3.1 Bullying in Kindergarten

While bullying has been a well-known phenomenon in schools for several decades, the relevance of the concept of bullying in kindergarten is still disputed among researchers, professionals and parents. Reservations regarding the use of the concept of bullying in kindergarten has much to do with labelling young children as bullies – characterised by certain traits caused of individual aggression, intention to hurt and imbalance of power – and victims – characterised by low self-esteem and lack of different competencies. These explanations continue to represent dominant models of research about bullying and school intervention programmes (Camodeca, Caravita, & Coppola, 2015; Goryl, Neilsen-Hewett, & Sweller, 2013; Perren & Alsaker, 2006; Salmivalli, 2010).

Despite disagreement about the individual causes of bullying, there is an increasing recognition that actions associated with bullying behaviour occur among kindergarten children (Cameron & Kovac, 2016, 2017; Camodeca et al., 2015; Goryl et al., 2013; Helgesen, 2017; Idsøe & Roland, 2017; Kirves & Sajaniemi, 2012; Lund et al., 2015; Perren & Alsaker, 2006; Vlachou, Andreou, Botsoglou, & Didaskalou, 2011). Children, parents and practitioners in kindergarten seem to interpret bullying as actions that cause children to feel violated. Children perceive bullying primarily as being excluded from play, which is what they are most fearful about in kindergarten (Helgeland & Lund, 2016; Kirves & Sajaniemi, 2012).

In Norway, the Framework Plan for Kindergarten notes that ‘If a child experiences harassment or bullying, the kindergarten must deal with, stop and follow up on it’ (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017, p. 11). Recent research about bullying in kindergarten has sought to identify not only the bully and victim
but also the group and institutional levels involved, especially in terms of strategies aimed at combatting bullying. Even if group and institutional factors are considered, much of the existing research is anchored in a definition of bullying as characterised by aggressiveness and intention to harm (Idsøe & Roland, 2017; Perren & Alsaker, 2006; Repo & Sajaniemi, 2015; Salmivalli, 2010). Therefore, an increasing number of Nordic researchers are looking for alternative definitions and explanations of bullying that are not based on individual characteristics but on bullying as primarily rooted in group relations (Cameron & Kovac, 2017; Helgeland & Lund, 2016; Helgesen, 2017; Lund et al., 2015; Søndergaard, 2009, 2014). Some definitions also look explicitly at physical and material factors linked to bullying (Helgeland & Lund, 2016; Helgesen, 2017; Myong & Søndergaard, 2013; Vlachou et al., 2011).

### 3.2 Research Focus and Aims

There is a need to investigate theoretical approaches that consider the complexity of the social processes related to bullying. The questions in focus are: (1) How can bullying in free play be seen as children’s exploration in inclusion and exclusion processes? (2) In what ways are children’s exploration of inclusion and exclusion processes in free play supported or restricted by institutional practice?

The purpose for this chapter is to look beyond traditional expectations about bullying, explaining the phenomenon mainly by individual factors. The aim is to explore how a theoretical framework about inclusion and exclusion, as constitutive of democratic processes, can contribute towards a view of bullying as a complex relational and contextual phenomenon. What can be perceived as bullying will be investigated in light of children as explorers of inclusion and exclusion processes, which constitute their cultural formation. From these theoretical perspectives, bullying will be analysed in the context of relational, institutional and societal dynamics.

As the main purpose of the chapter is to explore a theoretical framework, the chapter will be primarily theoretical in scope. Thus, only one empirical case is used as an example. This case will be analysed and discussed, obtained from a larger qualitative study of four Norwegian kindergartens. The analysis and discussion will illustrate how bullying can be seen as children’s exploration of inclusion and exclusion processes in a situation called free play.

### 3.3 Children’s Exploration

The concept children’s exploration of inclusion and exclusion processes is inspired by the perception of children as active agents (Hedegaard, (Chap. 2 in this book)). Through play and exploration, children act and experience the world and their relationships from the very beginning of their lives (Murray, 2012, p. 1211; Nilsson, Ferholt, & Lecusay, 2018). Exploring means to be familiar with, investigating, test-
ing, experimenting, discovering or a combination of these approaches. What seems to be typical of children’s exploration is that it is not just a methodical or epistemological approach; it is also an ontological one. Children’s explorations can be seen as inductive processes, requiring openness and flexibility, creativity and imagination, where they are in search of new ideas or perspectives (Nilsson et al., 2018; Stebbins, 2001). According to Stebbins (2001), it is necessary to constantly explore social life because life is forever changing. Children as active explorers is also in accordance with an understanding of the concept of cultural formation, which seeks to describe how the human being is in a culturally and socially conditioned world. The formation process is seen as a social, all-presenting and never-ending process, with the child acting with spatial, material and linguistic factors (Ødegaard & Krüger, 2012, pp. 25–26). At the same time, an active formation process leads to continuously different results, depending on how people perceive themselves and the world. The outcome of the formation process is always more than, and not rarely different from, what is expected and therefore something no one can take total control of (Hopmann, 2007). To understand children’s explorations as constitutive of their ongoing cultural formation seems to be a relevant perspective, from which to investigate bullying resulting from inclusion and exclusion processes in kindergarten.

