in critical theory, and the idea is that the participants enrich the project through their various forms of expertise.

Abductive analysis through workshops and a thematic analysis of sound and video recordings of these events shows the co-creation of the navigational spaces of *framing*, *conditioning*, *timing*, and *knowledging* to be central. To be able to co-create these navigational spaces, the repeated collective questioning and knowledge contributions of teachers and the researcher seem to be a central factor. By critically considering and exploring co-creational possibilities both the researcher and the teachers extended their play-facilitating repertoire and made the play-facilitating efforts increasingly explicit. This suggests that it is possible to simultaneously develop practice and scientific knowledge if interactions between the education sector and academia are facilitated. These insights will be beneficial for further investigations and innovations.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education and Care, collaborative research, abductive and thematic analysis



©2023 Marion Oen. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), allowing third parties to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format and to remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially, provided the original work is properly cited and states its license.

through workshops, kindergarten teachers' agency, play facilitating repertoire

Facilitating for children's play in the ECEC

The purpose of this research is to identify and co-create navigational spaces for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) teachers to exercise agency in facilitating for children's play. Play is fundamental for children, so much so that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989, Art. 31) explicitly highlight that "Every child has the right to rest, relax, play and to take part in cultural and creative activities". This emphasises that children's need for play is on par with their need for rest and leisure. As of 03.08.2023, 196 countries have ratified this convention (UN, 2023).

However, the understanding and definition of what play is, can, and should be vary (Johnson et al., 2005; Skovbjerg, 2016; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Rentzu et al. (2019) investigated how play is understood and applied in eight different countries, and found that in some of these countries, there is a dominant "play ethos," while in others, a tendency towards "schoolification" exists, resulting in a debate characterised by tensions between what is often referred to as academic learning and a more holistic approach. One might therefore think that seriousness and play are opposites, and that any link between them appears paradoxical, but Stelzer argues that plays seriousness can be intelligently grasped (2023).

In the Norwegian kindergartens, a preference for a holistic approach is evident, where children's self-initiated play is emphasised, and specific learning outcomes are secondary side effects (Sadownik, 2022). ECEC teachers hold the daily responsibility of ensuring that all children have access to play opportunities, but the way play is perceived is important because it influences which aspects of play provision that may take precedence. Nevertheless, challenges arise in fostering an inclusive play environment, as evidenced in Sadownik' research (2018). She highlights that teachers often automatically perceive children as part of the children's community, but that children experience that they must continuously position themselves in the play (Sadownik, 2018, p. 959). This implies that some children require assistance and backing from the teachers. Despite play's acknowledged significance in ECEC, real-world circumstances might limit the extent of children's free and spontaneous play (Bae, 2018).

To effectively facilitate play in practice, ECEC teachers face significant demands. One notable pedagogical challenge is the realisation that neither controlling children's play nor leaving inclusion entirely to them is feasible. This conundrum places pedagogues in a complex didactic situation, and teachers express uncertainty about how to do play (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Pyle et al., 2017). Children, on the other hand, frequently understand play as something that belongs to their own peer culture, and therefore seems to protect it from adult intervention (Olsson, 2023).

3 Facilitating Children's Play

The capacity of individual teachers to facilitate children's play is grounded in their observations, actions, and theorising on pedagogical practice. Further potential lies in collectively reflecting on new possibilities in these situations, empowering participants to act with a broader repertoire. Against this background, this study poses the following research questions:

Which navigational spaces for facilitating children's play in the ECEC is it possible to co-create through workshops?

To address this question, this project employs a systematic and exploratory approach, where workshops and play sessions are the main elements. The study builds on the collaborative effort of two municipality owned ECECs in Norway and a researcher co-funded by the Research Council of Norway and the municipality. The researcher has prior experience working within the agency for kindergarten and had already established valuable connections within the local community before the start of the project.

Navigational spaces

The objective of this study is two-folded: firstly, it is to cultivate an enhanced play environment for children, and secondly, to co-create and identify navigational spaces for teachers to exercise agency in this regard. Central to both these objectives are the understanding that education should lead to action and social change, enabling learners to apply their knowledge and critical thinking skills to address real-world problems. This is in line with the empowering intentions in Freire's (1970/2014) book titled *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Here he challenges traditional models of education that promote banking-style education, where teachers deposit knowledge into passive students. Freire advocates for a transformative approach to education that empowers learners and addresses the dynamics of oppression and inequality. He argues that education should be a collaborative process where both educators and learners engage in a dialogue to critically analyse and understand their social reality (Freire, 1970/2014).

Freire's (1970/2014) concept of 'conscientization' or 'critical consciousness' is central in his work and involves helping individuals develop a critical awareness of their social and political context, which enables them to analyse and challenge oppressive systems. This concept is directly related to the concept of agency, as it encourages individuals to become agents of change in their own lives and communities. Agency is often understood as a complex and multifaceted concept that refers to the capacity of individuals to make intentional choices, exercise control over their actions, and have an impact on their environment. It encompasses the actor's ability to act independently, make decisions, and influence the outcomes of one's actions. In the educational sector there is a need to critically discuss educational values and examine how values impact pedagogical practice, furthering professional development (Juul-Wiese, 2023). To be able to do this when facilitating children's play in the ECEC an awareness of once navigational space might

help.

