Can I Join in? Understanding Children’s Participation in Play

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ABSTRACT
Based on a design-based research project and ethnographic observations of children’s play in school and after-school activities, the paper analyses how children participate in play. Using participatory sense-making (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007) the main contribution of this paper is to show diversity in sensory, playful participation in children’s play, and emphasise the importance of paying attention to the not spoken, sensory, embodied movements that children share when playing. The analysis illustrates that children participate in play through a sensory engagement, which is short, intense and not spoken, and by taking part in other children’s and adults’ participatory approaches.

Keywords: design, play design, pedagogy, experiment, senses

Introduction
Based on a design-based research project and observations of children’s play in school, this paper investigates how children participate in play in school. Children’s participation in play consists of, for example, touch, movement, expressions, gestures, embodied signals, and even energies and flows, which are important to understand how children play. The main contribution of this paper is to show the diversity of sensory,
playful participation practices in children’s play, and to emphasise the importance of paying attention to the not spoken, sensory, embodied movements that children share in their play. Sensory, playful participatory practices can be easily overlooked, and there can be a tendency to focus on how children verbally express how they want to play, and with whom they choose to play, in play research done with pedagogical institutions (Bernstorff, 2021; Nelson, 2014). In this paper, we want to take seriously the sensing and sensible participatory practices children use in play, with the aim of gaining an understanding of play in school.

In 1989, the United Nations (UN) defined the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the terms participation (article 12) and play (article 31) are emphasised as specific rights and target points in children’s lives throughout the world. It is also stated that children need to have their views and feelings taken into account (UN, 2013). Furthermore, the CRC stipulates that it is necessary to recognise and respect children’s nonverbal forms of communication, which are seen in body language, facial expressions, drawings, paintings, and play, through which very young children demonstrate understanding, choice, and preferences (Bay, 2012, p. 35). In Scandinavian research, play is seen as having important value in children’s lives (Jørgensen, 2018; Lillemyr, 2003; Skovbjerg & Sand, 2021; Ødegaard & Hedegaard, 2020; Øksnes, 2008). Play is understood as preverbal meaning-making (Jørgensen, 2019), and as a way children express themselves and construct cultural understanding (Mouritsen, 1998), participate in everyday life (Skovbjerg, 2010), participate democratically (Hansen & Toft, 2020), engage in cultures of movement and sport (Lund, 2017), and construct opportunities for action through playful communication (Bae, 2012, p. 38). Therefore, several studies emphasise that children’s participation in play is valuable to them, but also to adults seeking to understand and support how children’s participation can have different forms, expressions, and social organisations. This article applies a microanalytical perspective on participation, which sheds light on how children’s participation can be nonverbal, embodied, and sensitively coordinated and expressed. The aim of the paper is to answer the following research question: What characterises participation in play at school among 6–8-year-old children?

We point out the following challenges when trying to understand how children participate in play in schools. First, research indicates that play is under pressure in schools and that professionals (teachers and pedagogues [1]) of today (due to increased academic demands in schools) seem to disapprove of or overlook the importance of play, creativity, and well-being in favour of learning skills and the curriculum (Alexander et al., 2016; Russo, 2013; Skovbjerg & Sand, 2022; Øksnes & Sundsdal, 2020). This is also emphasised by Schanke and Øsknes (2022) within this journal, and since schools provide less time to play, they question whether schools’ focus on teaching deprives children of an important kind of participation when playing.

Second, the Danish School Reform (2014) has changed the work sphere of pedagogues, so they, to a larger extent, work in school side by side with teachers (Graversen & Ringskou, 2015). However, the legislation highlights educational practices instead of
holistic pedagogical practices, and therefore, pedagogues are likely to work within and adapt scholastic practices (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2012). Third, the reform has changed the schooldays of children, so they spend longer days in school, and it is politically articulated that play needs to be incorporated into school’s everyday practices (The Danish School Reform, 2014). Fourth, several studies have indicated that play is not valued in its own right, since schools are dominated by logics of learning and a specific social understanding of how to behave and play (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2012; Møller et al., 2019; Skovbjerg & Sand, 2022; Øksnes, 2019). Øksnes and Sundsdal (2020) argue that play, to a large extent, is seen as a didactic tool serving a particular learning purpose, and that play in school gradually develops into something more disciplined, and becomes subordinated to the core task of schooling. When play is somewhat institutionalised and perceived as isolated from the school’s primary tasks, then a consequence might be that some children’s participatory play possibilities are disregarded, and thus, inequality in regard to play participation is produced (Alexander et al., 2016; London, 2019; Skovbjerg & Sand, 2022).

