

# Children's participation in documentation processes in local outdoor spaces

Maria Dardanou<sup>1</sup>, Bente Karlsen<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** This article describes a study that aimed to investigate how children perform and document Land Art in local places near their kindergarten and the visualization of their experiences through their drawings back in the kindergarten. Documentation is important for a kindergarten's planning and evaluation of pedagogical practices and activities. Studies have shown that using visual methods, such as drawings and photographs created by children themselves, to provide information related to children's perspectives, actions and attitudes is a way for children to communicate and make meaning of their experiences. Encounters with the natural world through the performance of Land Art offer children the opportunity to directly sense, interact with and know 'the world of materials'. Children's interactions correspond with natural materials and the environment. Participatory observation was used, following a group of twelve children, aged four and five years in a year's period to their trips near a shoreline. Data consists of photographs, voice recordings, video, drawings, and narratives to explore ways children interact with and make meaning of place by performing Land Art. The results show that children's photographs and drawings are ways to 'communicate' with their experiences and engage with, pay attention to and visualize their perspectives. The findings might have implications for new approaches to documenting children's voices and experiences through performing Land Art and drawings.

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## Introduction

Research has shown that early childhood educators employ different methods for documentation of children's experiences and learning in early childhood settings and outdoor spaces (Kumpulainen & Ouakrim-Soivio, 2019; Pramling Samuelsson, 2010). These processes of documentation often include stories, observations, pictures, and narratives to explore children's learning, progress or achievements. Nevertheless, children's perspectives, voices, and reflection are lacking in these processes (Clark & Moss, 2011; Formosinho & Passos, 2019; Spyrou, 2011; Tangen, 2008; Twigg & Garvis, 2010; Urbina-García, 2019). According to the Norwegian Framework for the kindergarten's context and activities (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017), children's active participation in the kindergarten everyday life and activities include both planning and evaluating the activities in relation to their age and their maturity. Smith (2015) underlines the principle of respect for the child's views and feelings outlined by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and argues that this principle should be enacted in all Early Childhood Education (ECE) settings. Canning et al.'s (2022) study of Hungarian kindergartens highlights the importance of including children's voices through play-based creative activities that focus on eliciting children's thoughts and feelings and providing insight into their lives. Additionally, according to Article 13 [1] of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989),

[T]he child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek,

<sup>1</sup> UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Institute for Teacher Education and Pedagogy, Tromsø, Norway, email: [maria.dardanou@uit.no](mailto:maria.dardanou@uit.no), ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3247-158X>

<sup>2</sup> UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Institute for Teacher Education and Pedagogy, Tromsø, Norway, email: [bente.a.karlsen@uit.no](mailto:bente.a.karlsen@uit.no), ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8658-1322>

receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice (United Nations, 1989, p. 4).

Documentation has an important role in the kindergarten's planning and evaluation (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017) and is a way to visualize both the pedagogical practices of the educators' and the children's engagement and interests. Furthermore, 79% of Norwegian kindergarten staff report that a camera is among the most common digital tools found in Norwegian kindergartens (Fjørtoft et al., 2019). Studies have shown that using visual methods, such as children's drawings and photographs, to provide information on the child's perspective, actions and attitudes is a way for children to communicate and make meaning of their own experiences (Einarsdottir et al., 2009; Johnson et al., 2012; Lindsay, 2016). Additionally, current literature recognizes the importance of outdoor experiences in early learning and development (Bento & Dias, 2017; Gessiou, 2022; Hagen, 2015; Sandseter et al., 2020). The Norwegian kindergarten has a strong tradition of spending most of the day outdoors (Moser & Martinsen, 2010). Likewise, the Framework Plan for the content and tasks of kindergartens (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017), highlights the importance of children's outdoor experiences during all seasons and in all weather conditions. Play in outdoor kindergarten settings is central to the Norwegian kindergarten tradition. The *Local community and society* section of the Framework Plan advises that kindergarten staff must help children explore nature's various landscapes and to get to know their local environment (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017). Children develop a close relationship with the outdoor space and natural materials in their community with the kindergarten staff and other children. The process of collecting and gathering materials from nature and putting them in a new constellation contributes to sensory-motoric skills (Karlsen & Dardanou, 2020). Trimis and Savva (2009) argue that children's artistic activities in relation to their *chorotopos* (space-place, area, landscape, region, village or town) and in-depth exploration of materials help children be more engaged with their own local environment and "[enable] them to understand the potential expressiveness of materials and their inherent meaning" (p. 527).