The concept of navigational space build on an understanding of pedagogy of the third space as a room of exploration (Eikset & Ødegaard), and that pedagogy of third space actively acknowledges the co-existing of realities, leading to more empowered teaching at the local level (Gupta, 2015). The concept emphasises the idea that individuals navigate and make choices within specific contexts that are influenced by various factors, such as social norms, cultural values, institutional structures, and personal experiences.

In the context of early childhood education and care, navigational spaces may refer to the environments in which teachers and children interact and engage in activities. These spaces include physical environments like classrooms and play areas, as well as social and cultural contexts that shape interactions and learning experiences. Navigational spaces may be co-created in workshops if we construct them around the concepts of trajectories, knowledging, exploration and the knowledgeable other (understood as both as workshop participants and theory).

Co-creative workshops

The workshops employed in this research are rooted in critical theory (Freire, 1970). The purpose is to establish an environment that empowers participants to critically engage with their surroundings and actively contribute to social transformation. Utilising workshops as a research method has multiple advantages, including the facilitation of diverse participants' contributions, enabling the co-creation of new knowledge (Nonaka, 1994). Workshops can also serve as 'third spaces' for professional learning and development, challenging the hierarchy between academic and practice-based knowledge (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Daza et al., 2021; Eikset & Ødegaard, 2020).

Moreover, the workshops are grounded in the concept of praxis (Freire, 1970), which encompasses more than mere practice—it is understood as rooted, justified, situated, and contextualised practice. This concept addresses the epistemological relationship between knowledge as universal and knowledge as particular, as well as the interplay between context as independent and context as dependent (Oliveira-Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012). Praxis coordinates the process of developing theory and practice, contributing to the creation of practical theory and theoretical practices. It involves transforming implicit knowledge into explicit knowledge. Explicit knowledge, in turn, plays a vital role in enabling the transformation of practice. The goal is to integrate theories, practices, and beliefs to generate insights into change processes, thereby creating knowledge about praxis and enabling transformative change (Oliveira-Formosinho & Formosinho, 2012).

A central aspect of the workshops employed in this research is co-creation based on abductive reasoning, as abductive reasoning can provide a strong epistemological foundation for generating new knowledge and

understanding (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). An abductive approach to co-design, as highlighted by Hurley et al. (2021), incorporates expert knowledge while exploring user perspectives, extending our understanding beyond established practices. Abductive analysis usually begins with the data and then forms possible explanations, interpretations, or theories that could account for the patterns or phenomena observed. This allows researchers to explore complex and context-specific phenomena and can lead to the development of fresh perspectives and theoretical frameworks. Abductive research, as described by Moscoso and Palacios (2019), combines elements from inductive and deductive methodologies, necessitating a solid grasp of existing theories and the formulation of hypotheses based on surprising findings (Timmermans & Tavory, 2022). The method is particularly useful when studying topics where existing theories might not fully explain observed phenomena or when seeking to make sense of complex, real-world situations.

Method

This study is part of a research strategy by the Research Council of Norway (see Jones et al., 2023 - in this issue) facilitating innovation in the public sector through, e.g., developing profession-oriented and practical knowledge, recognised by professional practitioners, and contributing to the profession's improvement. This project addresses the need for more knowledge about the teacher's role in play within the ECEC. In my pursuit of deeper insights into the research question, I aimed to establish a collaborative partnership with educators in the field. Regrettably, the closure of most ECEC facilities due to the COVID-19 pandemic limited access to the ECECs. Nevertheless, my status as an OFFPHD candidate employed by the municipality during the lockdown ensured access to the field.

Research kindergartens

Prior to collaboration, a series of contact points were strategically conducted. First, an online meeting was organised, bringing together key stakeholders including the agency director, local bureaucrats, headmasters from the kindergartens, and the researcher. Additionally, there was an exchange of emails with kindergarten headmasters who had expressed interest in the project. These contact points served as an introduction, establishing the framework for the upcoming collaboration. Moreover, project presentations were delivered to teachers within the potential participating ECECs. These presentations aimed to foster an open and constructive dialogue, encouraging a free exchange of thoughts and ideas among the educators. Lastly, ongoing email exchanges with educational leaders to ensure practical arrangements were necessary for a successful collaboration.

At first, six ECECs were invited to participate in this project, and out of those, two confirmed their willingness. Unfortunately, one of the kindergartens chose to withdraw from the project. However, another

kindergarten expressed interest in participating, leading to a collaboration involving two kindergartens—referred to here as Sunnydale and Golden Gate for anonymity purposes. It's worth noting that the researcher is employed by the agency responsible for kindergartens in the municipality, and all the contacted kindergartens were municipally owned. Despite this, participation in the research project was voluntary, and the majority of the invited declined to participate. Next, I will provide a brief presentation of the two participating ECECs.