3.4 Earlier Research About Bullying of Relevance to Kindergarten

There is a close connection between theoretical perspectives about bullying and what researchers are looking for in their empirical investigations (Rigby, 2004; Schott, 2014). For several decades, most of the research about bullying has been anchored in an individualistic approach centered on the Swedish researcher Dan Olweus’ definition of bullying, where “A person is bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons, and he or she has difficulty defending himself or herself.” (Olweus, 1993, p. 9). Bullying consist of aggressive behavior, involving negative actions repeated over time and imbalance of power or strength. Olweus’ definition is regarded as universal and does not consider cultural or contextual conditions. In recent years more researchers acknowledge contextual, material and physical factors as important in understanding bullying (Camodeca et al., 2015; Helgesen, 2017; Myong & Søndergaard, 2013; Vlachou et al., 2011).

There has been little research about bullying in kindergarten context, but there is evidence to suggest that small children can behave in ways that are consistent with bullying (Cameron & Kovac, 2016; Goryl et al., 2013; Kirves & Sajaniemi, 2012; Monks & Smith, 2006; Myong & Søndergaard, 2013; Perren & Alsaker, 2006; Vlachou et al., 2011). Increasingly, research has shown that bullying can have much to do with the social processes of groups of children (Helgeland & Lund, 2016; Helgesen, 2017; Kofød & Søndergaard, 2009, 2013; Lund et al., 2015; Salmivalli, 2010; Schott & Søndergaard, 2014).
Although individual and social aspects are combined, much research is still focused on individual aggression as the starting point and the victim’s lack of social skills (Camodeca et al., 2015; Idsøe & Roland, 2017; Kirves & Sajaniemi, 2012; Perren & Alsaker, 2006; Repo & Sajaniemi, 2015; Salmivalli, 2010). Kirves and Sajaniemi (2012, p. 386) used Olweus’ perspective to investigate bullying among kindergarten children. Exclusion is perceived as an indirect sort of bullying, ‘known as relational or social aggression’, where someone is sabotaged from friendships, isolated and excluded from community. They also point out that special children with low social status, such as children with special needs and immigrant children, are mostly at risk of being victims and excluded from groups. In a Norwegian report by Lund et al. (2015) about bullying, the researchers found that especially vulnerable groups of children are the same as those highlighted by Kirves and Sajaniemi (2012).

Cameron and Kovac (2016) conducted quantitative research on six Norwegian kindergartens, asking parents and practitioners about bullying in kindergarten. They also asked about their interpretation of bullying, the role of bullies and victims and perceptions of gender differences regarding bullying. The findings corroborate those of Helgesen (2010, 2017) and Helgeland and Lund (2016), who found that bullying does exist in Norwegian kindergartens, especially taking the forms of excluding others from play and conditional threats. Both parents and practitioners viewed the victims’ experience of being bullied as an important factor in bullying (Cameron & Kovac, 2016, p. 1967). Departing from other studies, they found that physical aggression was considerably lower than other behavioural factors. The researchers maintained that the inconsistency likely reflects a distinction in how bullying is interpreted in the context of preschool and school vis-à-vis differences in cultural norms. They noted the increased level of attention on the concept of inclusion in the Norwegian Framework Plan for Kindergarten and wondered whether this influenced the interpretation of bullying. This chapter therefore engages in an in-depth analysis of a theoretical framework of democracy as inclusion and exclusion processes. Hopefully, this investigation will contribute to an understanding of bullying focusing on children as a community and the societal and institutional conditions for relations between children.

