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Togetherness in Play and Learning

Special Needs Education in Mainstream Settings

Support for participation

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Support for participation

From a sociocultural perspective, children's learning and development occurs through building relationships and interaction with others, both adults and peers. Vygotsky uses the term 'zone of proximal development' to describe what the child can master with the help from a more 'competent' individuals, which could be other children or adults in kindergartens and schools. The following five chapters provide examples of practice that adapts in order for children with special needs to be able to participate in inclusive learning communities with their peers.

Karine Bekkely:

Adults' dialogue skills to support children's participation
in the community

Based on practice cases, Karine highlights how adults in kindergartens and schools can support and adapt so that children, irrespective of challenges, can participate in play and interaction with peers. The opportunity to participate in play and experience belonging to the children's community is a core component of an inclusive community.

Adults' dialogue skills to support children's participation in the community

Based on case histories, this chapter will highlight how adults in kindergartens and schools can support and facilitate participation in play and interaction with peers, regardless of the difficulties children may have.

Karine Bekkely

The opportunity to participate in play and experience togetherness in the children's community is important to each child, and at the same time these are key components of an inclusive community (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018). Where the community provides possibilities for some, it may be limiting for others. An inclusive community is not a final goal, but a daily process that is continually changing owing to "the way the community practices being a community" (Solli, 2010, s. 40). Based on this understanding of inclusiveness, we do not look at the challenges that children may face in various arenas as traits of the child. Instead, we look at the challenges caused by insufficient facilitation in their surroundings. This way of understanding inclusiveness implies that the child is seen as a 'child *experiencing* difficulties' not a 'child *with* difficulties' (Solli, 2010, s. 36). This gives adults greater and broader responsibility. Thus, to manage such responsibility for facilitation, the adult must be competent. Competence in this chapter is understood as knowledge and skills, in addition to attitudes and values (OECD, 2005). The term 'competence' is delimited in this chapter to mean the dialogue skills of adults, and their understanding of where and how children learn.

This chapter is based on case histories about Iris and Frida to highlight how an adult can use their competence to support and facilitate children experiencing difficulties, so they can take part in play and interaction. Both Iris and Frida are six years old, but the chapter is relevant to adults in both day-care centres and schools. Therefore, the adults in the examples from the practice are referred to as 'the adults' without further describing which arena it concerns. Iris and Frida are described through the eyes of the adults, and the challenges they may face in interactional situations are characterised by the adults and the way they understand Iris and Frida. This chapter will highlight the dialogue skills of the adults recognised as skills that help a child to connect with their own emotions and thoughts. According to Bae, (2004) this is fundamental in order for children to be active participants in a community. First, we present a short account of how dialogue should be understood in this context, after which, the chapter shows how adults can use their competence in practice.

What characterises the dialogue?
Bae (2004) has investigated dialogues between adults and children in kindergartens. She wanted to find characteristics in daily interaction between adults and children that may play an important role in child development. In this regard, she found that dialogues filled with reciprocity and equality, and a basic attitude of appreciation, help validate a child's own experiences and opinions. Bae (2004) claims that this is significant to the development of among others a child's self-esteem and the ability to form social relationships with others. She makes reference to the fact that an appreciative basic attitude is expressed through, for example, listening, understanding, tolerating and directing attention towards the child. Similarly, Bae stresses (2004) that it is the adult's responsibility to uphold equality and reciprocity in the asymmetrical relationship between the adult and child. She describes the dialogue between them as a continuous process that the adult should strive for

Therefore, the dialogue skills of the adults are extremely important in helping to create possibilities for children to take part in an inclusive community. Alternatively, adults can create barriers to children's participation. The chapter will also highlight how poor dialogue skills can contribute to this.

Challenging behaviour as a participation barrier – problematisation of the adults' descriptions
Our attitudes towards and views on children greatly influence how we respond to what we observe. On several occasions when giving guidance, I have met adults who talk of children who challenge the community in various ways. For example, they may say that the child "does not wait for their turn", "does not follow game rules" or "always wants to decide". Let us call the child Frida, even if she represents multiple children. The adults say that she does not like losing and therefore cheats or leaves before the game is over. She says nasty things to both children and adults if she gets angry, which she often does. I have also met adults, who say that Frida "is mean or terrorises the other children." At this point, the reader should be reminded that these descriptions of Frida are founded on the opinions of adults. The adults describe the *difficulties* that appear when Frida interacts with other children.