In this article, we draw attention to children's own expressions of their trip experiences through their engagement in documentation processes that highlight children as agents of their own everyday lives. Taking a rights-based approach considering research as co-created with children, not for them (Bessell, 2015), this study focuses on what children see, perceive, and make meaning of during a trip to a nearby local space. We acknowledge children's participatory practices as an important factor for children's inclusion in their own lives. Therefore, the aim of the study is to investigate how children perform and document Land Art in their local spaces and in what way these experiences are visualized through their drawings back in their kindergartens. This article will examine the following research questions:

1. How do children's performance of Land Art and drawings document their experiences in local places?
2. In what way can children's participation in visual documentation of their experience in local places contribute to democratic and inclusive practices?

Thus, this paper reports empirical research, building on the ideas of children as protagonists in documentation activities that contribute to ECE practices that connect children's actions and experiences and insights into children's performative (through Land Art) and photographic agency (through documentation with photographs and through drawings).

## **Theoretical Foundations**

### *The Perspective of Land Art*

This study builds on previous research that has explored nature through art and art through nature and its ability to encourage curiosity, sense stimulation and personal expression (Sørenstuen, 2011). Land Art falls under the overarching concept of environmental art, which includes eco-art, ecological art, earthworks and art in nature and 'can be often understood as art that is made in outdoors environments, close surroundings or other closes places' (Sørenstuen, 2011, p. 27). Therefore,

Land Art as collaboration and education constitutes a unique mixture of pedagogic form and art dialogue. Doing land art together is a pedagogical means: there are no detours, no vicarious motifs, no techne needed to start off. .... Artwork is real, it's what we do, using our real bodies, our real minds, real materials, and real actions (Solberg, 2016, p. 21).

Outdoor space and place-making involve exploration of the immediate surroundings (Parnell & Procter, 2011). Children's knowledge about the local environment can be articulated in a "physical, verbal and visual way" through walking, sensing, talking about their experiences and documenting images (Clark, 2010, p. 36). A walk on the shoreline or in the forest often means that stones, shells, sticks or cones are brought back to the kindergarten or home. Children's curiosity and attraction to nature's diverse elements can be a starting point for an approach to Land Art. Land Art as a pedagogical practice in kindergarten could add an aesthetic dimension, whereby the materials and landscapes of the place form a diverse foundation for creative activities. Children's presence and interaction with the place allow for visual expressions in both two- and three-dimensional forms (Karslen & Dardanou, 2020, 2022).

Various forms of expression reflect the child's development in many different outdoor areas. Inner experiences are made sensible by exploring different materials and trying out different techniques. Activities that promote creative ways for children to express their perspective of the world and what is 'real' for them involve aesthetic dimensions. These expressions are made visible, audible and responsive to the child and to others (Buaas, 2016). Experiencing nature and its materials through the senses while in a close relationship with nature can lead children to develop respect and responsibility for the environment from the perspective of sustainability (Kaga, 2008). Land Art is a form of creative expression in close relationship with nature as creativity can be practiced by playing directly with materials, expressing feelings, engaging in fantasy and meeting challenges. Natural elements, such as water, stones, earth and sand, which we often encounter, can provide a foundation for our understanding of nature, such as develop observational skills in nature's diversity and working in natural environments, in the familiar and unfamiliar (Miraglia & Smilan, 2009, p. 172). Furthermore, outdoor spaces, such as a shoreline, are spaces where children play freely. As Almon (2013, p. 6) argues, "play is the way children discover the world around them. They explore, invent, and transform it to suit their needs". Children's outdoor play often involves moving from one interest to another, reflecting the natural rhythms of children's concentration and curiosity, children's meeting of the world (Linn, 2008; Nelson, 2012).

