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Studying perspectives on kindergarten mealtime: Methodological reflections

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Abstract

Drawing on a recent doctoral research project that examined the everyday life perspectives during kindergarten mealtime, this paper discusses the methodological issues related to the concepts of child and adult perspectives during mealtime, and to the children's participation in research. Through the paper, we take part in a critical discussion of the dichotomization of child and adult perspectives (Lee, 2001; Spyrou, 2011; Wyness, 2013). Instead, we suggest to approach perspectives as something that is created through situated interactions between human and nonhuman elements. We argue that perspectives could be studied as constructed from a net of human, material, and discursive elements. In doing so, we also question children's participation in research as a source for production of knowledge that is more authentic than that produced by adults (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Lomax, 2012). Hence, the kindergarten mealtime will provide the arena for discussing methodological issues that are relevant beyond studies on food and meals.

Keywords

Methodology; situated perspectives; child–adult relations; mealtime; becomings; everyday life

Introduction

In this paper, we discuss some methodological issues that arose from a doctoral research project that examined everyday mealtime in three Danish kindergartens from the perspectives of different social groups, such as children, pedagogical staff, daily managers, parents, and kitchen staff. The project initially began with a methodological separation of adult and child perspectives and reflected an understanding of the research participants as “experts in their own lives” (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; McCarry, 2012). However, fieldwork and early analysis presented challenges in maintaining this approach to perspectives as something that originated from and was delimited to certain social groups. It became clear that perspectives were constructed through a more complex web of relations and could not be analysed as inherent and stable possessions of individuals or social groups. This led us to question the way the concept of perspective was approached in the study. In this paper, we draw on writings within post-structuralism, feminism, and childhood studies that argue for the decentring of the subject and the embrace of the nonhuman, including discourse, in the study of social life. Thus, based in post-structural arguments that the individual human is not rational, coherent, or autonomous, we argue that the study of perspectives should not rely on individuals or search for authenticity or essence, rather we seek to place perspectives as deriving from a network of humans and nonhumans (Clarke, 2005; Komulainen, 2007; Mazzei, 2013). We thereby argue that the concept of perspectives should be kept “open” and sensitive (Clarke, 2005). Further, the concept of voice is regularly used in research in a similar manner to that of perspective; sometimes these concepts are used interchangeably. We draw on research using both concepts. However, we use the concept of perspective when discussing our own research.

The concepts of voice and perspective have been connected with an aim of empowerment, through research projects that seek to “give voice” to those less powerful (Cairns, 2009; Sommer, Samuelsson, & Hundeide, 2013). Within childhood studies and education studies, the concepts have been interlinked with a discourse that defines children as social actors with rights and competences to participate in decision-making. Thus, an increased amount of research departs from children’s own perspectives on different subjects and involves children as research participants with methods and ethical procedures especially intended to suit children’s participation (Hunleth, 2011; James & James, 2008; Wyness, 2013). This is regularly expressed in the terms “research with or by” children, contrary to “research on” children (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Hunleth, 2011; Warming, 2003). Thus, the concepts of child voices and perspectives have been widely used within childhood and education studies as a means to empower children, and are regularly framed as a guarantee for authenticity or quality in research (James, 2007; Hunleth, 2011).

Wyness (2013) explains this turn from adult mediation of children’s worlds, to children’s own perspectives being in focus, as a response to a number of critiques that have been raised in relation to earlier childhood studies. A central critique has been that research on children and childhood was too centred on adult agendas, which emphasised children’s development towards future individualistic adults and citizens (Prout & James, 1997; Wyness, 2013). It was also argued that children were seen as objects of research that were allowed only superficial or tokenistic participation (Hart, 1992). Thus, research needed instead to recognise children’s here-and-now perspectives, as important in themselves. It is within this context that children have been framed as beings in their own right (Lee, 2001), whose perspectives should be foregrounded in research. Thus, one way of responding to these critiques has been to seek a marginal adult researcher role that should merely facilitate children’s articulations of their own interests from a genuinely child-focussed perspective (Wyness, 2013).