Sunnydale:

Sunnydale is a municipally owned ECEC situated in a natural environment close to hiking trails and local playgrounds. The kindergarten comprises four departments, with the one participating in this project caters to 22 children aged 3 to 6. The teachers within this department are all female, representing diverse backgrounds in terms of first language, age, and education. While the ECEC typically serves a student body with around 85% of children with non-majority language backgrounds, the participating child-group exclusively consists of dual-language speakers.

Golden Gate:

Golden Gate is a municipally owned ECEC situated in a natural environment with convenient access to forests, the sea, and mountains. The kindergarten comprises six departments, and the one participating in this project caters to 24 children aged 3 to 6. The teachers from this department were all native Norwegian speakers, showcasing diversity in terms of gender, age, and education. While the ECEC generally has approximately 20% of children with non-majority language backgrounds, the participating child-group exclusively consisted of native Norwegian speakers.

Since the researcher had previous experience working with both Sunnydale and Golden Gate, it was possible to establish a degree of trust and optimise time management, even during the lockdown. However, collaborating with the field during this period presented challenges, for instance it involved carefully scheduling and adjusting appointments to adhere to local COVID-19 regulations.

The workshops and intermediate play sessions

The ECECs participated in four 1,5 hours workshops each, with subsequent intermediate work from august 2021 to January 2022. The entire staff working with the children, including the headmaster, pedagogical leaders, skilled workers, assistants, students, and apprentices as well as the researcher were invited to the workshops. The individuals participating in each workshop was determined by the kindergartens, resulting in some variations. Despite the impact of the pandemic on the staffing situation, the ECECs made dedicated efforts to take part in the workshops and the kindergarten's core staff, including the pedagogical leaders, were present throughout the process. The ECECs adopted different solutions to enable the teachers' participation in the workshops. Sunnydale arranged the workshops in the evening and compensated staff with overtime pay, Golden Gate organised a daytime system where other teachers looked after the children. All workshops were conducted in person at the ECECs, except for one that had to be held digitally due to COVID-19 restrictions.

In advance of the workshops, the researcher prepared a guide, and this was developed from the understanding that an interview guide is a manuscript that structures the interview process more or less tightly (Kvale & Brinkman, 2012, p. 143). When creating the guide, the research question, the theoretical explorations, and the preceding workshop(s) were central. The guide served as a preparation tool but was not directly implemented during the workshops.

The first workshop began by posing the question, 'What is play?'. Participants shared their insights and, in collaboration with the researcher, identified areas for improving the ECEC's play environment. Together, we then explored ways to enhance play facilitation, combining practical experience with theoretical knowledge to encourage innovation. These discussions served a dual purpose to both explore and to innovate play facilitation practices. In each workshop, we selected a focus for the intermediate period, planning at least two play sessions.

The planned play sessions followed schedules for timing, location, and participant groups, but the content was spontaneously co-created by the children, deviating from the scenarios imagined in the teacher workshops. Each play session started with a children's meeting to consider the upcoming play, but the actual play unfolded separately. The researcher observed one of the planned intermediate play sessions between each workshop, while ECEC teachers documented the other(s).

In the second, third, and fourth workshops, we discussed the intermediate play and the adult participants' experiences. The researcher encouraged open discussions during which all the participants (including the researcher) shared their observations from the intermediate period, illuminating elements that seemed important. We then integrated relevant theories into the conversation to identify areas for further exploration and recognise overarching themes. While some participants were familiar with these theories, others were introduced to them, and additional readings were conducted between workshops to deepen our theoretical knowledge. This approach, blending theories and practical insights, guided us in innovative planning for upcoming play sessions. The second and third workshops concluded by pinpointing new themes for exploration within the intermediate play sessions. The fourth workshop concluded with a meta-discussion focusing on the workshop methodology.

A thematic analysis through workshops

The data analysis in this project took departure in the process of thematic analysis outlined as a six-step process by Braun and Clark (2006), but some modifications to this process were made, resulting in a two-phased process. Firstly, the participants reflected abductively and analysed their doings during the workshops, implementing theory and taking a meta perspective on their doings. Subsequently a thematic analysis of the gathered data material was done by the researcher alone.

Table 1. An overview of the analysis process:

Step in the analysis	Phase one: analysis conducted in the workshops using experience of intermediate play sessions as data material	Phase two: analysis conducted after the workshops using audio recordings of the workshops and video recording of intermediate play sessions as data material
Step 1 - Familiarising yourself with your data	Participants experiences were shared	Transcribing, reading, and rereading were done by the researcher
Step 2 - Generating initial codes	Discussions lead to identifying elements of importance	Not done after the workshops
Step 3 - Searching for themes	Meta discussions including theory led to identification of overarching themes	Extraction of the identified topics from the audio and video material
Step 4 - Reviewing themes	Themes were reviewed in intermediate play sessions and in the following workshop(s)	The extracted themes were reviewed against the transcribed text
Step 5 - Defining and naming themes	Not done during the workshops	The extracted themes were sorted into broader categories and named
Step 6 - Producing the report	Not done during the workshops	Researcher produced the report individually

Analysis in the workshops

The initial analysis in this project took place during the workshops. The workshops were designed to review essential aspects of play-facilitating and to explore avenues for enhancement. Analysis together with the teachers in the exploratory pedagogical workshops was not limited to just sharing experiences, but also included theorising as Ertsås and Irgens (2014) emphasise.

