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#### Participation as a matter of concern in participatory design

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This article starts from the paradox that, although participation is a defining trait of participatory design (PD), there are few explicit discussions in the PD literature of what constitutes participation. Thus, from a point of departure in Actor-Network Theory (ANT), this article develops an analytical understanding of participation. It is argued that participation is a matter of concern, something inherently unsettled, to be investigated and explicated in every design project. Specifically, it is argued that (1) participation is an act overtaken by numerous others, rather than carried out by individuals and (2) that participation partially exists in all elements of a project. These traits are explicated in a design project called 'Teledialogue', where the participants are unfolded as networks of reports, government institutions, boyfriends, social workers and so on. The argument is synthesised as three challenges for PD: (1) participants are network configurations, (2) participation is an aspect of all project activities and (3) there is no gold standard for participation.

Keywords: participation; participatory design; actor-network theory; actor; matters of concern; teledialogue

#### Introduction

Participation is a defining trait of participatory design (PD), and a wide variety of methods and techniques have been developed to include users and stakeholders in design processes. In practice, ensuring participation is complex and PD practitioners are well-versed in navigating influential design constraints and complex user identities. However, a review of the Participatory Design Conference (PDC) proceedings calls for more explicit discussions of what constitutes participation as well as increased attention to how participation unfolds throughout entire projects (Halskov and Hansen 2015). Thus, the starting point for this article is the paradox that, although participation is part and parcel of a rich diversity of practices, little attention has been given to developing analytical resources and conceptualising what participation is.

Accordingly, our concern is to investigate and discuss the consequences for the concept of participation when bringing together Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and PD (see also Binder and Nickelsen 2008; Ehn 2008; Latour 2008a; Storni 2012). The purpose is not to develop a method for participation, but to use ANT as a resource for framing participation as an inherently unsettled *matter of concern* (Latour 2004, 2008b). Participation, as a matter of concern, goes against universal standards for participation and the ability to claim, as a *matter of fact*, what is and what is not participation

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(e.g. Arnstein 1969). ANT provides an ontology of participation in which it is imperative to continuously investigate what constitutes and qualifies participation in specific situations. Thus, the contribution of this article is *analytical*. Our aim resonates with the work of Frauenberger et al. (2015), who call for nuanced understandings of rigour and accountability in PD, and emphasise a need for tools to think with, which allow for debate, critique and reflection.

This article discusses and develops participation as a matter of concern through two distinct yet intimately connected ANT concepts and experiences from an ongoing design project called 'Teledialogue'. The first ANT concept outlines participation as *overtaken*, meaning that agency is always derived from many interfering sources, rather than possessed by individuals (Latour 2005). The second concept is that participation is *partially existent*, implying that different forms of participation come into existence in various ways and situations, unbounded by the designer's intention or methods (Latour 2000; Mol 2002).

Teledialogue bears a resemblance to many other PD projects. It aims to design an IT-enabled platform for communication between social workers and children placed in foster care or at institutions, through participatory methods such as design workshops and qualitative interviews. Through three empirical excerpts focused on the children's participation, it is made evident that children's stances on privacy are overtaken by a government body, that their participation began long before they were physically present and that they inevitably brought with them networks of other participants.

In more general terms, participation as partial and overtaken presents three challenges to design. (1) Participants are not stand-alone subjects, but constituted and configured as actor-networks. ANT makes evident how participants are set up in the design process, and, in turn, how they themselves set up the project. (2) Participation is not limited to design events or premised by physical presence or intentional interaction. For instance, children unintentionally participate in Teledialogue through reports and articles. (3) There is no gold standard for a priori evaluation of the quality of participation, or even for distinguishing between participation and non-participation. Participation, understood through ANT, implies that it is always a specific achievement and must be accounted for as such. Thus, ANT challenges participation as concept and practice, while also enabling novel ways to discuss and practise design as a network achievement.

This article is organised in the following manner: First is the background of the role of participation in the field of PD, which shows that the concept of participation is vaguely defined and polyvocal. Then follows an account of ANT focused on participation as partial and overtaken. Next, we present the three empirical excerpts from the Teledialogue project that, in different ways, exemplify how participation is partially existent and overtaken. We conclude by discussing the above-mentioned general challenges to design, in relation to other conceptions of participation, including Sherry Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation.