However, recently this search for, and idealisation of, children's authentic and autonomous voices, and the emphasis on children as beings, has been criticised for not being able to encompass the changeability, difference, and ambiguity of children and childhood (Eldén, 2013; Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Lee, 2001; Lomax, 2012; Wyness, 2013). It is argued that humans can never be fully knowing, competent, rational, or "finished" regardless of being a child or adult. It is suggested instead that both children and adults can be understood as "always-unfinished subjects-in-the-making" (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008, p. 511) or as multiple becomings (Lee, 2001). Within feminist and post-structural approaches, the concepts of perspectives or voices have been criticised for an undue emphasis on the human individual as the source of perspectives/voices, consequently neglecting to consider how perspectives are created through interaction with other humans and nonhumans (Cairns, 2009; Clarke, 2005; Mazzei, 2013). Within childhood studies, it is further argued that the focus on children's autonomous voices neglects to consider the generational relations and institutional contexts within which children's participation is located, as well as creating a much too dichotomised understanding of children and adults (Alanen, 2001; Spyrou, 2011; Wyness, 2013). Relations between children and adults are often in the focus of research, but Plows (2012) argues that these are often approached solely from the standpoint of the child.

The approach to children and adults as dichotomised categories is also highly present in relation to food and meals. The commonly used concepts of "children's foods" and "the pester power" (the supposed tendency that children "pester" their parents for particular products, often used in advertising strategies [BurrIDGE, 2009]) indicates the existence of foods that are for children and foods that are for adults. These concepts come from the underlying understanding "that children and adults/parents have systematically conflicting interests when it comes to food" (BurrIDGE, 2009, p. 194).

In this paper, we argue that the pre-categorisation of perspectives into child and adult fails to recognise how perspectives are in constant development as they are constructed through situated interaction between humans and nonhumans no matter the age. Our aim is to contribute to the debate about voices/perspectives within childhood and education studies, by engaging critically with the dilemmas they raise (Cairns, 2009). We suggest some ways of working with the concepts without relying on individuals for provision of authenticity or truth, and without pre-categorising perspectives as belonging to either children or adults. The kindergarten mealtime will provide the arena for discussing such methodological issues, but the raised issues are relevant beyond studies on food and meals.

The research project and methods

The research described in this article was carried out in three Danish kindergartens between 2010 and 2013. Starting from an everyday life approach, the study focussed on mealtime, conceptualizing it as a situation in which humans, nonhumans, and discursive elements are all present and interacting (Clarke, 2003). The aim was to gain knowledge about kindergarten mealtimes as complex everyday life situations. In two of these kindergartens, children were served a common meal prepared in the kindergarten, while children brought their lunch from home in the third kindergarten. In this paper, we draw on analysis of data from all three institutions.

The empirical material was produced through a combination of several methods. The first author carried out the production of empirical material, which is why empirical examples are described

with the pronoun “I”. Participant observation (Gulløv & Højlund, 2003; James, 1996) was carried out with an emphasis on mealtime, but also included participation in the everyday life of the kindergartens in general. As part of this observation, several mealtime situations were filmed. Interviews (individual and in groups) were carried out with daily managers, parents, kitchen staff, pedagogical staff, and children. Furthermore, several methods were used to involve children in the research. Here we give only a brief description of the methods that were especially informative in relation to the focus of this paper.

Amongst others, we draw on the method of “walking interviews”, which was a way of acting out an interview instead of solely using verbal language, inspired by “Tours” by Clark and Moss (2001, p. 27). During these interviews, the researcher and one or two children at a time walked around the day care facility, asking and answering questions, while also “doing” the answers such as sitting at the tables, pretending to be eating, showing rooms, interior, food, and so on. The purpose was to elicit reflections and to make the interview fun, concrete, and closely linked to children’s everyday experiences. We also draw upon the method of “meal-days”, which entailed two children at a time planning and cooking a meal for the rest of the kindergarten with the researcher, as well as co-deciding how, where, and with whom to eat. “Role playing” was another method inspired by Clark and Moss (2001) and had the purpose of examining different mealtime roles through play. “Eating together” describes situations where a few children and the researcher would eat their lunch together in a room separated from the rest of the kindergarten group. The initial aim of setting up such situations was to construct relaxed situations in which children and the researcher could gain confidentiality. However, it turned out that these situations also provided good possibilities to discuss and practise mealtime in different ways and thus became situations for production of empirical material as well.