The participants (including the researcher) used the workshops to familiarise themselves with the data, which at this point is to be understood as the experiences of the participants. Then a loosely coding of the important areas were done through discussion in the workshops. Here the participants used their understanding to express what seemed important elements to highlight. To elaborate on these and to help the process move along, theory was brought into the workshops by the researcher and sometimes the trained teachers. This helped us identify themes for further exploration in the intermediate play sessions. The themes were then discussed in the next workshop, and the participants were asked if they found this way of thinking to be relevant. In the workshops, participants had the opportunity to review and provide feedback on the interpretations and portrayals of their contributions.

This way of analysing in a nonwritten and constructive way were beneficial for the innovative processes but

are not as valid as a thematic analysis involving actual coding of written material. In this regard, this is not a complete thematic analysis, but inspired by it.

Analysis of the workshops

The subsequent analysis was conducted after discussing and analysing the explorations with the teachers. A total of over 11 hours of audio recordings from workshops, approximately 8 hours of video capturing children at play (segmented into different play sequences), and 20 images of play materials have been collected, in addition to research notes.

The researcher watched the videos of children at play, and transcribed, read, and re-read the audio recordings from the workshops. The themes identified build upon the concepts of how praxis is manifested in the material. This data was then used to identify spaces the teacher navigated when facilitating for children's play. In this analysis the researcher took departure in the themes identified by the group and reviewed the themes, defined them, and produced the report. Through this double analysis process, it was possible to identify some co-created spaces ECEC teachers navigated when facilitating for children's play.

Ethics

This project has adhered to ethical principles and undergone ethical and privacy evaluations. Additionally, the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (Sikt) was consulted, and the project was evaluated and approved. This includes following procedures aligned with GDPR and their Guidelines for Ethical research (Sikt, 2023).

This project involves collecting audio recordings of workshops with teachers and video recordings of children engaged in play. Additionally, age and ethnicity data are gathered for both children and teachers. The data was treated as confidential information, and steps have been taken to ensure its anonymisation. While anonymisation is crucial, it also presents a challenge. Granting informants confidentiality and anonymity provides researchers with significant liberty in interpreting the material, often without the possibility of contradiction. Though not entirely eradicating the issue, involving participants in analysing the material during the workshops has helped to address this challenge.

The project's financial support is provided by the municipality, the university, and the Research Council of Norway. This context can give rise to ethical complexities, particularly considering the municipality's roles as owner, supervisory authority, and research funding entity. To alleviate the impact of this issue, the invitation to participate in the project was explicitly voluntary, and the scientific aspects of the project has been entrusted to the university.

Results

I will here present excerpts from the workshops with Golden Gate to illustrate the co-created navigational spaces. I have translated, condensed, and edited the utterances to make it readable, while simultaneously trying to stay as close to the original statements as possible. The excerpts are presented in sequence as they were co-constructed in the workshops, making it possible to see the transformation that emerged over the span of the collaboration. After presenting each excerpt, I will highlight the co-created navigational space from each specific episode. These navigational spaces were also identified in Sunnysdale, and the analysis and identifications of the navigational spaces build upon experiences from both ECECs.

Examples of teachers navigating play facilitating spaces

Workshop 1 - Framing

Researcher: When you work with play, what do you do? Are you preparing play, talking about it...?

Skilled worker: We observe what the children are engaged in. What they like, what they talk about, add some new elements to see if it sparks something within the children, and if it does, we can focus more on it...

Here the dialogue starts with a question of how to do play. The teacher answer that they practice play facilitating as a respond to children's actions or as an inspirational task. At the core of this dialogue is the discussion of what play is, should and could be. The actions proposed are to follow the children's initiative, as a following the children's initiative, the teachers are adding some new elements but the agency to develop this is given to the children. This is at the core of the debate of facilitating for play or making play into a learning session and reflect the position of the play to be child lead. This leads to the identification of the space navigated as *framing* play.

Pedagogical leader: We have several children in the eldest age group, and there's one who constructs a lot... whether it's puzzles or Legos or other things he builds. He does it alone or one-on-one. If more children join, he doesn't quite keep up in the play. He finds it challenging to include others in the activity.

Here the pedagogical leader poses a problem. This challenge is evident trough their work with play facilitating in all four workshops. It is a quite common to have this kind of challenges in the Norwegian ECEC, and it might be linked to the notion of the play being child driven. In this way the navigational space for play is still being *framing*. The presupposed understanding of the teacher's role as staging the play makes it hard for the teachers to actively engage in the play.