This paper applies an understanding of participation developed by De Jaegher and Di Paolo (2007), which nuances children’s participation in play. It conceptualises the micro-practice of social interactions, by highlighting how meaning is exchanged in the embodied, nonverbal, sensory and material encounters of the participants. The main contribution of this paper is to show diversity in children’s participation in play, and to emphasise the importance of paying attention to sensory dimensions of participation in order to understand how children participate in play. This can be unnoticeable practices, which at first do not appear meaningful, but which are full of meaning. Approaching children’s participation through a micro-analytical approach can generate future discussion of how children’s participation can be reinforced through sensory pedagogical initiatives.

**Related work: Studying participation in play**

Children’s participation in play is not a field that is clearly defined, and often materialises in interdisciplinary fields. Reading studies on children’s participation through play, we want to emphasise the following four bodies of literature, represented across international journals on education and childhood studies. The first body of literature has an epistemological and methodological goal to understand children’s perspectives, and the second body of literature remains critical towards studies within this approach. Hammersley (2017) analyses how scholars within the field of childhood studies since the 1970s have emphasised that children should be studied in their own right, that children are and must be treated as active agents, and that participatory methods are desirable standards (see Bartley, 1998; Jamens & Prout, 1997; James et al., 1998; Kampmann, 2000; Kampmann et al., 2017; Kjørholt, 2001; Qvortrup, 2004). While this paradigm and related approaches to studying children’s lives have been fruitful, not least within Scandinavian childhood studies (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2012; Hedegaard, 2020; Kampmann, 2009; Mouritsen, 1996; Palludan, 2009; Ødegaard & Skovbjerg, 2021;
Øsknes, 2008; Øsknes & Sundsdal, 2020), Hammersley remains critical towards the paradigm. According to Hammersley, several studies in schools have addressed issues relevant from an institutional perspective (Hammersley, 2017, p. 114). Or, when studying children in relation to problematic issues such as delinquency, it has often been with an idea of how to help children or discourage a tendency, with little attempt to understand the viewpoints and activities of children themselves. Similarly, Tjørnholt (2002) remains critical since studies on participation are often related to political and discursive dimensions. We refer to Hammersley because we find it clearly necessary to describe the non-spoken and subtle dimensions of children’s participation, and take seriously what children do together.

A third body of studies on participation is more oriented towards the micro-practices of play, and is rooted methodologically in ethnography. It emphasises more subtle and micro-dimensional aspects of children’s play. Lund (2017) argues that ‘working with children’s motivation is about developing an awareness and feel for the kinaesthetic, affective and existential qualities that excite children during different pedagogical activities, and staging one’s participation in ways that will help bring these to the fore’ (Lund, 2017, p. 1206). Lund emphasises that it requires an ability to sense what goes on with the children, in a particular situation, to tap into their experiences, and to act for their sake of good (ibid.). Köngnäs et al. analyse how children participate in play in peer cultures and find that ‘children seemed to handle their peer culture through small talk that the adults did not get or even recognise. … Children were able to read their peers’ nonverbal gestures, movements, and expressions’ (Köngnäs et al., 2021, p. 6). This emphasises the idea that there are dimensions to children’s participation in play, which can only be revealed through a micro-analytical perspective of what children actually do together. Through a relational materialist perspective, Sand et al. (2022) analyses how children play with materials and how materials play with children, thereby taking an active role in shaping the way children play and participate in play. Similarly, related studies have illustrated how children participate in play by using emotional language and social regulations (Ahn & Stifter, 2006; Broekhuizen et al., 2017). These insights are also essential in work by De Jaegher and Di Paolo (2007, p. 494), since they argue that meaning is generated in-between people and their surroundings. These studies differ from Glenn et al. (2012), who argue to “address a gap” through understanding children’s views of play, but do so through a study based on interviews, whereas the studies mentioned above (alongside the current paper) argue for showing what children actually do together: nonverbal practices, sensory encounters, and joint coordination, which are a part of the way they enact their perspective.