Situating perspectives: Perspectives produced through interaction

Voices and perspectives are often approached as uncomplicated mental, verbal, and rational properties of the individual (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Komulainen, 2007; Mazzei, 2013). Within childhood studies, Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) refer to this as an “epistemology of self-knowledge” (2008, p. 205) that understands children as “transparently knowable to themselves and privileges their ‘voices’ as the most authentic source of knowledge about themselves and their lives” (2008, p. 205). In line with this, James (2007) points to a tendency towards “text positivism” in which quoting of children’s voices is understood as an inherent guarantee for authenticity of the research. Thus, age is framed as a quality in itself that qualifies to a certain expert status, either in relation to one’s own voice as an expression of an essential, coherent “identity”, or in relation to understanding others of the same age (McCarry, 2012).

The focus on individuals for provision of “truths” through essential voices is problematic, whether this truth relates to oneself or to speaking on behalf of others. This is related to a general problematisation of the Cartesian self (Bhatia & Ram, 2004) and a turn towards the self as multidimensional, polyphonic, or hybrid. Individuals do not live in vacuums, and the search for essential, individual voices neglects to consider how voices/perspectives are produced through interaction, not only with other humans, but also with materials and symbolic/discursive elements (Bhatia & Ram, 2004; Clarke, 2005; Mazzei, 2013).

In this project, we have chosen “situations” (Clarke, 2005) as the analytical concept to encompass the interactional aspect of perspectives/voices. This is very similar to the thinking behind other post-structural approaches and concepts that seek to move the focus to situational production of

knowledge, in which humans, materials, discourses and institutional structures are co-producers of perspectives (e.g., Cairns, 2009; Mazzei, 2013; Warming, 2003).

While focussing on the changeability and situatedness of perspectives, we also want to explore how this approach can help to explain the more stable aspects that are also characteristic of perspectives, such as when an issue is commonly raised across different situations. Clarke (2005) argues that social life can be conceived “as an overlappingly layered mosaic of situations open to analysis” (p. 299). Just as individuals do not live in vacuums, neither do situations happen in vacuums. They relate and interact across time and place, thus situations interrelate through human, as well as material and discursive elements. This can explain how perspectives sometimes seem to have a certain stability or continuity, while they will always be changeable in relation to new situations.

One nonhuman element that is regularly emphasised in the study of child perspectives is the institutional context (Hunleth, 2011; Spyrou, 2011). However, as perspectives are produced and brought into play through situations, we do not consider the institution as context, but as an active part of the situation alongside human and material actors. “*The conditions of the situation are in the situation*” (emphasis in original, Clarke, 2005, p. 71). The nonhuman do not “just” frame individual human perspectives, but are part of perspectives, as in the following example (pseudonyms are used for participants):

One day during fieldwork, I was eating my lunch with two children. As I felt full, I stopped eating, but remained seated and talked with the children. Suddenly, Mikkel asks me: “Stine, are you full?” As I confirm this, Ida says: “Then you should say thank you for dinner”. She says so with a glint in the eye and a smile on her face. (Videorecording, 21.11.2012)

Thus, in this situation, the two children and institutional norms and routines, present a perspective that highlights certain codes of conduct related to table manners as an important part of mealtime. But children do not just replicate the institutional norms, they play with them, maybe in order to disturb the positions of a knowledgeable adult and children in need of guidance; positions that were already uncertain because of the research process. Thus, we do not argue to exclude individuals from the creation of perspectives, but argue that these are only one element in the complex construction of perspectives. Instead of looking to individuals, either child or adult, for provision of “truth” or authenticity, we suggest to look to the complex networks that are present within the situations in which empirical material about a given subject is produced.