Rarely have I met an adult who describes Frida *experiencing* difficulties, i.e., they describe how Frida may face difficulties during different types of interaction with other children because the surroundings have not been adequately facilitated.

When the adults look upon Frida as a child *with* difficulties, it affects the way they address her and facilitate any support. If Frida owns her difficulties, she is also largely responsible for how they can be avoided. For example, there will be fewer conflicts when playing with others if she stops cheating or saying nasty things. Such an understanding of Frida, as a person who owns her own difficulties, is also consistent with the adults' descriptions of Frida when they say, "The other children won't play with her anymore" or "We know she can do it if she wants to."

Is it true that the child "is mean and terrorises others" in the way the adults portray? Furthermore, is it Frida's responsibility if "the other children won't play with her anymore?" If one believes that the answer to these questions is "No", how does it affect Frida if the adults describe her this way? Can the characteristics of dialogue, such as listening, tolerance and understanding be maintained around Frida if the adult already looks upon Frida as a nasty child? Isn't such an understanding of Frida exactly the opposite of listening and understanding?

The appreciative basic attitude that forms the basis for dialogue, in the way Bae (2004) describes, builds on a principle of equality between those in the relationship. The problem for Frida is that there is no concept of equality in the way she is treated.

This has consequences in terms of how the adults take responsibility for the situation and how they facilitate support. When the adults do not listen, understand or show tolerance, it will probably contribute to the creation of barriers that prevent Frida from participating in the community. In many of my meetings with Frida and the adults around her, the adults have questioned whether there is anything else they can do for Frida. They have told her that she must not behave in the way she does, and they have worked on how to be a good friend.

Despite this, the relationship between Frida and other children and adults has not changed.

Nevertheless, changes may occur. With increased knowledge and understanding of the importance of dialogue when faced with children experiencing difficulties, the adults can adopt a more inclusive approach aimed at accommodating all children in the community. The following practice case will try to demonstrate the importance of the adults' dialogue skills for enabling Frida to participate in the community based on her ability and needs.

Frida playing a board game

Three different games and activities have been put out and Frida is looking at the table with snakes and ladders on it (a board game where you throw dice and climb up or fall down ladders on the way to the goal). She walks up confidently to the children who have sat at the table and says angrily: "I always win, because I'm best." She then stands looking at them seriously.

The children look confused. Some are just about to say something and others are about to turn around dismissively. At this point, an adult says: "It's nice that you've come up to us, Frida. Would you like to join in?" Frida doesn't answer, but another child says: "But she always wants to decide." The adult looks at the children, smiles at them and says: "Everyone can join in here, can't they?" The children nod gently, but affirmingly. He continues: "Good. Frida you can sit here and we'll go through the rules before we start." One-by-one the children explain the game rules. The adult says: "I always get upset when I fall down the ladder, do you?" One of the children says they get a bit upset, but that they try not to mind it. Thereafter another child looks at Frida and asks: "Will it be hard for you to play since you never lose?" Frida replies: "Huh? Then I'm not going to play anyway." The children, somewhat surprised, look at the adult who says: "Frida, what would you like the others to do if you fall down the ladder, so you can still play?" Frida waits a while and answers: "They've not to laugh." The adult looks at the children and says: "We'll remember that." Does anyone else have any good ideas for when someone is unhappy about not leading the game?" The children come up with various suggestions, such as you can always win next time or you should tell an adult if someone just leaves the game. Frida replies: "You can leave the game." The adult nods affirmingly and smiles: "I think everyone's been given a lot of good tips, so perhaps no one will need to leave?" Frida nods somewhat affirmingly and looks at the other children, who are also nodding. The adult ends the conversation by saying: "It might be a good idea to remember that it helps to comfort someone if they get upset or angry."

The game is about to start and Frida says: "I'm going first." The surprised children look at the adult, who smiles at the children and gently says to Frida: "Have you forgotten that the person who throws the highest number on the dice starts the game? Everyone can forget. You can throw first Frida and then we'll see who gets the highest number to start."