A fourth field in development combines pedagogy, play and design, and illustrates new ways to design for children’s participatory possibilities in play. Skovbjerg and Sand argue: ‘It is the capacity of professional pedagogues who understand play and children’s perspectives, and who consciously think about what they do while doing it, acting in the situation based on a specific reflection’ (Skovbjerg & Sand, 2022, p. 28). This shows how pedagogical professionalism, children’s perspectives, and play are
interrelated, and that pedagogues can design for children’s play participation by participating themselves in play, from different positions.

**Methodology and context: Design-based research and play-design**

The article is based on a design-based (DBR) (Barab & Squire, 2004; Brown, 1992) research project named *Can I Join In? – Possibilities of Inclusion Through Play*. The empirical material was generated during 2018–2022. The project involves two schools, 40 pedagogues, over 500 children, and seven Danish researchers, and collaboration with the international research institutions. Play designs were entered into a 10-week design process organized in the following domains:

**Context:** Pedagogues and researchers identified that they would like to work with inclusion.

**Lab:** Pedagogues and researchers developed a concrete play design based on knowledge about a play type following Hughes (2006), and using their experiences about play.

**Experiment:** Children tried out the play designs.

**Reflection:** Pedagogies, researchers and children reflected on the qualities of the play design.

Together with the design researchers, pedagogues and children developed more than 50 play designs following that structure, which can be used to create participation through play in school. In all, 31 of the play designs were observed and documented. In order to generate knowledge about the design processes, ethnographic methodology was used including: participant observation (Spradley, 1993); sensory participation (Pink, 2008); photographs and fieldnotes (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007); sensory and emplaced interviews with children and pedagogues (Sand, Skovbjerg & Tanggaard, 2021); and audio recordings of play situations. The empirical material consisted of observations, over 600 photographs, 100 videos, and 10 interviews.

**Analytical strategy**

The analysis strategy applied in the article is inspired by grounded theory (Salmana et al., 2020), and consists of open and closed empirical readings in order to define codes and memos (Charmaz, 2006), which was followed up by 18 data workshops where the research team discussed and analysed specific empirical themes and related material together. During the analytical process the data management program Dedoose was used to analyse the empirical material. In terms of ethics, generating data has been GDPR-compliant, and written consent of the participants was obtained from children, parents, and pedagogues in line with the Danish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity. The digital data processing programme Dedoose has been used to analyse and manage the empirical material.
Validation and critical reflection of the methodology and the analysis has been made by following Charmaz (2006). Emphasising the extensive amount of empirical material, it was necessary to have more people to create codes, to discuss codes, and to create the final analysis. We have also followed Øhrngren’s (2006) recommendation discussing the analysis with researchers outside the project.

Since the two schools were influenced by Covid-19 regulations during the design experiments, the involved researchers had continuous dialogues dealing with ethics, and how we could reduce demands or somehow align our involvement with the schools to their everyday practices. This type of ethics is described as situational (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983), showing how researchers make judgements and decisions in real time through careful observations, awareness, and sensitivity (van Mechelen et al., 2020). Since the children were between six and nine years of age, written consent was obtained from the children’s parents in a manner consistent with the Danish Code of Conduct for Research Integrity.

Within the following section, the primary theoretical concepts of the article are clarified.