Another empirical example produced through the method “eating together” can help illustrate how perspectives were co-created through situations in which humans, materials, and institutional norms interacted, as well as how this specific situation related to other previous mealtime situations. As described earlier, this method implied a reconstruction of mealtime where a few children and the first author would eat lunch away from the rest of the kindergarten group. In these situations, the material elements created a relaxed atmosphere that supported social interaction in ways that were different from many other situations. The food provided a common purpose for being together that took away the pressure of having to talk (contrary to an interview situation), and the walls provided separation from the other adults and children and freed the researcher and the children from feelings of surveillance. However, the institutional norms were also present and related these situations to previous mealtime situations in different ways. As such, many of the already established rules, routines and implicit norms were present in our

meals, but these situations also provided opportunities for critically negotiating and changing them. An example of this happened when the first author was eating with two children, Max and Maria, both 5 years old, at the kindergarten office:

Before starting to eat, Maria asks me if she can be the one to say “you’re welcome to eat” as was the normal way of initiating a meal. I agree to this. As we are about to start eating, Max announces: “Hey – first dish with fork and knife”, which was a rule of the kindergarten. We all grab our fork and knife, but Maria is having difficulty in holding the cutlery correctly. She looks to me and I explain her that I am actually not holding it the correct way and that I think it should be up to the person eating to decide what suits them best. When listening to our conversation Max starts to experiment by shifting the cutlery between hands, but then lays down the cutlery and states that it is ok to eat with your hands. Maria then follows his example and both children continue eating with their hands. A little later Max announces that he wants to eat the bread with cheese next. Maria answers that she does not like cheese, and Max replies: “Have you tasted it?” – an answer that the adult staff would usually give. However, when Maria answers that she has tasted it at home, Max does not do what the adults usually do, namely refer to the kindergarten rule that children at least have to taste one bite of things they claim not to like. Instead, Max accepts Maria’s statement that she does not like it. (Videorecording, 07.11.2012).

Throughout the meal, the children and I replicated the usual child and adult roles, as well as the rules, routines, and implicit norms, while at the same time altering them. This situation serves as an example of how the institutional norms and rules acted as the immediate guidelines on how to perform the meal, but also how we changed these as a result of the new situation. The cutlery was an important element of this situation. It brought norms related to proper eating manners into the situation, but at the same time, its difficult materiality urged for new strategies to handle it and to handle the food. This led to questioning of the routines and the cutlery was eventually dismissed.

When analysing this situation, we found several perspectives present. One perspective is constructed through the close relations between the cutlery, discursive norms on proper eating manners, embodied institutional routines, and Max. Together, these elements construct a perspective in which it is important to carry out the everyday mealtimes in a coherent way and they create a “script” that ensures such coherence in practice. However, this is contested by a different perspective, which is formed through the relations between the cutlery, the food, the researcher, Maria, Max and the atmosphere arising from the novelty of the situation. Together these elements create a perspective in which the enjoyment of eating is prioritised over the inconvenient codes of conduct. Thus, the example serves to illustrate how perspectives are a result of interaction between: the discursive, the routinised and embodied practices. and the material and human elements, and do not represent any authentic child perspectives. In fact, Max is part of both perspectives, as he initially is the one who calls upon the rule to use the cutlery, but then ends up dismissing this rule himself and thereby also contributes to the second perspective.

These two perspectives were simultaneously present in many different mealtime situations, and we therefore argue that discursive norms on table manners are powerful regulating mechanisms, but that these are simultaneously negotiated through everyday mealtimes. In everyday mealtimes other issues are at stake as well, such as materials with different qualities, humans with feelings and bodies, discursive norms related to other issues such as health, self-reliance, cosiness and caring, as well as structural issues such as time that defines an institutional rhythm in which

mealtime needs to fit. These elements form different alliances and construct different perspectives on mealtime.

We have argued that perspectives should not be understood as individual human properties, but as the result of situational interaction between humans and nonhumans. As we have also already indicated, the researcher is part of such a situational production of perspectives. This is relevant in relation to production of empirical material, as well as to analysis. Thus, within this approach, the aim of analysis is not to seek out and represent truths as expressed by individuals, but to represent the different and ambivalent perspectives within situations. This means that productions and readings of empirical material are themselves situated (Clarke, 2005). In the following, we will discuss some examples of how the researcher became part of the produced empirical material in this study.