### *Children's Meeting with the Environment*

Drawing on Ingold (2015), place is constituted by the lines of movement, by walking, sensing and exploring a place. Children's meeting with the world, the ground, through performing Land Art allows them to directly sense, interact with and know "the world of materials" (Ingold, 2010, p. 124). Materials flow, and they are a part of the world. They have properties and characteristics that influence creative action as the person who creates "is in a dialogue with the materials" (Waterhouse, 2013, p. 35). Children's interactions *are between and correspond in-between* with the natural materials (Ingold, 1993). Performing tasks in landscapes is not related to what people look at in a landscape but rather a way of finding meaning in and understanding of the surrounding world (Ingold, 1993). Therefore, the exploration of the surrounding world "is about vigilance and communication with regard to natural environments, local natural cultures and the art that at any time is created in interaction with such environments and cultures" (Sørenstuen, 2011, p. 71). Thus, natural materials offer opportunities for differentiation of attention as they reveal the diversity of the environment and the different relationships between people and nature. Active interaction with nature develops a different kind of attention than traditional learning activities and helps children discover new perspectives and ways of looking at the world (Fredriksen, 2019; Ingold, 2015).

Documentation is an experience of meaning-making in which children and teachers operate together and recognize the value of the process. Making-meaning and developing stories to explain the world are important for children to understand reality and their relation to it. Photography has been used as a visual method of meaning-making and involves the use of cameras to document research participants' lives and experiences (Clark & Moss, 2011; Johnson et al., 2012). According to Clark (2010, p. 200) "experiencing physical spaces differently can also be achieved through engagement with documentation which is

produced by children”[sic]. Likewise, it is remarkable to investigate further “the rich textures and depth of subjective accounts of people’s experiences with the arts and then try to capture how they feel about that” (Walmsley, 2018, p. 287). In addition, documentation gives opportunities for reflective discussions among children and teachers with the result that children’s participation is increased and they become actors in forming their everyday life in kindergarten.

### **Method**

The research is a small-scale study and focuses on a group of twelve children, aged four and five years, and their visits to a shoreline within walking distance of their kindergarten several times during a period of one year. The shoreline is used as a destination for play and free activities. Participatory observations were completed (Andersson et al., 2005; Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). Data consists of photographs, voice recordings, video, children’s drawings and narratives in order to explore the ways children interact and make meaning of place through their own documentation with photographs, engagement with Land Art and drawing. More specifically, data included around ten hours of video recording, around two hundred photographs taken by children and researchers and forty-eight drawings created by children.

Through participatory photography, children have opportunities to decide the subject of their photographs, and they can form the context and point out their own interests (Holm et al., 2018). In this paper, we will use children’s photographs of the local place, performance of Land Art, drawings completed back in the kindergarten and video recordings of the drawing process. The use of digital cameras placed the data collection in the hands of the children and therefore allowed them to be actively involved. The same shoreline was visited eight times during a period of eight months. Each trip lasted around two to three hours.

### **The Context of the Study: Outdoor Space – The Environment**

The outdoor space and the environment provide a generous opportunity for exploration for young children. The space and the shipwreck were chosen by the researchers due to the access to varied natural materials for making Land Art. The seasons and weather conditions are essential factors in this context as they set the premise for and affect children’s interaction with creative activities. Throughout the winter, children’s clothing can create certain obstacles; for instance, mittens make it more difficult to pick up small shells and similar items. At the same time, the temperature limits how long children can manage to be without mittens. What the outdoor space and natural material offer can influence a child’s expression in creative activity and curiosity in the surroundings. As in the direct contact with natural materials in Land Art, the children experience a new dimension to process creative development. Through Land Art, the children are able to create an awareness of the nature’s characteristic forms, rhythms and movements and be in a dialogue with the place (Moe & Øien, 2014).