**Theoretical departure**

Play is understood as a social practice in which the participants’ own commitment, ideas, interests and living conditions are of importance (Mouritsen, 1998; Øksnes, 2012). We draw on the concept of play order (Skovbjerg, 2012; Skovbjerg & Sand, 2022; Skovbjerg et al., 2022) to emphasise the idea that the essence of play is not constant, but is continuously worked at and negotiated among the participants. The order of play must be seen as an organisation of actions, materials, and relationships that are pursued by those who participate, and the value is determined through maintenance and repetition, which take place constantly. Therefore, the play order is what makes sense in the given situation, and that is in constant motion between confirmation, development, and settlement (Skovbjerg & Sand, 2022). Participants confirm what order is and is not through their social, bodily, and material practices.

Participation is understood through De Jaegher and Di Paolo’s (2007) philosophical ontology of meaning-making. Rooted within embodied cognitive science, using phenomenology and social interactions, and inspired by Goffman’s face-to-face interactions, De Jaegher and Di Paolo (2016) develop what they describe as participatory sense-making, in which meaning is generated in-between people, bodies, and environments. They are interested in unnoticeable social encounters that range from temporarily brief and superficial, to deep and extensive (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007, p. 486). For example, children’s participation can be superficial and unnoticeable or deeply engaged, which influences the meaning-making within the situation. De Jaegher and Di Paolo argue that individual sense-making processes are affected by other participants, and that environments and new domains of social sense-making can be generated that were not available to each individual on her own (De Jaegher, 2013, p. 6). And here, it becomes essential to try to understand how children reconfigure, align,
and coordinate together. Godard and Bigé describe participatory sense-making as happening in an in-between: ‘Neither you, neither me, neither us, but at the interstice between these three pronouns, a third-included’ (Godard & Bigé, 2019, p. 97). A we-space is a space where different elements are related, and make sense within that specific space. The dancer and researcher Bigé (2019) questions himself as to whether he can accept that his movements as a dancer are not his but rather are borrowed, and prolong others’ movements. Following Bigé, the player must accept that a certain play order is not his, but exists and emerges in interaction with playmates and the surroundings, and the play order as the we-space will unfold in connection with the shared practices of the participants. The following analysis examines how children participating in play develop meaningful interactions in play.

**Analysing children’s participatory sense-making in play**

The analyses illustrate three forms of participation in children’s play order. First, we see how children’s participation is related to the surroundings; second, how children’s participation is related to children’s relation to pedagogues; third, how children’s participation is related to other children participating in play.

1. **From classroom to warzone**

Children are involved in the play-design called ‘Word Relay’. They have to create words or shapes with different materials. After 50 minutes, when the children build and create shapes together, four boys suddenly begin to play something completely different from the rest of the class, for which the series of photographs below provide insight.

The following empirical material is from observation and a video observation, and illustrates how the four boys’ use of materials is rooted in their way of reading, navigating, and engaging in the social environment that surrounds them.

The children are divided into groups and work with smaller materials, such as pipe cleaners, matches, plus-pluses, etc. All children are working at tables or on the floor in the classroom. Without telling the other classmates, four boys develop a game together. They build small firearms out of plus-pluses and they shoot at each other. They run around and bend their heads and backs. One of the boys raises his hands, shoots, and repeats a quiet whistling, shooting sound, while his hands press the trigger twice on the small pistol he holds in his hands. He begins to run, slightly up on his toes. The other boy, Yunus, is lying under a table. He holds a machine gun in his hands and with a quiet, whispering shooting voice he sends a series of bullets after the boy closely followed by a ‘deu, deu, deu, deu, deu’ of tongue rolls. They run past me, do not see me, they see no one but each other, but they know we are here. Two other boys come to Yunus. He shows his pistol, which is 6 cm long and consists of different coloured plus-pluses. The other two stare and open their mouths,
Figures 1, 2 and 3: The photographs depict the classroom, where four boys develop a game with weapons they built. The rest of the class are busy playing Word Relay. Photos: Sand.
without saying anything. The two boys continue their fight. They shoot and run on tiptoe over to the door. One boy is caught in a corner, and they fight with body contact. Yunus makes gentle bent kicks with his knee against the other boy, who is standing bent forward against the wall. The boys’ fight is silent. (Fieldnotes, 4 October 2019)