3.5 Bullying Caused in a Need for Belonging, Can Lead to Exclusion

Various theoretical perspectives can be applied to explain bullying and in recommending intervention strategies. Rigby’s (2004) analysis of different approaches concluded that none of these approaches have grasped all aspects of bullying. Research and intervention strategies ought to be informed by knowledge from different sources. Nevertheless, the understanding of what bullying is has important consequences for what kind of knowledge we seek about bullying (Schott, 2014, p. 22; Schott & Søndergaard, 2014, p. 2). Therefore, the theoretical perspective can be decisive in how we perceive and then prevent and intervene in bullying. The
Danish interdisciplinary research project Exploring Bullying in Schools (eXbus) consists of several researchers who are investigating bullying from an alternative standpoint to the dominant Olweus-inspired perspective of bullying. Unlike in the concept from Olweus, they do not focus on individual characteristics or a universal definition. Instead, they examine relationships and group dynamics, taking contextual factors into account. Researchers from eXbus explain that bullying is a consequence of social processes, whereby members of a group constantly worry about their own position and where their need to belong is threatened, with exclusion being a possibility. These researchers understand exclusion as a general phenomenon in normal groups, noting that it can move to social processes in awry directions and can develop into bullying (Myong & Søndergaard, 2013; Schott, 2014; Schott & Søndergaard, 2014; Søndergaard, 2009, 2014).

Although all these researchers see bullying as a need to belong, which can result in exclusionary processes, none of them refer explicitly to inclusion and exclusion as constitutive of democratic processes. Therefore, it might be useful to investigate whether the theory of democracy can expand our understanding of the processes that result in bullying. The starting point of my theoretical investigation is the research by eXbus. Different eXbus researchers have written about inclusion and exclusion in line with the political theorist Iris Marion Young. I will follow up on her perspective about democracy to address the question of inclusion and exclusion. Then I add some thoughts from another political theorists, Chantal Mouffe, and a theorist of education, Gert Biesta.

According to Young inclusion is a process of discussion and decision-making in terms of freedom from domination. She points out that the ‘Calls for inclusion arise from experiences of exclusion – from basic rights, from opportunities to participate, from the hegemonic terms of debate’ (Young, 2000, p. 6). Understanding bullying as exclusion does not require the existence of an absolute outsider to the group; rather, a borderline position might suffice. For internal exclusion, though people are formally included, they may find that their claims are not taken seriously and they are not treated with equal respect (Young, 2000, p. 55). Myong and Søndergaard (2013, p. 325) point out that the position of a victim can continue as exclusion when the excluded person is at a sufficient distance. Exclusion can then serve as a tool for strengthening inclusion within the group.

The need for inclusion in a group can promote goals for contempt, expressed as symbols of similarities and differences (artefacts such as clothes styles, interests, toys as well as behaviours, attitudes, norms and values). However, the selection of what is important as differences and similarities can be random and alternate from time to time (Søndergaard, 2014, pp. 51–52). This perspective centres not on the personal characteristics of the bully or victim but on what is ‘here and now’, the goal of contempt, and a tool for the group to achieve inclusion through the process of exclusion. Therefore, children’s positions can shift from that of being bullies to being victims. It can be difficult for group members to uncover this, which can produce more fear. For adults it can be challenging to understand what is happening, making them question whether it can be called bullying (Myong & Søndergaard, 2013, p. 326).
The complexity of inclusion and exclusion processes – where they always require and are interwoven in each other in an unpredictable way – challenges how we have generally thought about bullying and intervention, perceived as a chronologic process – bullying – exclusion – intervention – inclusion (Myong & Søndergaard, 2013, p. 340). Myong and Søndergaard have also warned about our expectation that social processes can be free from exclusion. This understanding can reproduce a rigid separation between ‘positive’ similarities and inclusion on one hand and ‘negative’ differences and exclusion on the other. In every group, resistance and conflict will always be necessary to prevent hegemony. Demands for inclusion can conceal real differences because of, or can lead to, asymmetries of power. They warn of being blind to inclusion’s own exclusion.

From a deliberative democratic perspective, inclusion as democracy is a question about equality and freedom. Realising these values is not something that needs to be understood or decided on once and for all; it is a question that has to be asked in every new situation where questions about inclusion and exclusion arise (Biesta, 2011; Mouffe, 2000). This perspective goes beyond bullying caused by individual, aggressive factors or individual experiences of being bullied. Biesta (2010, p. 561) has maintained that freedom is not ‘a phenomenon of the will’ or a private feeling. He refers to Arendt (1961) who understood freedom as the possibility to exist together in plurality, where all participants can act as equal, but unique human beings.