#### Participation in PD

The primary motivation for the early developments of PD in the Scandinavian context was the distinction between participation and non-participation, which was linked to the democratisation of work life. Thus, in PD, full user participation was seen as both a democratic aim in itself and a pragmatic effort aimed at creating better designs (Greenbaum and Halskov 1993). A collected volume based on material from the 1985

conference, *Computers and Democracy* (Bjerknes et al. 1987), shows that PD at that time was an emerging field of research and practice revolving around core values such as (1) democracy and quality of work life, (2) workers acquiring control of computer systems and their use at work and (3) designing computer support for skilled workers.

These core values of early Scandinavian projects were manifested in the landmark 1991 anthology, *Design at Work: Cooperative Design of Computer Systems* (Greenbaum and Kyng 1991). The book brought together Scandinavian and North American cooperative design researchers who shared, among other things, the view that 'computer systems that are created for the workplace need to be designed with *full* participation from the users' (Greenbaum and Kyng 1991, 2, our italics). Later, Kensing and Blomberg (1998) identified the key issues in PD as (1) the politics of design, (2) the nature of participation and (3) the methods, tools and techniques for participation. And, in a recent handbook on PD, the editors state that at the heart of PD is the idea that those who use information technology play a critical role in its design and that PD is defined by mutual learning through collective reflection in action (Simonsen and Robertson 2012). Thus, a central point of PD involves giving users a voice in design, through interaction with prototypes, for example.

A recent study by Halskov and Hansen (2015) investigates contemporary PD research. The study recognises that participation remains a central concern for PD researchers, who constantly deal with unique and messy situations when facilitating participation in design. However, the study, which reviewed all full research papers from the PDC 2002–2012, also makes evident that, although designers constantly consider and address participation, there is a surprising lack of detailed accounts and analyses of what constitutes participation (Halskov and Hansen 2015). Based on this material, and on an analysis of key PD texts, Halskov and Hansen (2015) develop five different aspects of how the concern for participation has manifested itself historically and in the PDC papers (Halskov and Hansen 2015) (Table 1).

According to Halskov and Hansen (2015), politics is one of the fundamental aspects of participation, originally revolving around a conflict perspective reflecting the opposing interests of workers and employees. But, as also pointed out by Muller and Druin (2012), in contemporary PD the conflict perspective has been challenged by a polyvoiced perspective, reflecting how IT has entered domains with complex constellations of users or stakeholders all playing critical roles in design processes. The context or use situation is also a fundamental point of departure for contemporary PD. Though participation has been investigated in the workplace context, the contemporary domains of IT use, though complex, are often considered to be more dynamic, with fewer well-defined groups of stakeholders with only partially shared interests. In this way, distinctions between users and other kinds of people become blurred, and the context temporary and distributed. Finally, the original aim of participation was the improvement of the quality of working

Table 1. Fundamental aspects of participatory design (Halskov and Hansen 2015).

Politics	People who are affected by a decision should have an opportunity to influence it
People	People play critical roles in design by being experts at their own lives
Context	The use situation is the fundamental starting point for the design process
Methods	Methods are means for users to gain influence in design processes
Product	The goal of participation is to design alternatives, improving quality of life

life, but today, PD is concerned with improving the quality of life in a broader sense, through the design of alternatives, implicitly recognising the complexity of design.

Although PD research often addresses one or more aspects from Table 1, there is little explicit analytical attention directed at what constitutes participation. The review shows that the issue of participation is often only loosely defined, or not at all. And, cases with an explicit stance on participation are often divided between discussing (1) users as full participants in the design process, or (2) the value of mutual learning between users and designers (Halskov and Hansen 2015). Furthermore, the review shows that PD researchers often report on only a single design activity and rarely on long-term or full-scale projects. The focus is on isolated instances of design events, leaving out the interpretation, planning and decision-making taking place in-between events. When the design process moves from one activity to another, the practice of participation is underexposed and, like other kinds of design research, demands thorough reflection and documentation of the design process (Dalsgaard and Halskov 2012).