From the notion of participatory sense-making and play order, we may ask how the four boys make sense of playing within the classroom? We see how the use of miniature weapons is closely related to the physical frame of the classroom, the overall rules and the activities going on, since they move softly, talk silently, etc. Through micro spatial coordination, they manage to play a game of war and physical fights, but with no one disturbing them or telling them to stop, and return to the activity facilitated by the pedagogues. The reason for this could be that the boys, through their embodied practices, align their play with the silent, existing pedagogically organised activity that preoccupies the rest of the class. They are physically beaten, they run around and shoot, but through soft and subdued movements and sounds they fight a silent war, which does not disturb the rest of the class. Let us imagine that the boys ran around with loud voices and wild gestures. Then, the pedagogues would have been forced to interrupt the game. Furthermore, we see how the boys develop a game without speaking to each other, and by coordinating and aligning their movements. This play activity would not make sense during the lunch break outside in the play yard. As Herman argues: ‘The materiality of a thing is not locked inside the thing: it comes into existence through tactile encounters. It is in the interaction between my body surface and the surface of materials, that sense-making starts to arise’ (Herman, 2021, p. 10). The first part of the boys’ sense-making is about a process of making weapons, and the second part is about fighting a war, which is aligned with the surrounding space. It is in these sensuous and nonverbal practices that sense-making emerges. Through embodied practices, they align the social and structural space of the classroom. Hereby, participation through play order in this case is related to social skills, such as understanding, making social adjustments, and coordinating in relation to the surrounding space through minor coordinations and adjustments (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007).

The following example is different from the one analysed above, since it shows how pedagogues are part of children’s participatory sense-making practices.

2. “You want to be dog in a roleplay?”

The next example is from a role play, and illustrates how children’s participatory sense-making is related to pedagogical practices, and how pedagogues can have an important role in supporting children’s participatory sense-making. The pedagogue, Tom, asks about the content of the city. They suggest: chocolate factory, bank, houses, military base, and theatre.
Nada suggests: ‘Dog’.
Tom: ‘You want to be a dog in the role play?’ A boy asks Tom a question, and Tom takes time to answer him.
Nada asks: ‘Why don’t you write dog?’
Tom: ‘You want to be in a bakery?’
Nada: ‘No, I want to be a dog.’
Tom: ‘Okay.’
Nada: ‘Now write dog!’ … The dialogue continues, and the pedagogue does not write dog on the board, and after a while the pedagogue Trine reenters the classroom.
Helena: ‘There is someone that is not in a place?’
Several children say: ‘Nada.’
Tom: ‘Nada has not reported anything, but I know what Nada wants to be.’
Trine: ‘What do you want to be Nada?’
Nada: ‘Dog.’
Trine: ‘Great, you can join Viola and Helena. They need a dog in their house.’ (Fieldnotes, 1 November 2019)

After the brainstorming activity, the following play situation is interesting, since it reveals how Nada is really good at aligning the role of a dog with the other children’s roles, but that somehow contradicts the ideas of the pedagogue Tom, since he did not want her to be a dog.

Crawling on her knees, Nada enters the chocolate factory, wearing a tiger costume and playing the character of a dog. The three boys make weapons for their military station. They make them by putting together plus-pluses. Nada is lying under the table. She barks: ‘Woof, woof, woof’. A boy sneaks up on Nada and sits on her, while she barks at him. ‘Woof, woof, woof.’ ‘I caught it,’ he shouts. ‘Ouch, my arm,’ says Nada and sounds sad (but she isn’t, ed.). In the moment when the boy releases his grip on Nada’s arm, she makes a counter-attack. She pretends to scratch him with her paws, while saying, ‘Scratch, scratch, scratch’. He catches her arms again. Younus takes his plus-plus gun and shoots her in the forehead. ‘I will take your fur off you,’ he says. Nada grabs the tiger fur, holds it between her hands, and makes a farting sound towards the boys, and she runs. (Fieldnotes, 1 November 2019)

If we return to the dialogue, we see a difference in the way the two pedagogues, Tom and Trine, handle Nada’s suggestion of how she can participate. For unknown reasons, Tom does not understand or approve of the play order Nada is trying to establish as a dog. Trine does not question the play order, but instead welcomes the role of a dog, and shows where a dog is needed. To Nada, it makes sense to participate in the role...
of a dog, and the rest of the class supports her. Trying to understand the perspectives of children, and follow their suggestions and micro-coordinations might enrich the participatory possibilities of the individual child, even though they, from an adult perspective, might appear silly or even unruly (cf. Uhrnfelt, 2022). This empirical example illustrates how Nada and the boys construct a we-space through a common sense-making practice, through the redefinition of materials, costumes, and the play situation.