Situating the researcher

The role of the researcher during fieldwork is widely discussed (Johansson, 2012; Spyrou, 2011). Sometimes it is indicated that the researcher can pick and choose between different roles and find the one that suits the purpose of the study best. We, along with others (Johansson, 2012; Rautio, 2014; Warming, 2011), argue instead that the role of the researcher is characterised by changeability throughout the research process and is relationally constructed through the different situations in which research is carried out. Initially the first author (“I” in the following) tried to construct a role for herself as an “atypical” adult (Gulløy, 1998). This meant that I tried not to grant permissions or correct children’s behaviour as the typical adults in the kindergartens. As argued by Spyrou (2011) it is not possible to make imbalances in power disappear, since the mere position of being an adult involves special privileges that the researcher cannot just throw off. But, through this role I hoped to involve myself differently in such power relations and be positioned as someone less disciplining than most pedagogical staff. In some situations, this position (or something that at least resonated with the aims of it) succeeded. During mealtime for example, children, the eating materials, and I, constructed a kind of “atypical adult” role for me. When participating in lunch box meals, I had borrowed my daughter’s lunch box and when participating in common meals, I asked to use the same cutlery and plates as children. Such materials became part of producing the untypical adult role, as they generally brought about many conversations and practices in which I was allowed to participate through my own similar materials. This position provided some interesting situations. I unintentionally broke many of the formal and informal rules, and sometimes I apparently went too far in following children’s ways of doing mealtime, leading to great amusement or corrections from children. My role as a researcher thus created new situations in which it was negotiated how an untypical adult should act during mealtime, and the empirical material created in these situations informed the analysis of perspectives on child and adult positions and the notion of proper mealtime behaviour connected to these positions.

When I participated in activities with children, I experienced that my role became a lot more complex. This happened partly because the children’s participation had a purpose that I had decided upon (examining food and eating), while also trying to involve children in constructing the trajectories of the research. But I experienced ambivalence when trying to hand over the ownership of the research to the children. Like Johansson (2012), I experienced that “things” in the situations “revealed their capacity to direct attention along different trajectories than we had intended” (Johansson, 2012, p. 107). Thus, children sometimes interacted with each other and with materials in ways that seemed very far from the research’s purpose. This forced me to choose whether to correct the children and tell them to keep focus or to risk not producing the

empirical material I intended on food and eating. Furthermore, as an adult I also felt responsible that children did not cause harm to each other or to the materials that we borrowed from the institution, something that was also clearly expected by the pedagogical staff. But this also related to institutional norms and rules, and it was very unclear how much these norms and rules were allowed to be “harmed” as a result of the research, which caused many dilemmas.

My relations with the pedagogical staff were also characterised by ambivalence. I disturbed the established relational structure of how children and adults behaved, and the staff sometimes seemed to find this provoking. They seemed both challenged and defensive while at the same time interested and encouraging of my researcher role. Thus, my relations with the institutional rules and norms and with children and the other adults, constructed researcher roles that were constantly changing. Sometimes I sought to maintain rules, order and quietness, while at other times I played along with much more chaotic situations in which established institutional rules were discarded or heavily reconstructed.

Through the following example, we will illustrate some of these issues and show how the empirical material was produced through relations between children, the researcher, staff, materials, and institutional norms and routines. This example describes a situation where the first author did a walking interview with two girls after lunch:

The girls took me to the table where they were usually eating, but at this time of day, the chairs were placed upside down on the table to make it easy to clean the floor later. We took down the chairs and sat at the table, so we could act out their stories. A pedagogue, Hanne, then passed and commented in quite a grumpy voice that we had to replace the chairs after use, to which we agreed. We alternately sat at the table and walked around the institution for a while. On one occasion when we were away from the table, Hanne passed by and demonstratively replaced the chairs on the table. She made no comments, but was clearly annoyed that we had not done so yet. A little later, the walking interview led the girls and me to a small hallway with a door to the playground. The girls wanted to show me the outside, since this was a beloved place for them to eat. However, they did not want to put on shoes (it was March and snowing) so they stopped at the door and looked out. They got very eager and almost stepped outside, and on the video recordings that I made during the interview, I hear myself command the girls with irritation to put on shoes or stay indoors. Shortly after, I tell them, in a rather stressed voice, to move and make place for other children and adults who were on their way out. (Videorecording, 15.03.2011)