Workshop 2 – Framing and conditioning

Skilled worker: I think that if we first talk about going to a restaurant, then we can step into a role ourselves. And in that role, one can actively try to involve the children who struggle to taking on a role, or who just don't know what to do... If you're the waiter, for example, you can say something like "I want spaghetti and cola, can you get it?" That's how you actively step in. That's what we usually do when we play, we try to involve those

11 Facilitating Children's Play

who aren't usually part of the role-play by taking on a guiding role, but at the same time being a part of the play. I think that's the adult role... you structure when you're in a role, you're not just an observer. That's what I think, anyway.

Researcher: Yes, and when you imagine a restaurant play. What roles do you have then? What do you think? Well, you usually have someone behind the counter, taking orders... Or do you? Do you walk around and take orders too...?

Skilled worker: You can have someone taking orders and someone delivering... and you can also add, like, "here are a couple who..." or imagining something like a mom and a dad who are at the restaurant... or something like that. You can add a lot there to make it more complex.

In this excerpt the teacher explores a more actively engaged role in the play. The teacher expresses ways to imagine play together with the children. We can see here that the framing of what play is, has moved and made it possible for the teacher to position herself to conditioning play. It is worth mentioning that this was not perceived as a new way of facilitating play. It was something the teachers frequently did. Still, the actual articulation of this and the following discussion was important. It helped the teachers become more aware of possibilities in their work, thus being able to condition play in different ways.

Workshop 3 - Knowledgeing

Pedagogical leader: What I've observed, if we're going to talk about him [the child who struggled to participate in collective play], is that there has been significant development. During play earlier, he used to pretend to be sick and he would withdraw completely... But in the last play session he actively participated in a role, and no matter who joined the play he would open and say "come in." ... Yes, he has made significant progress because we've talked about the themes, and we have shown him different participating roles and he has become confident in them. I see it in outdoor play as well. On Monday, he was part of a larger group of children playing together. He didn't retreat to play with just one other person; he was part of a bigger group. So, it has spread to other areas too.

Researcher: It's nice to hear. I've been thinking about what, what is it that you teachers actually do when you've been playing? And I've been noticing how you talk. Like, you use language very actively. I don't know if you've thought about it, but you are verbalising the play so that all the children can hear. In a way you create a shared story in the room that isn't predetermined. It's not like you tell the children to play... let's say Goldilocks and the Three Bears, and instruct the Bears to do exactly this and that... Instead, you're following and exploring. And by speaking the way you do, you provide a framework for the story, so that all the children can hear it. So that the children who are a bit hesitant in the doctor's office hear that "Oh yes, there's a birthday party going on in there". In this way they're not forced to join, but they're invited in. I don't know, is that something you've thought about?

Skilled worker: I think it happens automatically, I do it all the time, regardless...

Pedagogical leader: When you say that, I think... yes, we do that. We also do the same thing in transitional situations like when a child is getting dressed. We say things like "Great that you're putting on your jacket and practicing the zipper" and we talk about it out loud so other children can hear it to. This motivates them to respond and do the same. I think it's like you said, it just comes naturally in play, and we speak out loud because we're used to naming things that happen all day. So, it's in a way an extension of the rest of the day.

Here we can see the participants reflecting on the ways they are doing play, recognise the theoretical understanding of the role of the commentator and linking this to what they do in transitional situations.

This collective knowledgeing is giving the participants a broader understanding of the possible practices and

function as a navigational space. The teachers expressed that they have not thought about this way of facilitating for play before. The navigational space of *knowledging* contributes to the participants space to exercise agency in their play facilitation. This knowledge was not given to the teacher as a ready-made concept, it was co-created in the situation building on the collective understandings of all the participants in the workshop.

Workshop 4 – Conditioning and timing

Pedagogical leader: I guess I've set up things in a way that also benefits me, so that I can have some control. I've been involved in filming, and I've been part of the play, but I've found it easier to facilitate and remain with the rest of the group so that others can step in. But I do see the importance of it, we all see it... But this isn't a one- or two-person show, it's all of us as a team and group, from... from the new apprentice to me as the pedagogical leader... I mean, we're all in this and we all see it.

Researcher: I find it interesting that you mention control, because this is indeed a very important aspect that might be under-communicated. I mean, taking on the role of organising the implementation of playgroups and prioritising them. That's simply a role within the play as well, not just something for the pedagogical leader to do. It's also about how to facilitate play, and someone needs to take on that role.

In this sequence we can identify the navigational space of *conditioning*. The teacher being honest about her need to have control of the situation and the resources at her disposal. This navigational space was brought up again and again in the efforts to make concrete plans for the play sessions.

Pedagogical leader: We were outside, and I was thinking "what can we do?". I can find some balls... I was there thinking as a facilitator, but then the children created a game themselves. They organised themselves and maintained the play for almost an hour yesterday without anybody walking away. And because I have developed an awareness... and have been involved in this facilitating of playgroups over time, I'm able to see the competencies they possess during this hour. Which allows me to know that this is important. And then I can sit here today and share it. Because often, we have too little time to share the experiences we have, the play we observe in snippets here and there. Or we don't have time to be conscious about what... what it is we're seeing... Now it's like "yes, I saw this for an hour yesterday!".