Trine’s way of entering the classroom and the conversation, and following Nada’s wish to participate in the game as a dog is an example of how pedagogues can support
children’s sense-making processes by reflecting and improvising in situ. Improvising and following Nada’s perspective generates a new form of participation. Focusing on interactive autonomy, it becomes important to understand how the body is exactly autonomous in its surroundings. We might think that Nada is very familiar with the tiger costume and the role, and the movement the costume provides. The empirical example shows how she, as a dog, generates a participatory space together with the boys, where they know the sense-making of how to act and react to one another. This way of being sensitively coordinated emerges from an aligned sensitivity between the play order, pedagogue, materials (costume and weapons), and the boys and Nada. Thus they bring in practices aligned with the we-space in a sensory way.

The following analyses emphasise how children’s participatory sense-making is generated in relation to other children.

3. Pokémon Stratego
Four pedagogues designed the play-design ‘Pokémon Stratego’. The idea behind the design was to start with a game the children played inside, and bring it outside. At the beginning of the design-based research project, the pedagogues and researchers read play theory together, for example, the mood perspective developed by Skovbjerg (2012). The pedagogues were inspired by this perspective, and wanted to design for an intense mood with a high level of energy and movement. Below, we see how that spatial setup influenced participatory sense-making practices among the children. The pedagogues, Casper and Mads, are preparing the teams for play, and they try to motivate the children, and generate high energy among the participants by using a loud, energetic voice and making team slogans. The two teams have a set of Pokémon cards. Each player gets a card, and they have to catch participants from the other team.

Figure 6: Nada tries to get away from the boy sitting on top of her. Photo: Sand.
and battle, and the child with the higher card wins. The pedagogues encourage the children to think strategically, figure out what cards the others have, and collaborate as a team.

The game begins. Something happens to the tired girls. At once an intensity is activated. I observe how they change their way of moving, observing, talking etc. Their eyes zoom out, they focus, and scan the bushes for opponents. They move differently too, as they bend their knees, run tiptoed, and stand and run closer together. I follow the girl with the scarf. She walks out onto the open lawn. A boy comes towards her. They look suspiciously at each other. They hesitate and read the other’s confidence and body language. He approaches her, not in direct line with her as he looks away from her, walks around her, looks at her card and exclaims loudly, ‘arghhh’ (a sound that should scare her). He seems nervous. Instantly she hides her card. A split second after he jumps at her. They both identify their cards. ...

After 30 minutes, Casper brings the highest card, Solgaleo, into the game. He shouts, ‘HERE COMES SOLGALEO!’ Four or five children run forward with him. They look happy and strong. The strong cards do something to the game. The children are more eager. A girl tries desperately to get through a hedge, which is densely overgrown. The girl sneaks forward. She is waiting and suddenly she runs. I can hear children screaming. It’s a bit chaotic, a wild war atmosphere. She stops. Orient. Right, left, right. She meets another girl, smiles, looks at the other girl’s card and takes it in a snap, they quickly run away from each other. (Fieldnotes, 3 December 2020)

Within this example, we see how children’s sense-making is related to each other when playing, and how several exchanges of meaning remain tactical. The observations of children approaching each other, the small adjustments, hesitating, looking, stepping back, acting spontaneously, trying to climb through a thick bush, and so forth, illustrate coordinated sense-making practices. This is also related to the encouragement of the pedagogues to collaborate, communicate, and think strategically, which illustrates how the framing of the play situation influences the participatory possibilities of the children. These small forms of exchanges of meanings are full of meaning. According to Herman, passivity is never entirely passive: any passive registration requires some form of active engagement (Herman, 2021, p. 2). For example, when the strong card ‘Solgaleo’ is brought into the game, all the children change their coordination and actions into a confident way of moving, and that influences other children’s reactions.