Normally I would not boss the children around like this. When looking at the video I wondered what happened, and when listening carefully, I could hear that the pedagogue, Hanne, who had earlier commented on the chairs, was now also present in the hallway. My bossing the children was probably a way of trying to please her and make up for the irritation we had caused earlier, by keeping order and not being in anybody’s way. Thus, the role that I had imagined for myself was constantly negotiated and changed through different situations that became part of how the empirical material was produced, in this case, causing reduced latitude for children to act in. When analysing empirical material it must be acknowledged that neither the researcher nor the research participants acted within vacuums, but within webs of relations.

Child and adult voices?

If voices are products of situated relations between humans and nonhumans, does it then make sense to talk about a child perspective at all?

It is well argued that adults are positioned as influential agents in the domain of schools and daycare institutions (Cairns, 2009; Spyrou, 2011; Taines, 2014; Wyness, 2000). On that basis, it might be argued that we need to separate children from these otherwise adult-dominated worlds when we wish to gain insight into their opinions, feelings, and experiences, since these will otherwise be silenced by dominating (adult) perspectives. However, as argued in this paper, the risk of doing so is that we end up being blind to the way perspectives are constructed through interaction with other humans (adult and child) and nonhumans.

As argued in the introduction, the opposition of human becoming (child) and human being (adult) has been questioned; instead, all humans can be approached as incomplete becomings. Thus, an important experience throughout this project was that neither children nor adults had unambiguous, fixed perspectives ready to be communicated. This is illustrated through a situation facilitated through the method of meal-days:

In this situation an adult, Hanne, is eating at a small table with three boys. One of the boys, Amir, has planned and prepared the meal as part of his participation in the research project, and he is very enthusiastic about it. The meal is initiated by Amir as he commands everyone to place their hands under the table as is the norm of the kindergarten. Hanne struggles to place herself at the small table and is therefore a bit slow to follow the command. Amir explicitly tells her to do as the others, and she smiles and places her hands under the table and waits for Amir to allow them to eat. As they start eating, she curiously asks about the food and seeks his permission to have some bread, thereby acknowledging Amir as host of the meal. A few seconds later Amir serves himself some tuna, and Hanne affirmatively states that he can have some more, and by that she claims some authority over the meal. Hanne then starts to send around the tuna, instructing the boys how to help themselves, how much they should take, and corrects them in their table manners, now clearly acting as the host and authority. However, this is partly reclaimed by Amir as he starts naming some of the food in Arabic, which all the eaters apart from Hanne, can speak. She does not notice at first, but then starts repeating the word and asks the boys if she is pronouncing it correctly. She simultaneously continues correcting the boys while also expressing delight in how well the meal tastes and asks Amir about the preparation. Throughout the rest of mealtime this constant shift in roles continues, as Amir and Hanne shift between hosting and being hosted, correcting and being corrected. Sometimes these shifts happen smoothly and sometimes through conflict, but always as a consequence of interaction. Hanne shifts between acknowledging Amir's ownership of the meal and trying to keep order and control. Simultaneously the boys shift between seeking adult guidance, adhering to corrections, initiating activities and opposing corrections and instructions. (Videorecording, 01.04.2011).

In this example, the food is important in constructing the relation between Amir and the other eaters. The food positions Amir as a host with special privileges such as initiating the meal, a special knowledge about the preparation, and a special status. This position is constantly negotiated with the adult, the food, the other children, institutional norms and routines, and with discursive norms on child and adult roles. The example especially shows an ambiguous adult position. The adult is struggling to simultaneously relinquish and sustain control. Thus, the adult

is simultaneously involved with construction of a perspective that responds to the new situation by recognising the children's ability to handle mealtime on their own and even host the meal, as well as with a perspective that views the adult as the decisive authority and children as in need of guidance and regulation. This ambivalence is very characteristic for adults in the study, and it is present within the way they act out the mealtimes and in the stories that they create about them. Hence, the so-called adult perspectives are not only changeable, but also as multidimensional and situationally constructed through interaction as are those of children.