According to a democracy perspective, which is based on the values of freedom and equality, it is significant to relate to others, not in an antagonistic way (relating to others as enemies) but in an agonistic way (relating to others as opponents). How to transfer antagonism into agonism has to be a central question in thinking about preventing and intervening in exclusion processes. This perspective makes it necessary not to look at opponents as good or bad, in moral terms, but in political terms, in light of questions about freedom and equality (Biesta, 2010, 2011).

Schott and Søndergaard (2014, p. 12) have employed the cultural–historical framework from psychology to empirically analyse the complexity of inclusion and exclusion processes in children’s groups. This approach understands human practice in terms of an ‘inner’ and dialectic relationship between the social and the individual. It corresponds with Hedegaard’s (2008, 2012) model for children’s learning and development. She highlights a dialectical perspective of conflict or tension between children’s motives and perspectives and the different demands from friends and caregivers in institutional settings.

Hedegaard’s model, more in explained in detail (2012) is suitable to grasp the complexity, both of the child’s intention and project, and what is going on in concrete situations. The model consists of three levels, the first of which is devided into two sub-levels: 1a) The personal (relational) level is about the child’s own intentions and perspectives. 1b) The shared activity in the group is where persons might have a common project, but there can occur conflict because the persons in the activity setting have different personal motives, intentions and projects. 2) The institutional level is about pedagogical practice and how practitioners create conditions for the social processes in groups of children. Material artefacts and physical conditions for the children’s agency and exploration of inclusion and exclusion processes are high-
lighted. 3) The societal level is about the formal and informal values and norms in a society, embedded in expectations regarding children’s learning and cultural formation, influencing what is going on in the kindergarten (Hedegaard, 2008, 2012).

Hedegaard’s model is relevant for analysing the complexity of bullying in kindergarten. The model can help us understand that the prevention of bullying is dependent of possibilities of cultural formation based on the values of freedom and equality in a democratic community. This approach does not focus primarily on changing individual factors. The overarching aim is to consider how individual motives and perspectives can be transformed into what is good for all in the community. An important question is to examine institutional conditions and societal values and expectations in terms of what is considered a good life for the children living together in the kindergarten (Hedegaard, 2008, p. 17).

3.6 The Empirical Excerpt and Methodological Aspects

An example of children’s exploration of inclusion and exclusion processes in kindergarten is presented in the excerpt from a qualitative empirical research in four Norwegian kindergartens in 2013 and 2014. The main goal of the research was to employ a democratic perspective to investigate conflict situations between children and between children and practitioners. The project was reported to the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. Written consent from the practitioners and parents was obtained on the bases of assurances of anonymity, confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time (Backe-Hansen, 2016). For the youngest children, consent was given by their parents, but for children over 3 years, I asked for permission to look at their play, how they make friends and how they re-establish friendships after a quarrel (Backe-Hansen, 2016; Bell, 2008; Hedegaard, 2008). The informants and kindergartens presented in the excerpt have all been given pseudonyms.

I spent 1 week in each of the four kindergartens to observe the interaction between the children and between the children and practitioners. During these weeks, I also had unplanned dialogues with the practitioners during lunch breaks, as well as more random encounters, all recorded in field notes and observation protocols. To obtain some knowledge about the context and institutional practice, institutional routines and physical framing factors were also observed (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). I attended staff meetings where the practitioners were asked to write about conflicts between children or about events where they personally had been involved in a conflict with one or more children. Furthermore, they were to state the time and location of the event and who was present – children and/or adults. They were also requested to reflect, in writing, on their perception of the event. Based on my own observations and a thematic analysis of 30 narratives (Gibbs, 2007), I developed a semi-structured interview guide and carried out 12 focus-group interviews with the practitioners from the four kindergartens. In the focus group interviews, the participants did not only answer the interview questions; they also discussed with each other and exchanged their views and experiences (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011).
Field notes, observation protocols and group interviews with the practitioners about conflicts involving the children during play were collected and underwent a thematic analysis (Gibbs, 2007). During the analysis of the empirical data, I discovered a few episodes that differed from other conflict situations. In particular, the power balance between the children involved was outstanding. I started wondering whether the observed situations could be about bullying. The selected excerpt is used as an example because a written narrative from Sara, one of the practitioners, chronicles a situation in which a boy (Sjur) was the target of a trap planned by two other boys in the preschool group. During the observation recorded in the excerpt, I positioned myself close enough to hear the conversation, not participating or disturbing the boys. Based on the ethical responsibilities of the researcher (Backe-Hansen, 2016; Bell, 2008), I chose to comment to one of the assistants that Sjur was excluded from the drawing activity for nearly an hour. I also enquired about Sjur’s situation in the focus group interview. The observation protocol was analysed according to spatial and material factors. The utterances between those involved were analysed utterance by utterance, according to the dialogical model (Linell, 2009; Linell & Gustavsson, 1987). Because of space constraints for this chapter, the excerpt has been condensed.