Listening involves more than just words

In order for the adult to support Frida's participation in the game, the adult has to use his dialogue skills, among other things, direct attention towards a range of things, not just the uttered words. This maintains reciprocity in the dialogue. Dialogue as a process is important in order to understand children in different situations and this will also enable adults to continually develop their skills. Consistent with Bae's (2004) comprehension of dialogue, children's experiences are acknowledged by listening to, for example, both body language and tone of voice. At the same time, an attempt is made to understand what children want and the type of support they need through their body language and expressions. In the practice case, the adult listened to more than just Frida's utterances about always winning and being the best. He also listened to her angry body language or tone of voice by trying to understand: Is Frida angry, or is there something else behind it? The adult acknowledged the body language of the other children by, for example, confirming their surprise that Frida wanted to start the game. They turned to the adult, who used dialogue to confirm their experience, at the same time as it was used to help the children start the game in a different way. Since the adult was conscious of his own, and the body language and emotions of others, and acknowledged them, it helped to promote each participant as a subject. In the practice case, we saw that the adult smiled and was friendly, and that Frida and the other children shared experiences and tips about falling down the ladder or not being the leader. Forgetting or making a mistake in the

community does not prevent emphasis on the children and their contribution as individual subjects. On the contrary, dialogue is used to clarify the experiences of each participant. This helps to acknowledge the children's own experiences as valid. It is safe to assume that such appreciation of Frida changed her body language as the game progressed. She was less stubborn, and at the same time she was encouraged to take part. The appreciation that the adult created through facilitating dialogue with and between the children contributed to an inclusive practice.

Sharing experiences and emotions with others

As one of the characteristics for an appreciative basic attitude, Bae highlights (2004) tolerance for the different experiences and emotions of others. This implies that adults can create equality between children through enabling them to see, hear and understand their dissimilarities. In the case of Frida, the individual child shared experiences and emotions before the game started. In addition, Frida was asked how she could be helped if she wasn't the leader. The adult's practices encourage the children to share experiences, thereby promoting tolerance for dissimilarities. By sharing and listening to others, Frida is also helped to distinguish between her own emotions and the experiences of others. The adult initiates the exchange of experiences and tells of his own emotions when he falls down a ladder and the children thereafter follow suit. So again, we see that the adult's dialogue skills help to present the children and adult as individual subjects and subjects for each other.

Emphasising that everyone can forget or make a mistake

Through dialogue skills, the adult can create participation and the exchange of experiences in the community by helping to put into words misunderstandings along the way, for example, by discovering that children understand the rules differently. Some might believe that they have to have exactly the same number on the dice to reach the goal, whilst others may not. Or by putting it into words when someone forgets something, for example, the way Frida was allowed to start the round by throwing the dice to decide who would start the game. Frida did not follow the rules, but the adult used dialogue to convey that she was still an equal participant. At the same time, the experience of the other children was acknowledged in that the adult confirmed their surprise and said that the rules had to be followed. This is consistent with Bae (2004), who shows that equality and appreciation in dialogue can also be expressed by creating space for participants to show tolerance for different perceptions of reality. Since the adult encouraged both Frida and the other children to put into words misunderstandings or their perception of the situation, the participants also appear as subjects in the community here as well.

It may be useful for children to help each other to agree on what they should do if someone forgets the rules or if someone struggles if they are not leading or don't win. In this way, the adult's practice has prepared the community for the possibility that misunderstandings and forgetfulness may arise. Or the adult's practice can prevent this by preparing the children in advance. The adult contributed to the creation of a practice where the children themselves, or with the help of an adult, handle forgetfulness, misunderstandings or disagreements during the game as they arise. Consequently, the adult's practice has helped Frida to participate with the others on equal terms.

What impact does the adult's dialogue skills have on Frida?

If an adult does not have an appreciative basic attitude and associated dialogue skills, Frida might not receive the support she needs. If the adults are unable to see Frida as a child *with* difficulties, a comment from Frida saying she" can't be bothered to play if she doesn't win" would be met with "we don't say things like that." This could be intended as feedback on how children should or should not behave towards each other in the community. However, it may also contribute towards children avoiding Frida, because it confirms that Frida has said unpleasant things. In this way, the adult's practice contributes to the creation of barriers against Frida's participation in the community. Since the adult does not have an appreciative basic attitude during dialogue, we find that such feedback indicates inequality between the participants, and at the same time no room for understanding or listening to what Frida is expressing. Through the case histories, we see that dialogue is a prosses where the adult must continually strive to be consistent with what is being expressed. By listening to more than words alone and sharing experiences of others collectively, we find that equality and appreciation between the participants flourishes. At the same time, Frida can learn more appropriate ways to respond by taking part in the community, for example, by saying in advance that it is allowed to leave the game. As such a response may in some situations be more appropriate instead of getting angry or saying nasty words if the child does not win. In the next case history, we are going to look at how the adult's dialogue skills can create opportunities and barriers for Iris, who in contrast to Frida, withdraws from the community.