However, there are also several empirical examples, within our study as well as elsewhere, in which children express views that are more similar to those of other children in the same situations than they are to the adults in the situation. Warming (2003) explains this through a generational perspective:

The social order can be regarded as being divided up into two major groups—adults and children, with specific conditions surrounding the lives of each group: provisions, constraints and requirements, laws, rights, responsibilities and privileges. Children's daily lives and thus childhood as an institution, to a great extent, are structured by adult views of how those lives should be lived and of the nature of childhood. ... Ontologically the generational perspective can account for why children's perspective on "the child's best" and how to encourage children's quality of life, may be different and even conflict with that of their adult carers. (Warming, 2003, p. 818)

Thus, we cannot speak of an essential or independent child-voice, but the institutional, structural and discursive differences between child and adult subjectivities and the differences in power it produces, produce differences in what it means to be a child and an adult. However, Clarke (2005) argues that we cannot take for granted what differences mean to those in a given situation; instead, we need to explore the meanings and consequences of difference in social practices. Therefore, what we argue here is that there certainly are differences related to being a child and an adult; however, these differences do not mean that we can take for granted that children and adults necessarily part in different perspectives. Rather than starting out by analysing perspectives as children versus adults, we want to stay open and allow such differences to be constituted differently in different situations. Sometimes they might be crucial and define opponent positions for children and adults and sometimes not. In this study, children and adults expressed that there are differences between being a child and an adult in relation to the everyday mealtime, but they also expressed that there are similarities in what they appreciate and aim for. The different positions have to be situated and the researcher is in need of using a high level of sensitivity.

This was emphasised through a situation in which the first author ("I"), a pedagogue student who was helping in the project, and four children aged 4 and 5 years (two boys, two girls), were doing a roleplay. The setup was to act out an everyday kindergarten mealtime, first through the use of toy food, but as (real) lunchtime approached, we all agreed to exchange the toys with our packed lunches. The roles changed during the roleplay, and in the section described here, the children are "themselves" and the researchers are in an undefined role of being "themselves" learning to be "typical adults". Thus, the researcher and the student intentionally refrain from correcting children and they pretend not to know the institutional norms of adult behaviour.

In this section of the meal, the two girls, Maiken and Mirjam, have started laughing a lot and rather loudly. The two boys and the student helper then talk about what to do about this, as they feel that the girls are being too loud. This turns into a situation in which the boys instruct the student helper in how the adults would usually handle such a situation.

They provide him with different strategies: first, he should yell loudly to the girls that they have to be quiet – he does so and they only laugh harder. The boys then tell him to use a threat, and instruct him to tell the girls to leave if they do not stop. They explain that adults get ‘real’ mad if children are so loud. As the student helper does not do his job properly, the boys themselves start yelling to the girls that they have to stop or leave the room. One of the boys then shows the student helper how he should grab the girls’ arms and drag them out. Eventually he does so, and the girls are expelled from the meal (for a short while). (Videorecording, 14.03.2011).

Thus, in this situation, adults and children are constructed as having different kinds of power, as the adults have the authority to correct children, while children have the power to refuse such corrections. However, this was not a “children versus adults” situation, since the adults and two of the children agreed that too much noise should be prohibited, but they expressed having different roles in this. The boys sought to use the adults as tools to regulate the girls’ behaviour. They drew on the power usually connected to adult positions, but this was challenged by the atypical situation in which the adults had purposely sought to create different kinds of power relations with the children. This turns into a blurring of who is “most” competent in the “adult-role”, and thereby explicates some of the expectations that are connected to this role, but it also illustrates how children and adults regularly strive towards the same aims. Many situations in this study constructed perspectives in which children and adults united in expressing that it was uncomfortable and distressful when the noise level was too high during mealtime. Children often corrected each other, but also they often failed in making other children “calm”. Thus, they defined adults as in charge of maintaining order and relied on their ability and willingness to do so. However, how they should perform this role, how much noise and what kind of noise is preferable/acceptable was situationally negotiated and often a theme of disagreement in the everyday mealtime.