3.7  A Case About Internal Exclusion in a Free Play Setting

The case is from a Norwegian kindergarten named Viben, with approximately 80 children. The oldest children belong to the preschool group, and especially the boys in this group seem to distance themselves from the rest of the children in the kindergarten (referenced from an informal dialogue with one of the kindergarten teachers). Analysis of the case reveals how Sjur is internally excluded (Young, 2000) from the activity in the outdoor free-play setting for nearly an hour, without the practitioners’ intervention.

It is midmorning; the children and practitioners are outdoors. In front of the kindergarten building – there is a big area with a sandbox, swings and a couple of small huts. At the opposite end, there is a shed for toys and outdoor equipment. Tables and benches are located in different places in the outdoor area. Kai, Erik and Sjur (all 5 years old) are sitting around the table furthest away from the practitioners, who have taken places around one of the other tables, conducting some walks and talking with the children, trying to have an overview.

3.7.1  Free-Play Outdoors – Not All the Three Boys Are Drawing

Kai has brought a drawing book from home. The book and some boxes containing pencils are on top of the table. Erik is allowed to colour with Kai, and they sing together. Kai asks Sjur to find a skin-like colour. He finds the pencil and asks if he could draw too, but Kai answers that he is not allowed to draw before he himself is ready. Kai
orders Sjur to find a yellow pencil, which he does. Then Kai tells Sjur that it is not his
drawing book. Erik replies: ‘it is only ours!’ Sjur objects: ‘But I should just draw’.

Sjur continues to sit next to the boys, who are drawing, while he knocks two
pencils together and sings. Kai says: ‘It is my book, only one at a time’. Erik asks
‘why?’ Kai doesn’t answer but invites him to his home, where he also has markers.
Kai and Erik continue to colour. Many pencils fall to the ground, and Kai orders
Sjur to ‘take them up again!’ He asks Erik: ‘Do you want to draw him [the figure in
the book], or do you want to draw there instead?’ Sjur comments on the colours they
are using and offers Erik a pencil. Kai comments: ‘It’s the colour you already have’.
Sjur repeats: ‘It is the colour you already have’. Kai replies to Sjur: ‘Don’t imitate
me! I decide who is going to have brown hear. You have to take up the pencils!’

The kindergarten teacher Maia comes and asks if another boy can join in. Kai
suggests that he can tear off a sheet for him. Sjur comments that he will get two
drawings, one on both sides. Kai replies to Sjur: ‘It’s not you who decides. Stop
imitating me! You are not allowed if you say it to me!’ Sjur responds: ‘I am not say-
ing it to you’. Kai and Erik continue to draw and sing. Then Erik says to Sjur: ‘Stop
imitating me!’ Sjur replies: ‘I am not imitating, Erik’. Erik repeats: ‘Stop imitating!’
Sjur replies again: ‘I am not imitating you’. Sjur, then Erik, place two pencils across
in the box and sing together. Kai addresses Sjur: ‘Take it away’. Sjur does what Kai
orders him to do. Kai says to him: ‘Look at what you are doing!’

Per (assistant) arrives and takes a picture. The observer says that the boys have
been drawing for nearly an hour, but one (of the boys) has been waiting all this time
to draw. Per replies: ‘They find a way to do it’. The observer answers: ‘Yes, it is
obviously better to sit there’ (to Sjur). Erik leaves the table but returns. He lays
down on the ground and continues to draw. Sjur also lays down on the ground. Kai
is left behind at the table, shouting: ‘Who wants to draw?’ Many children run to the
table. Linn (assistant) comes and takes copies from the drawing book, which she
hands out, including to Sjur. Sjur, Kai and some other children are now drawing, but
Erik has gone away to the sandbox.