Here the teacher mentions the navigational space of *timing*. The teacher expresses the experiences of both children and teachers having explored change. This opens the navigational space of time, helping the teacher to be able to plan for longer play sequences. Understood as multiple play sessions and inspirational sessions laid out to help children and teachers so that experiences relate to each other.

The co-created navigational spaces

Navigational spaces in this project are understood as the different ways a teacher may manoeuvre their play facilitating. During the workshops we worked to identify such co-created navigational spaces, and the thematic analysis of the workshops illuminated four navigational spaces the teacher's exercised agency in: the frame, the conditions, the time, and the knowledge. Some of these navigational spaces were extended, and some merely recognised. The identified co-created navigational spaces in this project is:

Framing – The navigational space of framing in this project revolved around the awareness of different understandings and positions about what play is, should and could be. We can recognise this in the debate about what a teacher may do to facilitate play. This is especially evident in the utterances in the first workshop. The navigational space the teachers moved in was also evident in the initial negotiation and clarifications aiming to identify a common goal for the project itself.

Conditioning – The navigational space of conditioning in this project revolved around discussing available playrooms, work schedules, activity management and available play material. This was brought up repeatedly. Interestingly, the pedagogical leader had some meta reflection on this in the fourth workshop, mentioning that she had set up the play sessions to indicate that this was an important space she enjoyed navigating.

Knowledgeing – The navigational space of knowledgeing was central during all the workshops. Exploring the roles of the commentator and the administrative facilitator can be understood as examples of this. Here the participant co-scaffolded their knowledge to be articulated so that it functions on a continuous level to make teachers aware of the different roles they might enrol. In the excerpts, we also see the collective knowledgeing evolve through the workshops.

Timing – The navigational space of timing is relevant throughout the project. It is a key factor in the need for multiple workshops and the many play sessions. This navigational space is related to the concept of trajectories. This space became illuminated by the pedagogical leader in her story about her observation in the fourth workshop. Her telling this story made it possible to see and therefore navigate this space. It empowered the teachers so that they became more aware of their possibility to exercise agency in relation to time, for instance by having a trajectory plan for facilitating their play.

Discussion

In collaborative research, numerous participants with diverse understandings, discourses, and practices come together. I have suggested workshops as a potential way to co-create navigational spaces by delving into assumptions taken for granted and applying new theories to stimulate innovative thinking. It is in this context important to note that the discussions must evolve beyond familiarity with theories and/or practices. They should encompass an exploration of taken-for-granted assumptions and the application of new theories to provoke novel ways of thinking (Fleer, 2013).

Within the proposed framework, knowledge is not perceived merely as an accumulation of empirical facts; instead, it is dynamically shaped in the context of praxis (Freire, 1970/2014). If we view innovation as involving creative processes that yield not only new knowledge and research for developing practices

(Wallerstedt et al., 2023), but also improved or novel practices, we can interconnect these different interpretations. In this framework, the concept of innovation can be instrumental in stimulating creativity and discovering fresh approaches to translate and disseminate knowledge. New concepts and practices are intrinsically linked, where practice is grounded in theoretical knowledge, and theory is embodied in practice (Fleer, 2013).

While there are many advantages to collaborative research, it should not be overlooked that it presents certain difficulties. Edwards (2004) notes that it is often difficult to make it work, with limited lessons learned from previous attempts. Fleer (2013), having undertaken several collaborative research projects, highlights the significance of participants understanding of their roles and their relations with other participants for successful outcomes. She further emphasises that successful collaborations foster "relational agency" among participants to collectively contribute to knowledge-building (Fleer, 2013, p. 28). Hence, participants' comprehension of their roles and the purpose of knowledge seems crucial to the collaborative endeavours.

As a result, researchers and their competencies must adapt to the new context when participating in a practice-developing research project, which can be challenging for individuals (Ødegaard, 2023). Embracing the messiness of real-life challenges and contradictions is vital, as well as fostering collaborative skills, co-creation strategies, language awareness, and perseverance mindsets. These attributes are essential, not only among individuals within the field, such as researchers and practitioners, but also among policymakers and partnership participants outside the ECEC domain (Ødegaard, 2023). For successful collaboration, a project must also consider societal goals and values, institutional discourse, and practices, as well as individual motives and requirements in generating new knowledge and practices (Fleer, 2013).

A concrete and critical issue that arises at the outset of collaborative research is determining who will take charge of making methodological choices, leading, and designing the project. Ideally, these decisions are made collaboratively, but it may not always be feasible. Regardless of the methodological approach, collaborative research design places high demands on research management, and the choices regarding this must align with the research's purpose, which may vary between participants. Agee (2009) points out that theory is inextricably linked to the research question, whether the theory shapes the initial research question or new questions are proposed along the way. However, even with varied research purposes, the research design and theory cannot be uncritically adapted to all participants' wishes at the expense of the research question.