### **Ethical Considerations**

The research methodology followed the ethical principles of anonymity and strict confidence. Participation was voluntary for all children, and parents were given the opportunity to withdraw their children from the study at any point. Children were asked each time if they wanted to participate in the trip, and there was an instance when one child wanted to participate in only three of the eight trips. This was respected by the researchers, and the study followed the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF, 2019) statement that any research must be based on child participation wherever possible. From a praxeological principle as a paradigm within ECEC (Lyndon, 2023) and our intentions to address to children as the protagonists of the study, we considered their active participation was an important perspective, we respected the children’s free participation or the fact that they did not engage in some aspects of the study. Pseudonyms have been used for the settings and their respective educators and children. Children had various opportunities to be listened to and influence the process of the study. In each trip we have a gathering in the form of circle time with the children to discuss the weather conditions at that day, the materials that they could collect and the opportunities to form their own Land

Art expressions. We listened to the children's ideas and reminded them that the cameras were available for them to be used at any time they wanted. The children sometimes asked if they could use the cameras before it was mentioned from us. We also observed that children were interested to look at the photographs they had taken during the trip. In the end of our research project, we visited the kindergarten and had a presentation of the photographs the children took during the various trips. The children showed enthusiasm to look back at these photographs and many of them recognized even some of the photographs they had taken.

## Results

For the purpose of this paper, data from the eight trips to the shoreline/beach close to the kindergarten and the documentation from the children and their drawings were analysed.

A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was conducted based on the theoretical background, the research questions and the content of the data. The analysis was implemented by the researchers, where we went through audio recording, photographs and drawings of the participant children. The fact that we have been two researchers during the whole process of the study, has contributed that we have had discussions and reflections between us in the different stages of the study. The analysis identified three different categories: the perception of the shipwreck through the camera lenses, the perception of the shipwreck through the performance of Land Art and the perception of the shipwreck through drawing. These categories will be discussed as part of the children's participation in the documentation of their experiences on the different trips. An important element in the analysis was the shipwreck, which is a Russian transport ship that burned only some meters from the shoreline around one hundred years ago. The ship was transporting coal and some immigrants from Russia to Norway. The local authorities have decided not to remove it since it does not affect the local environment.

### The Perception of the Shipwreck Through the Camera Lenses

According to the analysis, the children's photographs and performance of Land Art were inspired by the shipwreck close to the shoreline. During the second trip, the teachers told the story of the shipwreck to the children. The children were first asked to guess what the thing was that was so close to the shoreline. Many different ideas were expressed:

**Child 1:** I think it is a dead whale.

**Child 2:** No, it is a fish.

**Child 3:** I know, my mother told me, it is a ship.

**Child 4:** A whole ship, don't you see, there, where the board is inside and wall outside there again.

**Child 5:** One of our school groups has said that the teacher has told the story.

**Child 4:** Is it fish, dinosaur or ship?

The discussion about what was in the sea was included in the subsequent trips by the teachers. Children during the subsequent trips repeated the story of the shipwreck themselves. On all the trips, digital cameras were given to the children, and they were asked to take pictures of anything they liked. Getting the cameras was quite exciting for the children, and the researchers noticed that children asked from the start of each trip when they would get the cameras. Children explored the place each time, taking close and distant photographs. The shipwreck was found very often in children's documentation from different trips and during different seasons. It was there every time, and every time it was documented by the children as *a natural* part of the place.

The children's participation in the documentation captures what children *see* and *mark* as important from their own point of view of the place, and the shipwreck was a part of that (Figure 1). The camera lenses give insight into meanings constructed in the context of interactions while children interacted, individually or with other children, with the environment and the materials at the specific time (Kondo & Sjöberg, 2012).



Figure 1. Photo of the shipwreck taken by a participant child

### The Perception of the Shipwreck Through Performing Land Art

On most of the trips, the children were asked to gather stones, shells or any other materials they could find on the shoreline and to make *anything* they wanted with them. Other times they were asked by the researchers or their teachers to gather ten specific stones or shells to give them a frame of the natural materials. The digital cameras were again given to the children to document what they had created. Through engaging in Land Art at the place with the natural materials, children interact with those materials and form *their* space at the place.