There are thus a number of good reasons to place participation at centre of the encounter between ANT and PD. By drawing on ANT, we are able to offer an analytical resource for understanding participation as a productive matter of concern throughout the full range of project activities in specific design projects. This is addressed in the following section, through two related consequences of ANT – that action is *overtaken* and existence *partial* – which are subsequently illustrated by the Teledialogue design project.

#### Participation as partial and overtaken

Although there is no explicit concept of participation in ANT, it is nonetheless an approach for studying the process through which human and non-human actors are *enrolled* and come to participate in *actor-networks* (Latour 1987). For instance, in his seminal contribution to ANT, Michel Callon (1986a) describes how researchers in France struggled to enrol fishermen and scallops as participants in designing scallop cultivation at St. Brieuc bay. Neither scallops nor fishermen participated directly and undisturbed, but rather, as actor-networks of other things. The fishermen participated through union representatives, and the scallops through towlines, collectors, experiments and scientific papers.

With ANT, participants are thus considered actors configured by networks of other actors, and participation is achieved in and through this network. Human actors, such as fishermen, play an important part in this network formation, but ANT includes non-humans (artefacts, scallops, technologies, reports, materials, etc.) on equal terms, treating both as actor-networks, always mediated and configured by multiple others (see also Marres 2011; Storni 2012 on the materiality of participation). Thus, the participant simultaneously participates as an actor and as a network of other actors. As formulated by Callon:

The actor network is reducible neither to an actor alone nor to a network [...] An actor network is simultaneously an actor whose activity is networking heterogeneous elements and a network that is able to redefine and transform what it is made of. (Callon 1986b, 93)

Consequently, participation becomes first and foremost a relational and heterogeneous network achievement running through specific design processes and projects.

The analytical premise for engaging participation with ANT may be described as a displacement from what Bruno Latour (2004, 2008b) calls *matters of fact* to what he calls *matters of concern*. As the names imply, matters of fact are universal claims to the nature of phenomena, whereas matters of concern continuously open up these same phenomena as unsettled. Facts are produced and constituted through the same hybrid actor–networks as are concerns, but, at the same time, they also cover up this relational origin. On the other hand, matters of concern emphasise this mediated and processual aspect of reality, they are focused on the formation of relations that may produce, in the end, actors with agency. Thus, approaching participation as a matter of concern persistently unsettles the nature and function of participation, as it brings into focus the multitude of relations mediating and transforming participation in specific and situated ways.

In the following paragraphs, we synthesise this understanding of participation as a matter of concern, through two analytical concepts from ANT: (1) that participation is *partially existent* throughout the full range of project activities and (2) that action is *overtaken* by multiple others, rather than taken by individuals.

The *partiality* of existence entails that instead of a world comprised of fully realised and singular subjects and objects, the world consists of actor-networks in partial, relative and multiple existence; partial and multiple in the sense that they take shape and *become* through and by the various modes and practices of which they are part (Latour 2000; Mol 2002). In ANT, things do not have essential or absolute qualities. On the contrary, they are formed in collectives of other things, of actor-networks and are always intimately entangled in practices. This also means that they may differ substantially, from one practice to another. What may clearly qualify as participation in some situations may in others take an entirely different nature (see e.g. Ferguson 1994). The implication is that participation is never fully realised, neither is it completely absent, nor may it be defined as essentially 'this' or 'that'.

Action as *overtaken* suggests that the acts of participants do not have a clearly definable and distinct source from which they emerge. On the contrary, acts and agency are seen as network effects, rather than being located in and demarcated by the subject. The participant is simultaneously the manifestation of multiple others, and a translator that adds to and potentially betrays these. Thus, the participant is neither an individualised actor nor a trustworthy or representative spokesperson (Callon 1986a; Lezaun and Soneryd 2007). As formulated by Latour, participation becomes a mediated event dispersed through time and space:

Action is not done under the full control of consciousness; action should rather be felt as a node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies that have to be slowly disentangled [...] Action is overtaken or [...] Action is other-taken! So it is taken up by others and shared with the masses. It is mysteriously carried out and at the same time distributed to others. We are not alone in the world. 'We', like 'I' is a wasp's nest. (Latour 2005, 44–45)

As Lezaun and Soneryd (2007) state, this implies, among other things, that the stances of participants are translated and overtaken by policy reports, evaluations and prototypes before they are manifested in action. There is no direct and undisturbed causality between opinions voiced and action taken. The process of summarising, representing and materialising participation is integral and formative to eliciting the agency of participants.