I have in this article suggested to use workshops to co-create navigational spaces as a way for individuals to become aware of their possibilities when facilitating for children's play in the ECEC. The term navigational

spaces are inspired by the concept of a third space, as a room of exploration (Eikset & Ødegaard, 2020). Pedagogy of the third space entails shifting away from a belief in a 'one right way' approach and embracing a more open mindset that allows for thinking and operating within nuanced and ambiguous grey areas (Gupta, 2015). The pedagogy of third space can actively acknowledge co-existing realities, "leading to more empowered teaching at the local level" (Gupta, 2015, p. 271). In the third space, collaboration offers a chance for all involved parties to collectively acquire new knowledge and understanding regarding teaching and learning (Williams, 2014).

The interplay between navigational spaces and agency is intricate, involving not only physical or virtual environments but also social interactions and broader forces. A potential problem with the concept of navigational space is that it may be understood to focus too narrowly on individual agency and choices, and potentially downplaying the role of structural constraints and external influences. To alleviate some of these restraints, the understanding of navigational spaces is in this project not seen as static, predefined contexts, but rather as dynamic and evolving. This takes departure in a shift towards understanding education as a collaborative process where the participants engage in dialog to co-create possibilities (Freire, 1970/2014).

The concept of navigational spaces suggested in this paper is explorative, like the concept of third space, but it differs by intentionally being navigational for the participants. While navigational spaces offer opportunities for individuals to make choices and act, they are not immune to structural constraints and hidden influences. In this research the navigational spaces of framing, conditioning, knowledging and timing has been co-created in a way that the participants could move within them and adjust their practice, much like navigating through physical spaces. Operationalizing the concept of the third space in professional practice lacks consensus, and further insights into how partnerships address its implementation are still needed (Daza et al., 2021). This can also be said about the concept of navigational spaces, and while the concept of can be useful to understand how individuals can navigate and interact within their environments, the concept still needs further refinement, empirical research, and ongoing dialogue so that we better can understand its strengths and limitations.

Conclusion

Collaborative efforts to co-create navigational spaces for facilitating children's play in the ECEC through workshops can be beneficial in both practice development and knowledge creation. When teachers and researchers actively participate in collaborative discussions, sharing experiences, and collectively shaping the play facilitation strategies they may navigate differently. Empowering teachers' agency through the co-creation of navigational spaces such as the spaces of framing, conditioning, timing and knowledging, is therefore a feasible approach with the potential to yield positive outcomes.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the extent of these positive outcomes might vary. While co-creating navigational spaces can foster agency, it cannot eliminate all constraints or challenges faced by teachers in their daily practice. Factors such as organisational policies, resource limitations, and external pressures will continue to influence the scope of agency teachers can exercise. Therefore, while co-creation of navigational spaces can contribute to the empowerment of teachers facilitating children's play in the ECEC, it is important to recognise that achieving autonomy within the context of complex educational systems still presents limitations.

References

- Agee, J. (2009). Developing qualitative research questions: a reflective process. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education: QSE*, 22(4), 431–447. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390902736512>
- Bae, B. (2018). *Politikk, lek og læring*. Fagbokforlaget.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Bubikova-Moan, J., Hjetland, H. N., & Wollscheid, S. (2019). ECE Teachers' Views on Play-Based Learning: A Systematic Review. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 27(6), 776–800. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2019.1678717>
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. L. (2009). *Inquiry as Stance: Practitioner Research for the Next Generation*. Teachers College Press.
- Daza, V., Gudmundsdottir, G. B., & Lund, A. (2021). Partnerships as third spaces for professional practice in initial teacher education: A scoping review. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 102. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2021.103338>
- Edwards, A. (2004). The New Multi-Agency Working: Collaborating to Prevent the Social Exclusion of Children and Families. *International Journal of Integrated Care*, 12(5), 3–9. <https://doi.org/10.1108/14769018200400033>
- Eikset, A. S. B., & Ødegaard, E. E. (2020). Historical Roots of Exploration—Through a Fröbelian third space. In M. Hedegaard & E. E. Ødegaard (Eds.), *Children's Exploration and Cultural Formation*. International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development, vol 29. Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-36271-3_7
- Ertsås, T. I., & Irgens, E. J. (2014). Fra individuell erfaring til felles kunnskap. I: M. P. Postholm, (red.), *Ledelse og læring i skolen*. Universitetsforlaget.
- Fleer, M. (2013). Attunement of Knowledge Forms: The Relational Agency of Researchers, Policy Writers, and Early Childhood Educators. In J. Duncan & L. Conner (Eds.), *Research Partnerships in Early Childhood Education: Teachers and Researchers in Collaboration* (pp. 27–47). Palgrave Macmillan US. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137346889_3
- Freire, P. (1970/2014). *Pedagogy of the oppressed: 30th anniversary edition* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.). Bloomsbury Academic.
- Gupta, A. (2015). Pedagogy of third space: A multidimensional early childhood curriculum. *Policy Futures in Education*, 13(2), 260–272. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210315579540>
- Hurley, E., Dietrich, T., & Rundle-Thiele, S. (2021). Integrating Theory in Co-design: An Abductive Approach. *Australasian Marketing Journal*, 29(1), 66–77. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1839334921998541>
- Johnson, J. E., Christie, J. F. & Wardle, F. (2005). *Play, development and early education*. Pearson Education, Inc.