3.8  Bullying Analysed and Discussed as a Complex
Exclusion Process

The analysis reveals findings which will be discussed according to the theoretical
perspective presented in this chapter, highlighting the inclusion and exclusion pro-
cesses from a democratic theoretical perspective. Hedegaard’s model points to three
levels of analysis, which the first level is divided in two: the individual (child),
social (activity setting), institutional (the practitioners’ practice) and society levels.
These levels complement, but also glide into each other and give a sense of how
complicated inclusion and exclusion processes can be. Although the children’s
intentions are not represented, the observation protocols, the written narrative from
one of the practitioners and the focus group interviews with staff lend support for
the interpretation of their perspectives (Hedegaard, 2008, p. 16).
3.8.1 Individual – Relational Level

In the excerpt, only three boys are presented in the drawing activity. The private artefact, the drawing book, seems to give Kai power (Myong & Søndergaard, 2013; Salmivalli, 2010, p. 14), which attracts the other boy, Erik, in an attempt to establish a closer friendship with him. Kai’s exploration in achieving a closer friendship also occurs in the invitation to Erik to visit his home and to encourage him to personally choose the figure and colours he would like to draw. This attractive private drawing book gives him an opportunity to explore his power to decide who can join in as well as to define the position to Sjur (but not to Erik). In accordance with the traditional concept of bullying, he probably intends to exclude Sjur, but it is more likely a consequence of his attempt to establish a stronger friendship with Erik. For Kai, the exclusion of Sjur can be seen as a tool for his own inclusion (Helgesen, 2017; Myong & Søndergaard, 2013).

As long as Erik’s interest in drawing persists, he accepts and supports Kai’s leading role, although he asks why only one can draw at the time. Erik is motivated to draw and supports Kai’s comments to Sjur, but he is also singing along with Sjur. In this situation, Erik seems to be more conscious about the drawing activity itself than to whom he wants to befriend. This is in line with what Nilsen (2005, p. 124) conceptualises as ‘we- ness’ or a common interest, depending on the situation and the attractiveness of the activity itself, more than to who is involved. This sort of ‘we-ness’, therefore, can change from time to time. When Erik gets tired of drawing, he simply leaves Kai and the other children behind.

Sjur awaits his turn to take part in the main activity, which is drawing. Even when another child joins later, and is allowed to draw, Sjur still has to wait, moving further back in the queue. He tries to get involved by singing, primarily to assist the other two, obeying orders from Kai, retrieving sticks from the ground. According to Perren and Alsaker (2006, p. 52), submissiveness seems to be characteristic of victims, but submissiveness might as well be a strategy for Sjur to try to be included in the ongoing drawing activity. He is demonstrating agency, trying to cope with the situation by serving the other two boys, commenting on and repeating the utterances of the others. He is not arguing loudly, screaming, demanding his turn to draw or explicitly defending himself. He only denies the accusation that he is imitating Kai.

Earlier research has revealed that children most often seek adults for help (Reunamo et al., 2015). However, all the while that Sjur awaits his turn to draw, he does not ask the practitioners for help. Research suggests that there is an expectation not to be childish or to seek help from adults, but to remain at a distance from practitioners. Reluctance to inform teachers about bullying can result from feelings of shame, fear of reprisal ‘or fear their reports might be demised as non-credible’ (Oldenburg, Bosman, & Veenstra, 2016, p. 66). Screaming or asking for help could have seriously stigmatised Sjur. To be seen as a snitch, or even worse, a victim, is not attractive to anyone.

It seems important for Sjur to be with Kai and Erik, although he does not participate in the preferred drawing activity. In a way, he occupies a border zone position,
partially making up one of the team (Wood, 2014, p. 12), and he can be seen as being internally excluded (Young, 2000; Schott, 2014). Sjur is actively taking part in the conversation but not in an equal way. His suggestions are not taken seriously. His behaviour is constantly criticised and corrected by the other boys. They address him in an antagonistic or hostile manner. Only once in the excerpt does Sjur repeat what Kai is uttering: ‘It is a colour you already have’. This repetition can be interpreted as an attempt to support Kai, but Kai interprets it as a negative imitation. He also orders Sjur to stop imitating, even when this has not occurred. In the kindergarten teacher Sara’s written narrative, it is also told that two other boys who are setting a trap for Sjur explain that their reason is because he imitated them so much. Sjur’s so-called imitation seems to be a goal of contempt and a ‘legitimate’ reason for exclusion. According to Myong and Søndergaard (2013, p. 325), the goal of contempt can be randomly selected and seems to be based on the other children’s definition of what Sjur has done, even when he is evidently not imitating.

Sjur probably does not define himself as an excluded victim. He patiently awaits his turn to draw. He also has one intention or project in common with the other boys (Hedegaard, 2008, 2012), to distance themselves from the practitioners, not giving them any signal which could call for their attention. In this respect, he is part of the group, doing the same project and contributing to a deal and unity with the other boys.