Sensory participatory possibilities
In the empirical analyses, it becomes clear that the small adjustments, coordinations, and social manoeuvrings are important to the way children participate through play.
But they are also glimpses or energies of ‘something happening’ between two or more children and their environments, which can be difficult to notice, pay attention to or write up analytically. The three empirical analyses show how children’s participation in play varies, and they have different orientations in the way they interact to the surroundings, to pedagogues, and to other children. In all three examples the children deliberately align their participation to something else (surroundings, pedagogues, and playmates). Play researcher Ian Bogost describes this as the following: ‘Even if play produces fun, the basic experience of play is not letting loose or doing whatever you want, but carefully and deliberately working with the materials one finds in a situation.’ (Bogost, 2016, p. 113). Bogost identifies a specific type of sensitivity when playing. Instead of ‘doing what you want’, one needs to carefully and deliberately work with the materials in the given situation. The perspective of participatory sense-making helps to nuance how children have the same sensitivity, not just to materials (cf. Bogost, 2016), but also towards spatial structures, rules, and the other play participants. The children generate, align with, and take care of the participatory possibilities that emerge when playing together. All the examples show how children manage to take part in play by contributing to the play order and, at the same time, showing a sense of understanding for others’ ways of participating. For example, making it possible to combine a game with weapons and being a dog in a tiger costume, indicates that both parties are sensible to each other, and each can coordinate her/his actions in relation to the other. These coordinations generate a “we-space” (cf. Bigé, 2019).

As stated earlier, the CRC emphasises the necessity to recognise and respect children’s nonverbal forms of communication, which are seen in play, body language, facial expressions, and drawings and paintings, through which very young children demonstrate understanding, choice and preferences (Bae, 2012, p. 35). Analysing children’s participation in play through their micro-coordinations, entanglements, and adjustments helps us shed light on and nuance participatory forms and expressions, which are subtle and sensory, although very important for how meaningful (playful) activities come about. Within these sensory dimensions, children can feel varying degrees of connectedness with other children (cf. De Jaegher & Paolo, 2007). The analysis provides insight into sense-making in play, which comprises unnoticeable and silent social encounters that range from temporally brief and superficial, to deep and extensive encounters. We also see how the social interaction order is linked to surrounding structures (the classroom, the logics of being quiet and not disturbing), but the interaction has its own properties that are not defined by surrounding structures. That means that the key rules and practices of social interaction remain, regardless of the environment of the interaction (De Jaegher et al., 2016, pp. 2–3). In the example with Nada, who wants to play the character of a dog, we see how following the perspective and strategies of the child can be important in terms of how children can make their participation in play activities meaningful.
Conclusion

Returning to the initial aim of answering how children participate in play, we have taken a primary departure from the philosophy of participatory sense-making, and in the three empirical analyses, we pay attention to how senses, silent movement, the spatial environment, unnoticeable interactions, and materials are part of how children make sense of playing, and also generate participatory possibilities. Based on the three analyses, we conclude that children’s participation in play is fundamentally socially coordinated, sensory, instant, and nonverbal, and sometimes happens in split seconds among other practices. Furthermore, children’s participatory sense-making in play is characterised by three varieties, which have different orientations in the way children interact with the surroundings, pedagogues, and other children. More specifically, we conclude that understanding children’s participation in play through the notion of sense-making allows us to recognise how children show very skilled ways of playing in a sensitive way. For example, social skills related to decoding and understanding the surrounding space can be essential when participating in play. From a pedagogical perspective, understanding children’s perspectives in play and trying to follow their participatory strategies can generate new sense-making practices among children. We argue that these small forms of exchanges of meanings are full of meaning. We call for more studies by those interested in understanding children’s participation in play through a micro-analytical perspective.

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