- Jones, M.-A., Grevle, T. E., Dehln, E., Burner, T., & Bubb, S. (2023). Opportunities and Dilemmas in Interactions between the Education Sector and Academia. *Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education (NJCIE)*, 7(4). <https://doi.org/10.7577/njcie.5708>
- Juul-Wiese, T. (2023). Educational Ideas on the Move: Student Teachers' International Teaching Internship. *Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education (NJCIE)*, 7(2). <https://doi.org/10.7577/njcie.5353>
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2012). *Det kvalitative forskningsintervju* (2nd ed.). Gyldendal Akademisk.
- Moscoso, J. N. (2019). Abductive Reasoning: A Contribution to Knowledge Creation in Education. *Cadernos De Pesquisas*, 49(171), 308-329. <https://doi.org/10.1590/198053145255>
- NESH. (2021). *Forskningsetiske retningslinjer for samfunnsvitenskap og humaniora*. Den nasjonale forskningsetiske komité for samfunnsvitenskap og humaniora. <https://www.forskningsetikk.no/globalassets/dokumenter/4-publikasjoner-som-pdf/forskningsetiske-retningslinjer-for-samfunnsvitenskap-og-humaniora>
- Nonaka, I. (1994). *A Dynamic Theory of Organizational Knowledge Creation*. *Organization Science*, 5(1), 14-37.
- Ødegaard, E. E. (2023). Responding to Wicked Tensions and Problems in Practices-Developing Research. In C. Wallerstedt, E. Brooks, E. Eriksen Ødegaard, & N. Pramling (Eds.), *Methodology for Research with Early Childhood Education and Care Professionals: Example Studies and Theoretical Elaboration* (pp. 153-169). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-14583-4_11
- Oliveira-Formosinho, J., & Formosinho, J. (2012). Praxeological research in early childhood: a contribution to a social science of the social. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 20(4), 471-476. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2012.737707>
- Olsson, M. R. (2023). 'I don't think that it's play. Because we have to play'. Norwegian six-year-old children's understandings of play when they start in primary school. *International Journal of Play*, 12(3). 321-336. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2023.2235469>
- Pyle, A., DeLuca, C., & Danniels, E. (2017). A scoping review of research on play-based pedagogies in kindergarten education. *Review of Educational Research*, 5(3), 311-351. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3097>
- Rentzou, K., Slutsky, R., Tuul, M., Gol-Guven, M., Kragh-Müller, G., Foerch, D. F., & Paz-Albo, J. (2019). Preschool teachers' conceptualizations and uses of play across eight countries. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 47, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-018-0910-1>
- Sadownik, A. (2018). Belonging and participation at stake. Polish migrant children about (mis)recognition of their needs in Norwegian ECECs. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 26(6), 956-971. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293x.2018.1533711>
- Sadownik, A. (2022). Narrative Inquiry as an Arena for (Polish) Caregivers' Retelling and Re-experiencing of Norwegian Kindergarten: A Question of Redefining the Role of Research. *Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education (NJCIE)*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.7577/njcie.4503>
- Sand, A. L., Skovbjerg, H. M., Jensen, J. O., Jørgensen, H. H., & Bekker, T. (2023). Can I design for play? How pedagogues design for children's play situations in school. *The Design Journal*, 26(4), 536-557. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14606925.2023.2215416>
- Sikt (2023). *Personvernhandbok for forskning*. Sikt kunnskapssektorens tjenesteleverandør. <https://sikt.no/tjenester/personverntjenester-forskning/personvernhandbok-forskning>
- Skovbjerg, H. M. (2016). *Perspektiver på leg*. Turbine.
- Stelzer, J. (2023). The seriousness of play: Johan Huizinga's Homo Ludens and the demise of the play-element. *International Journal of Play*, 12(3), 337-348. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2022.2135537>
- Sutton-Smith B. (1997). *The ambiguity of play* (2nd ed.). Harvard University Press.

- Tavory, I., & Timmermans, S. (2014). *Abductive Analysis. Theorizing Qualitative Research*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Timmermans, S., & Tavory, I. (2022). *Data Analysis in Qualitative Research. Theorizing with Abductive Analysis*. The University of Chicago Press.
- UN United Nations (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. General Assembly resolution 44/25. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>
- UN United Nations. (2023, September 23). *Status at 11. Convention on the Rights of the Child*. United Nations Treaty Collection. https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=IND&mtdsg_no=IV-11&chapter=4&clang=en#49
- Wallerstedt, C., Brooks, E., Ødegaard, E. E., & Pramling, N. (2023). *Methodology for research with early childhood education and care professionals – Example studies and theoretical elaboration*. Series: International Perspectives on early Childhood Education and Development. Springer Open.
- Williams, J. (2014). Teacher Educator Professional Learning in the Third Space: Implications for Identity and Practice. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 65(4), 315–326. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487114533128>