### 3.8.2 Activity Setting

The three boys belong to the same preschool group, but in the excerpt, they make up a small activity group (Hedegaard, 2012). It appears that they have different intentions and have different possibilities to acquire agency and to decide whom to be with. According to Lee (2001, cited in Löfdahl, 2010, p. 124), agency is related to dependence rather than independence, as everyone depends on others to be able to act. Moreover, access to power in the form of possessing attractive toys, such as a private drawing book, seems to generate power and attraction, albeit only temporarily.

It appears that the three boys, who were quiet and calm, are exploring access to power, trying out their own and the others’ positions and agency. To have the possibility to conduct this exploration, the boys all understand that they have to avoid suspicions from the practitioners about what is going on. They tacitly agree to maintain their distance from the practitioners, not only in terms of space, but also by not engaging in behaviours such as physical force, crying or talking loudly or calling for the practitioners’ suspicion about exclusion. They immediately accept when kindergarten teacher Maia asks whether another boy can join in. The three boys seem to do more than just reassure themselves about their own power. The children are exploring the world by subverting the rules and want to find out what the world will do when it is provoked (Henricks, 2010, cited in Wood, 2014 p. 11). It is important to see kindergarten as a place where children constantly try to create space and
manipulate the institutional conditions regarding the possibilities for inclusion and exclusion. Importantly, the three boys have common knowledge of how to avoid demands and expectations from the practitioners. This knowledge is developed and exercised by children within the institution and is not explicitly taught. It opens up the possibility for children to explore gaps and make room for their own activities (Markström & Halldèn, 2009, p. 120), including the exploration of inclusion and exclusion processes (Löfdahl, 2010; Wood, 2014, p. 14).

3.8.3 Institutional Level

The practitioners told me that when the children are outdoors, fewer conflicts arise than when they are indoors, because there is more physical space and more possibilities for them to organise their own groups and play. Although the practitioners did go to the table where the three boys were sitting, they did not seem to wonder what was really going on between them. The calm behaviour and conversation seemed to protect them from the practitioners’ attention. Teacher Maia even asked for another boy to be allowed to join in and was unaware that Sjur had been waiting and was being bypassed.

When I told the assistant (Per) what was really going on between the boys, he commented, ‘They find a way to do it’. This response is consistent with expectations that preschool children are already socially competent and able to handle conflict (Franck & Nilsen, 2015). For the practitioners in this kindergarten, the expectations are that children themselves often find their own solutions to conflict. ‘We try to intervene when there is a fight (assistant John) or ‘when the children are arguing loudly’ (assistant Peter). This is in accordance with research revealing that teachers are less likely to intervene when bullying is not physical (Yoon & Bauman, 2014, p. 312; Oldenburg et al., 2016, p. 65, Monks & Smith, 2006, p. 803).

In the group interview with the practitioners, I spoke about the observation of the three boys. I also mentioned the written narrative from one of the practitioners. The practitioners said that they are aware of Sjur’s challenge to be included and that he had been better at seeking help from adults. At the same time, they saw Sjur as a boy who risked being invisible to practitioners. They had worked hard and Sjur had been better at voicing his opinions, but they think that self-assertion was an ongoing challenge for him. This interpretation is in accordance with cultural tendencies as well as earlier research focusing on the individual’s lack of competence and ability to assert himself (Perren & Alsaker, 2006, p. 52, Lund et al., 2015; Kirves & Sajaniemi, 2012). Earlier research has also focused on individual social skills rather than on patterns of interactions between children or material and contextual factors (Schott & Søndergaard, 2014, p. 8).

The practitioners highlighted that, socially, school will be much more challenging. To be a schoolchild means to be more socially independent from adults. Therefore, Sjur had to settle conflicts himself. This is in line with theoretical perspectives that mute children’s continuing development and maturity, which accentu-
ate their responsibility for their own choices, even at an early age. These perspectives can divert attention from the importance of adults and can lead to the risk of not seeing the point of engaging children (Hedegaard, 2009, p. 69–70). According to Hedegaard, there is a worry that too heavy a burden is laid on the individual child. There can also be too much focus on the individual child’s lack of self-esteem and social competence as not reflecting social relations and context. The practitioners appear oblivious that exclusion can serve as a tool for inclusion in the group (Mouffe, 2000; Myong & Søndergaard, 2013).