When a child withdraws from the community. Problematisation of the adult's descriptions

When meeting adults in different arenas, I have also met those who talk of children who withdraw from the community. The adults describe Iris as a child *with* difficulties. They say that Iris "can't" or "won't" play with the other children. She often plays slightly further away from the other children and frequently says "No" if they ask her to play with them despite the fact that the adults have told Iris and the other children several times that everyone can join in. The other children are starting to get tired of asking Iris and the adults are not sure what else they can do. They say that Iris likes being on her own the best. "Shouldn't she just be allowed to play on her own?" the adults ask. Iris' parents say that she often plays actively with the other children in the street and that they don't recognise the way the adults describe her. The adults interpret the parents' descriptions to mean that Iris "can if she wants to."

Is Iris able to join in if she wants to and does she like being on her own the best? One of the problems of accepting such statements is that the adults describe Iris as a child *with* difficulties. Therefore, the solution to Iris' difficulties is, for example, that she takes part in the community when she chooses to do so herself. Even though there should be room for individual differences and the child's voice should be heard, such an interpretation is inconsistent with an inclusive practice. The parents first and foremost say that she chooses to be with other children and not alone. That is, they do not see Iris *with* difficulties at home. In other words, she *experiences* difficulties in surroundings that are not adequately adapted. If we use the chapter's framework for understanding, the adults are responsible for adapting the surroundings to make it possible for Iris to take part in the community in various arenas. Only then can the adults assess in more detail whether Iris still needs or wishes to be alone or to withdraw with fewer children. An inclusive practice is also missing if Iris is not acknowledged and understood as a child *experiencing* difficulties. In my meetings with various adults, I have found that many find it difficult to facilitate children who withdraw from the community. The continuation of this chapter will therefore highlight how adults may use their competence to create possibilities for Iris to take part in the community and emerge as a subject on equal terms with the other children.

Iris in the sand pit

Iris is sat digging with a spade in the sand looking at other children, who are digging a short distance away from her. The children are also looking at Iris. An adult sits down between Iris and the other children and starts digging. She then looks at Iris and says: "Will you help me to build a house, and we can decorate it with flowers?" One of the other children answers spontaneously: "I can decorate it with flowers as well." "Great," says the adult, who looks at the child and Iris, and says with a smile: "Maybe you could go over there (pointing) and pick some together?" The other girls nods and stands up.

She stands still waiting and looking at Iris. Iris looks down, but releases the spade. The adult says: "How nice of you to wait for Iris before going to get the flowers." Iris gets up cautiously and the children walk off together. Whilst they're picking the flowers, the adult sees another child looking at them. The adult looks at Iris and the other child, and says with a smile and slightly high-toned voice: "Maybe they'll pick a lot of flowers so they can share them with you?" When returning with the flowers, one of the children asks Iris if she can have one. Iris stands still for a few seconds without answering. Then she bends down, takes one of the flowers and gives it to the girl, who says "thank you". The adult smiles to both children. The adult then asks: "Is it nice to share at any other times?" One child tells of when she shared popcorn at the cinema, another said she has to share with her little brother. The adult also asks how it makes them feel when they share. One of the children laughs and says: "It makes me so happy that it makes my tummy tickle." "Have you ever felt your tummy tickle, Iris, asks the adult. She looks up slightly and says cautiously with a smile, that she and the girl next door once jumped on her trampoline the whole day. They continue playing after the conversation, and both Iris and the other children pick more flowers.

Drawing attention to more than just words

To help Iris join the game, the adult must focus on what and how Iris expresses herself in different situations and try to interpret her expressions. Appreciation is not primarily about praising external actions such as when Iris took the initiative to pick flowers. Nor about solely listening to her words about liking her own company either. Appreciation as a basic attitude is linked to trying to understand how Iris experiences the interaction with others and validating her experience. In order to grasp Iris' experience and thereafter acknowledge it, the adult must pay attention towards among others the non-verbal expressions of the other children. What did Iris and the other children actually convey when they looked at each other? Or when Iris looked at the ground whilst the other child waited? And how did she feel when she told the story about jumping on the trampoline with the girl next door? The adult must draw attention to these expressions so they can acknowledge and validate them immediately afterwards. It may be the case that Iris is not the type of girl who will take up a lot of space now or later in social situations. At the same time, her

parents describe a different type of child. Even though Iris may not talk much in various situations, the dialogue with and around her varies considerably. Iris shows variation in her expressions and behaviour in each community. At the same time, both adults' and children's use of dialogue with Iris and each other takes place in different ways. To understand Iris and to take care of reciprocity and equality in the dialogue at the same time, the adult must therefore listen to more than just words. Earlier we saw examples of the adult drawing attention to the children's body language, but attention can also be aimed at the dialogue with the parents and with Iris. This enables the adult to gain a better understanding of why Iris plays more actively at home and acknowledge her experiences there. This would be consistent with reciprocity and equality in the dialogue, in contrast to understanding the parents' descriptions as confirmation that she "can do it if she wants to". We also saw that the adult listened to more than just words when the adult recognised how the other children looked at and approached Iris, and thereafter helped her join the game or when the adult smiled to Iris when she shared her flowers. The adults must notice