During the fourth trip, children started to gather elements that were on the shoreline. Participant Child 5 found a part of a chain. One of the researchers asked him the following questions:

**Researcher 1:** What is this you have found?

**Child 1:** It is a chain. It is of course from the ship.

**Researcher 1:** What are you going to use it for?

**Child 1:** That will work to make a ship in the sand.

The child associated the chain with the shipwreck as a natural element from it and used the chain to visualize the ship in the sand (Figure 2). As children are the agents of documenting these interactions at the place with their photographs, they participate with their own perspective of their experience (Figure 3). Thus, materials 'flow' together with the children in the world as both the Land Art and the drawings can be described as substances that are constantly changing and transforming in an everlasting material flow (Ingold, 2007). Children making lines through their performance in Land Art and drawing can be viewed as a way of documenting their own interpretation and expression of the place and surroundings (Ingold, 2015). Those lines are in the movement, in the place and at the kindergarten. Children's direct interactions with the landscape are an arena for a variety of experiences that involve the use of body and movement (Fjørtoft, 2013). The involvement of the senses and the body was part of a gradual development of a relationship among the children, the natural materials – that varied from season to season – and the shoreline.



Figure 2. Performing forms of the shipwreck with a chain found at the shoreline



Figure 3. Performing forms of the shipwreck with natural materials found at the shoreline





**Figure 4.** Performing Land Art with ten selected stones at the shoreline



**Figure 5.** A continuous performing of Land Art from Child 2 by adding sand at the ten selected stones

A child showed Researcher 2 what they had made (Figure 4) and drew a line in the middle.

**Researcher 2:** So, you picked 10 stones, and what did you do?

**Child 2:** One boat, two boats, because it is the boat that burned (points to the boat to the right with their foot, then points to the other boat with a foot) it's the boat that sank.

**Researcher 2:** Can you say a little about what it is?

**Child 2:** Chimney?

**Researcher 2:** Chimney, yes.

**Child 2:** Both.

**Researcher 2:** 10 stones, so you have made two boats, super.

**Child 2:** A line in between.

**Researcher 2:** Why that?

**Child 2:** So that they should not be together.

The teacher left, and the child continued to change his/her expression. As seen in Figure 5, the child later added a new natural element, the sand, to his/her ship on top of the stones (Figure 5). Finally, Figure 6 show the documentation of one of the participating children's expression with shells, first taken from the child's perspective. Figure 7 shows the same moment where the child is documenting the collection of the natural materials but from the researcher's perspective. By addressing the two different perspectives all voices are important for our study. The engagement of all the participants is valuable for inclusive practices as both children and researchers are equal protagonists of their common experiences.



**Figure 6.** Children's documentation of their own performance of Land Art



**Figure 7.** Collecting natural elements for Land Art: the researchers' perspective

### The Perception of the Shipwreck Through Drawing

Back in kindergarten the children's expressions moved forward through their drawings and became a bridge between their experiences at the place and of the place. The kindergarten teachers chose to provide the children with different drawing materials, such as pencils, markers and coal. Children's drawings are used to access children's views and experiences (Einarsdottir et al., 2009). As drawings bring 'a deep sense of embodiment and connection to our experience of the world' (Anderson, 2019, p. 22), they contribute to

focused attention to the surroundings, the environment and the materials in a dynamic form of engagement with movements, landscapes and places. Based on chorotopos as a perspective, children's aesthetic activity and performances provide awareness of the local environment. These performances are discussed as a way of meaning making of the shoreline as a place. The children's photographs and drawings are seen as opportunities for the children to reflect on their experiences of their trips to the shoreline (Figure 8 that shows the shipwreck drawn by participant Child 2 and Figure 9 that shows the shipwreck drawn by participant Child 5). Both children in these drawings used coal as a drawing material which also can be connected with the history behind the ship carrying coal.



Figure 8. The shipwreck drawn by participant Child 2 with coal



Figure 9. The shipwreck, drawn by participant Child 5 with coal

Our video recordings of the drawing process were included in the analysis. During the conversation at the start of the process, the following dialogue between the kindergarten teacher and a child was recorded:

**Teacher 1:** I can see that there many straight lines and lines in the middle, is it the shipwreck?

**Child 3:** Yes.

**Teacher 1:** What is this under here, under the shipwreck? [Pointing at the drawing]

**Child 3:** The sea, it stands in the sea.

Another element in the children's drawings are the lines that characterize the shipwreck. These lines reflect a memory, a meaningful connection that is drawn between the trip to the shoreline and the child's perspective, where the visual experiences from the trip provide content for the drawings. In the drawings, the shipwreck from the story is told again based on each the child's own visual interpretation. Drawing involves the interaction of several processes, an interactive dynamic motoric and visual component. We draw to see in a broad sense, including exploring, discovering, studying, experiencing, confirming, telling, fabricating, identifying, recording, documenting, thinking, creating and expressing (Frisch, 2008).