3.8.4 Society Level

Free play is highly appreciated in Nordic kindergartens and according to the Norwegian Kindergarten Act, childrens’ play is already mentioned in Chap. 1, Sect. 1.1: The purpose and content of kindergarten. Kindergartens “shall contribute to well-being and joy in play and learning […] be a challenging and safe place for community life and friendship […] and promote democracy and equality and counteract all forms of discrimination” (The Kindergarten Act no. 64 of June 2005, Amended in Act No.119 of 19 December 2008, p. 1.).

In Nordic kindergartens practitioners also have internalised an ideology characterised by values and ideas about the free child, especially valuing children’s free outdoor play (Helgesen, 2010; Kristensen, 2014; Paavilainen, 2017). However, the practitioners in Viben kindergarten did not appear to be concerned about their own role of withdrawing from the preschool boys’ free play outdoors. This subscribes to a romantic view on children and childhood. Children should be relatively free from adult intrusion and direction, enabling them to exercise agency, self-regulation, ownership and control and to direct their own learning (Franck & Nilsen, 2015, p. 4; Wood, 2014). This ideology draws on the kindergarten tradition and makes kindergartens different from school-oriented institutions (Markström & Halldén, 2009, p. 115). However, free play, not even outdoors, is never completely ‘free’. The physical spaces available, explicit and implicit rules and children’s social networks continue to provide a framework for children’s actions, although they do alter this (Paavilainen, 2017, p. 17).

Based on the analysis of the presented excerpt, it is important to comment on the Norwegian Framework Plan, which highlights that ‘If a child experiences harassment or bullying, the kindergarten must deal with, stop and follow up on it’ (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017, p. 11). As we have witnessed in Sjur’s position in the group, it is not always necessary a child’s own experience of being bullied, which seems to be decisive. His position in the activity setting can be perceived as borderline, partially participating in the ongoing activity. In light of the theory of democracy, what is decisive is the lack of opportunity of equal participation and the antagonistic way of excluding. This perspective can lead to greater focus on exclusion as an observational phenomenon rather than mainly what an individual child experiences or perceives (Paavilainen, 2017, p. 66).
Also important is how realistic it can be to put an end to exclusion as a phenomenon. Myong and Søndergaard (2013 p. 340) warn about being blind to inclusion’s own exclusion. As we have seen in the relations between Kai and Sjur, attempts to be included can result in exclusion (Young, 2000). These processes are interwoven in an unpredictable way (Myong & Søndergaard, 2013). Unlike strategies aimed at eradicating bullying as a chronological process from exclusion to inclusion, preventing bullying and promoting democratic formation demand everyday attention from practitioners. This assumes a consciousness about practitioners’ responsibility to follow up on children’s ‘free play’ on the basis of questions about equality and freedom – where everyone participates (Young, 2000). It demands insight into children’s cultural formation as exploring and shaping of social relations, to be able to recognise power and positions at play and to constantly perform the pedagogical work of striving for democracy as inclusion in kindergarten. It is, therefore, not sufficient to focus on individual competence, lack of social skills, individual feelings or experiences of being bullied, nor is it sufficient to consider how institutional conditions and physical factors influence children’s exploration of inclusion and exclusion processes. It is necessary to go beyond bullying events, armed with the knowledge and a deeper understanding of how to actively contribute to meeting others in an agonistic, not antagonistic, way and to strive to live together in plurality (Biesta, 2010, 2011).

### 3.9 Conclusion

A democratic approach to bullying does not deny or trivialise children’s own experiences or feelings about bullying. There will always be the need to listen to and take every child’s perspective seriously. However, Sjur does not seem to express experiences of bullying. Rather, he seems to hide what is happening to him, i.e. not being childish by asking for help. He is concerned about the common aim and project to have a physical as well as relational distance from the practitioners. It is doubtful whether Kai’s attitude towards Sjur is rooted in aggression or intention to hurt. It seems more likely that his exploration of power and attractiveness to Erik explain this exclusion.

A more contextual understanding of what is going on between the children, though insufficient, seems to be necessary to understand, detect and prevent bullying. From the theoretical perspective of democracy, it seems expedient to look at children’s cultural formation as a constant exploration of inclusion and exclusion processes. This perspective sees inclusion and exclusion as complex ongoing processes that can lead in awry directions. It does not call for a focus only on the individual child, nor does it call for universal strategies for the intervening in and the prevention and eradication of bullying. It demands that practitioners work daily to support the social and physical conditions of every child to be included in play. The aim of this work is to strive for the freedom of equal participation and to be together in plurality as a never-ending cultural formation process.
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