Iris' and the other children's expressions in the community in order to understand what they are conveying. This acknowledges the children's experiences and adult facilitation also helps the children to acknowledge each other as well. In this way, opportunities are created for Iris to take part in the various communities.

What impact does the adult's dialogue skills have on Iris?

If the adult's starting point is that Iris "can do it if she wants to", it will be more difficult and less necessary to use dialogue as a tool. It will be more difficult because the adult listens to the words only and less necessary because Iris' expressions have already been understood and clarified. In other words, such an understanding would case the adult to have and take as little responsibility for helping Iris to join the community. If the adults believe that they "have done what they can", their lack of facilitation could also contribute towards the other children viewing her as a less attractive playmate. This gives less dialogue variation with and around Iris, and the perception of Iris as a child *with* difficulties is confirmed. The surroundings neither listen to or understand Iris and she does not emerge as a subject in the community. In other words, we find that the adult's lack of facilitation results in Iris losing the opportunity to take part and develop in the community.

The adult must understand their own responsibility to give support and competence to facilitate the support. At the same time, the other children can also create opportunities for Iris to take part in the community. We observed this when they were active picking and sharing flowers, and when they shared experiences and emotions linked to sharing. This is consistent with the sociocultural learning theory where learning and development take place during interaction with others, because children are supported in active participation (Vygotsky, 2001).

When everyone is included and contributes to the community, children change and develop, sometimes with the adult's support. For example, after playing in the sand pit, the adult could have taken the initiative to talk to the children about when they were waiting for each other and sharing experiences and emotions.

Another option is for the adult to start other small or long spontaneous or planned conversations adapted to the children's age. By listening and observing the body language and actions of other children, the children may become aware of their own body language and actions. It is reasonable to assume that when the adult facilitated the exchange of sharing experiences, it helped Iris to tell her day on the trampoline. Exchanging experiences in this way contributes to equality between the children and they appear as subjects to each other with their own feelings and their own experiences. Through their own dialogue skills, the adult creates space for children to understand and tolerate each other.

By using the community in this way, the adult can observe the situations in which each child needs support from both the adult and other children so they can master the situation. Such support can be viewed in light of what Vygotsky (2001) refers to as *scaffolding* that takes place within the child's zone of proximal development. When the adult supports the child in such a manner, the adult contributes to helping the child to cope independently later. This is one of the key principles of Vygotsky's (2001) sociocultural learning theory, where learning takes place during social interaction with others. Relationships and dialogue created in the community thus become essential to the child's development. We have now seen that Iris and Frida received support to participate in the community and to emerge as subjects even though they express themselves differently.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen that it is the competence and dialogue skills of the adult that in various ways help children to participate in the community. Using their competence to create opportunities for participation and togetherness is a continuous process over which the adult must constantly reflect. In the community, different forms of the dialogue process take place between children, and between adults and children. In these processes both learning, and development take place, and the child experiences participation and togetherness in the community through interaction with others. By using their dialogue skills in various types of interaction with and between children, the adult contributes to appreciation of each individual's experiences. At the same time, both the children and adults emerge as subjects for each other. Thereby the participants are given space to listen, tolerate and understand each other, which results in an inclusive practice.

This chapter has also demonstrated that the adult's competence is clearly related to attitudes, their view of the child and reflection over their practices. If the adults are unaware of this or lack competence in the characteristics of dialogue and possibilities, barriers for an inclusive practice may otherwise arise, as highlighted when a child is viewed as a child with difficulties or experiencing difficulties. An inclusive practice does not occur on its own through the good intentions of adults or by the physical presence of children or adults. If this was the case, both Frida and Iris would be at risk of being excluded by the community permanently. The adults must have competence in dialogue as a process and its characteristics so they adopt an appreciative basic attitude. Only then will the adult be able to take responsibility to create and maintain an inclusive practice so that all children can take part in and belong to the community.