If identification of children’s voices is put forward as the main aim of research, it entails a risk to implicitly adopt a dichotomous approach to child and adult perspectives. Besides the inherent risk of stereotyping adults by representing them as one unified opponent to children’s perspectives, this also means that the many shared positions and the interdependency between child and adult voices, as well as material and discursive elements, are overlooked. We therefore argue that it should not be taken for granted that a specific “child perspective” exists, but that research instead should seek to identify the multiple perspectives with which children are involved and discuss how these relate to other present perspectives, including the power relations between them.

Implications for use of methods

If a voice/perspective does not derive from a separated, human individual, but is a product of a situation, then we need to use research methods that capture the interactional aspect of perspectives and not over-rely on the individual for production of empirical material.

Most research, even within the participatory research tradition, favours verbal children, for example, by facilitating verbal communication through the use of pictures or other objects (Warming, 2011). Furthermore, it relies on the individual to express his or her perspective on a given subject, as argued throughout the paper. In this project, we have aimed at including nonverbal and interactional aspects in the production of empirical material. Methods such as participant observation, roleplay, eating together, and meal-days do not necessarily require verbal

language and they are centred on the interaction between research participants, researcher and different materials. Methods such as photo elicitation (Harper, 2002), drawing (Bruselius-Jensen, 2011; Christensen & James, 2000), and walking interview aimed to facilitate verbal communication.

In an attempt to take the changeability of perspectives seriously, we sought to use methods that both drew on previous experiences, such as interviews, as well as methods that were designed to create new experiences, such as “meal-days” and “eating together”. Through these situations, the concept of mealtime became an area for experimentation and discussion.

Conclusion

Through the kindergarten mealtime, this article has sought to contribute to the more general recent discussion about children’s perspectives in relation to adult perspectives. Through the doctoral research project that this article builds upon, an observation was that children relate to their everyday life experiences when they discuss and practise mealtime, which is highly influenced by interaction with adults, as well as institutional rules and norms. Hence, even when trying to remove children from this context of the everyday kindergarten mealtime through different activities in the research process, they still, to a very large degree, reproduce the structures, rules, norms, and values that characterise the everyday kindergarten mealtime.

As we have argued throughout the article, the pre-categorisation of perspectives into child and adult did not represent the empirical findings of the project, since perspectives were created across, as well as within, these social categories through shared everyday life. This dichotomising way of approaching perspectives was found to be a construction that camouflaged a far greater complexity.

The pre-categorising of perspectives into child and adult are no different than other socially constructed categories such as gender, ethnicity, and social class. In this project it was increasingly obvious that mealtime was about the common situation between all actors in the room (human, nonhuman, and discursive) and needed to be regarded as interactive rather than separated. We have therefore suggested to approach perspectives, not as individually created by either child or adult, but as situationally created through interaction between humans and nonhuman elements. This is an attempt to look beyond the individuality of perspectives and implement the idea of both children and adults as becomings. Through a focus on situations, the multiple positions and contradictions within both individuals and collectivities can be articulated (Clarke, 2003); hence, this approach allows for ambiguity and complexity to be foregrounded.

In suggesting to look beyond the categories of child and adult, we do not argue that children should not be given the opportunity to be involved in research where they are encouraged and facilitated to reflect and examine aspects of their lives in a new context. However, as also argued by Komunlainen (2007), the use of children’s voices should not be sensationalised or simplistically implemented as a concept representative of any isolated, authentic truth about children’s lives. Instead we suggest that children, alongside adults and nonhuman elements, should be included as co-creators of multiple, situated perspectives. We also argue that relations between different existing perspectives should be discussed and possible power imbalances addressed. This insight is also important in relation to reflecting and developing methods for capturing the interactional and situational perspectives of many aspects of the social life of human beings.

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