## Discussion

The present study aimed to explore children's experiences in a local space and interrogate how children perform Land Art with the use of natural materials of the environment during their trip in a shoreline. One of our research questions was to investigate how children's participation in the Land Art activities and their processes of documentation these experiences (through photographs and drawing) support democratic and inclusive practices. From a praxeological perspective, we acknowledged the complexity to balance praxis, ethics and power in a participatory research approach as ours (Lyndon, 2023). The study reveals that children's photographs and drawings are a way to communicate more deeply with their experiences, a way to engage with, pay attention to, and visualize their perspectives. These findings demonstrate that the context and location of images are important for children, with the presence of images in the form of photographs and artifacts enabling familiarity with a place. Experiences of participation



through documentation processes give opportunities for a rights-based approach through the involvement of all children in the daily life of the kindergarten.

Children's investigations of the shoreline, looking for elements that connect with the story of the shipwreck, show children's interest in associations and connections. The participant children's performance of Land Art enhances their direct dialogue and communication with the natural environment (Brady, 2007; Sørenstuen, 2011). Children's photographs taken at the shoreline and their drawings followed by their narratives connected to their trips document children's participation in *sharing* their experiences and acquired local knowledge.

A comparison of children's documentation with photographs and drawing as visual methods that children's involvement in these situations indicates that the shoreline and the shipwreck drew their attention. The data reveal that this attention moves as children represented their experiences on the shoreline itself and back in the kindergarten in the form of drawings. This transition of the experience indicates that children are active participants of their meaning-making through their direct participation in play and activities in an outdoor space. Children's interest is revealed in their photographs, the performance of Land Art with different materials (natural and not natural) and drawings that enable children's participation. Interactions with natural environments such as the shoreline are important for children's experiences and place these experiences in the *chorotopos*, which encompasses a close relationship with materials and place (Trimis & Savva, 2009). Children's participation in expressing themselves through the visualization of what they had seen, felt, smelt and sensed in the place (such as the air, the smell of the sea, the water, the sand, birds' voices, etc.) sets them as actors of the process, actors *of* the moment and *in* the moment. Indeed, this in-between mode of communication with the place and the materials affects children's focus, interests, interactions and relationships among themselves and with the environment (Ingold, 2015). In order to support inclusive and democratic practice in early childhood settings, it is vital to invest in and make visible to all participants all the different relationships, interactions and ways to express how the world is perceived.

The children's perception takes place *here and now* as they experience the space with all their senses, and this perception comes to light in the visualization of the experiences the children had on the shoreline with the gathering of materials and the Land Art activities. Finally, all these experiences are gathered again in their aesthetic expression through drawings. Children are 'collectors' of natural materials and 'collectors' of experiences at an individual and at a group or community level. Land Art as a form of expression and as a creative activity can be a framework that forms the basis for community and aesthetic experiences in order to familiarise oneself with, experience and appreciate the local physical environment.

### Conclusion

To conclude, evaluation and documentation are key pedagogical elements in ECE and contribute to the development of children's learning and experiences. The findings from this study indicate the role of children as active participants in exploring and interacting with local spaces through different forms of visual documentation such as performance of Land Art and drawings. ECE educators might often experience that there is a gap in implementing policy documents' guidance (e.g. the Framework Plan for the content and tasks of kindergartens) and with everyday practices. The importance of listening to children's perspectives is underlined in order to acknowledge children as partners in the activities and aim for a holistic pedagogical approach of inclusion through child-centered experiences. Children's voices can be expressed in different ways, and inclusive practices can be performed in various ways. Outdoor spaces provide opportunities for a variety of practices, exploration and development of various interactions and relationships. We acknowledge that this is a small-scale study, but at the same time, the data indicate that it is necessary for ECE to develop practices that provide children with various modes of expression during their everyday life to promote children's rights as active participants.

## Declarations

### *Authors' Declarations*

**Acknowledgements:** We would like to acknowledge the participation of the children and their educators in the study. All photographs were taken by the children or the researchers of the study.

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