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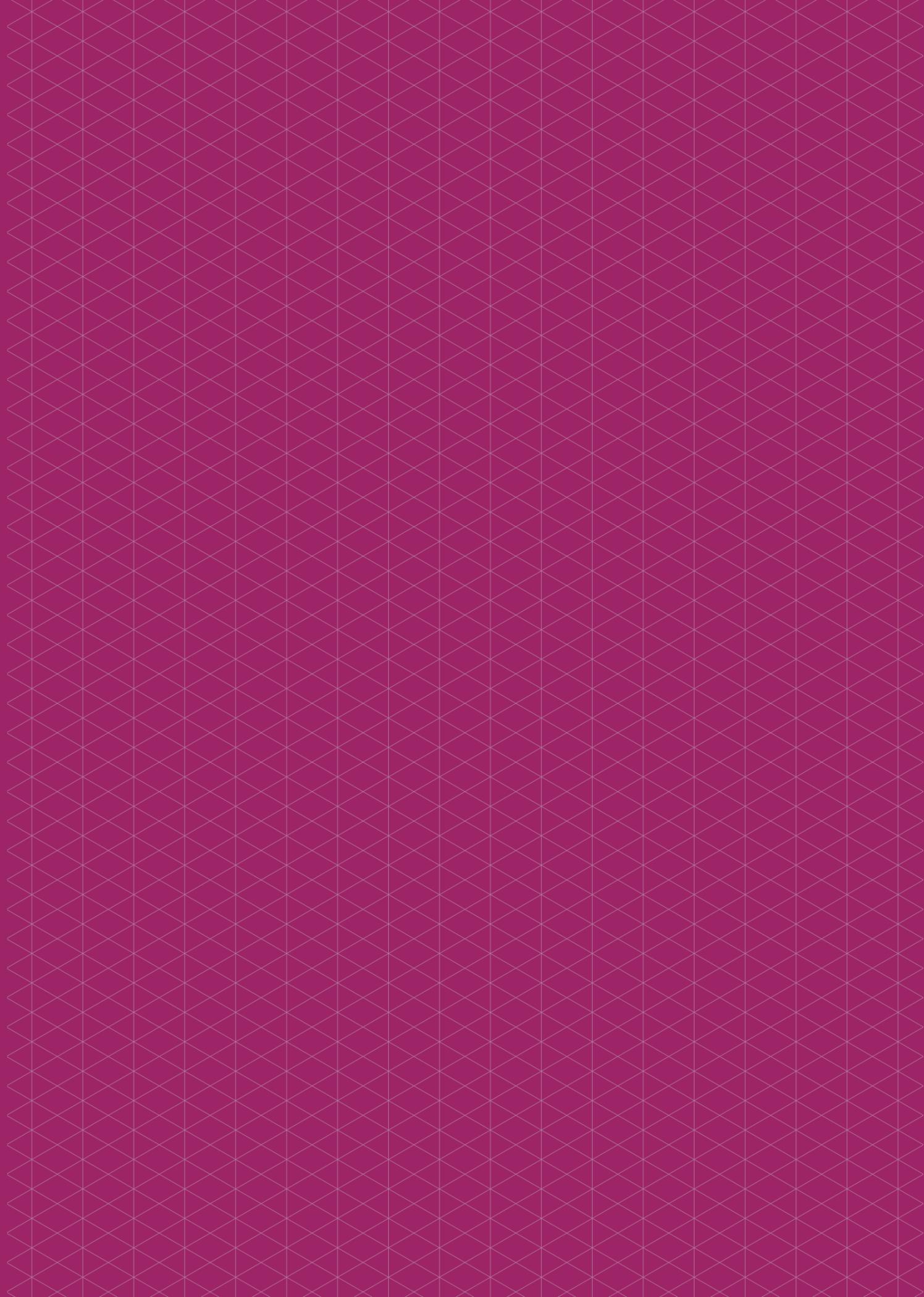
From a sociocultural perspective, children's learning and development occurs through participation in social communities — where community with peers is of particular importance. Children's participation in learning communities with other children, or facilitation of such participation, is a recurring theme in this anthology. The contributors to this anthology are advisers at Statped with experience from a variety of fields. They account for various approaches founded on experienced-based and research-based knowledge. What they all have in common is that they, through their adviser roles, have worked closely with the field of practice. This anthology shares the experiences from collaborations with kindergartens and schools in the efforts to develop a knowledge-based practice.

The anthology is primarily directed at students and professionals who work in kindergartens and schools but may also be of interest to others.