ANT challenges participation as a means to an end, regardless of whether the end is democratic design or improved technologies, or both. ANT produces ongoing and nagging concerns, such as: How participation is conducted? Who, and how many, are participating? How are they allowed and enabled to participate? How is the design process enacting the participants? Participation becomes a matter of concern, to be assembled and designed, case by case, where the criteria for participation are not transcendent, but carefully developed and explicated in each project.

#### Children's participation in Teledialogue

This section describes empirical examples from the ongoing research and design project, Teledialogue, instigated by the authors of this article. The project was officially launched in late 2013, with the stated purpose of utilising various forms of IT to strengthen the dialogue between placed children living in foster care or at institutions and the social workers who are formally responsible for their upbringing (Teledialog 2013). Currently, a lack of resources often limits this dialogue to biannual face-to-face meetings at the child's residence – the minimum required by law. Teledialogue, thus investigates whether IT (chat, videoconferencing, texting, etc.) can strengthen the quality and frequency of communication between placed children and social workers.

Teledialogue is organised around workshops, test runs and qualitative fieldwork as the primary arenas for participation. However, experiences from the project make it evident that, however important, these activities do not encompass or explain participation. The excerpts illustrate participation as a matter of concern, that children are always participating with others and that their participation exists in different forms and unfolds in different ways, throughout the full diversity of project activities.

#### Excerpt 1: Children partially participated from the outset

That participation partially exists in all stages of the design process can be illustrated with children who heavily influenced the design of Teledialogue, while we wrote the research proposal. Teledialogue was, amongst other things, motivated by a report by the National Council for Children (NCC) in Denmark that makes evident that placed children and social workers have only sporadic contact with each other, which is described as very frustrating for children (Aabo et al. 2012). The report is based on interviews with 113 placed children and provides a collection of suggestions on how to improve their situation. One of these is to improve the dialogue between social workers and children so as to include children more substantially in decisions affecting their lives. For instance, the report quotes the difficulty experienced by one girl, Isabella, in contacting her social worker and calls for methods to be developed to remedy the situation:

'I started writing mails e-mails to her because I always got her answering machine and she never called back (...) That was really annoying, that you couldn't just call her and get through' says 16 year old Isabella [...] The children demand more information about how and when they can come into contact with their social worker and with the inspectors, and they want the methods for this contact to be better suited to their needs. (Aabo et al. 2012, 10–13)

While Teledialogue was being developed, the 113 children came to act as proxies for all placed children in Denmark. They circumscribed and delegated certain roles and qualities to the problems of children and social workers, which, in turn, necessitated

certain actions and considerations. The 'report children' called for more contact with social workers rather than, say, pedagogues, and they referred to computers, smartphones and social media as central to maintaining contact with other important people in their lives: I really want a computer in order to maintain contact with my friends, because it is difficult for me now', one boy moaned (Aabo et al. 2012, 46). Although never physically present in our project, the report children decisively participated in defining the purpose of Teledialogue and the aim of including children in the design process: improving contact between placed children and social workers through IT.

Children's participation partially existed when writing the research proposal for Teledialogue; it was mediated by the NCC report and did not await the physical presence of other children at workshops or during test runs. Similarly, the subsequent participation of children during workshops was overtaken by the participation of report children, and vice versa: they all act in conglomeration with each other, and with and through reports and research projects.

#### Excerpt 2: Children's privacy is overtaken by a government body

In Teledialogue, children share personal and intimate information with social workers and researchers via various forms of IT. Thus, there is a need for concern regarding privacy and data security. But this concern is not simply the children's concern, it is dispersed among system administrators, Danish law, research ethics and most importantly, a government body called the Danish Data Authority (DDA). The DDA acts by ruling on which forms of IT that are sufficiently safe and secure for public affairs. And, since these children are talking to representatives of the state, and not their biological families, they are, in effect, overtaken by the DDA in the management of their privacy.

In the case of Teledialogue, children are already using Skype to talk to relatives about sensitive and private matters. Consequently, they would like to use Skype to talk to social workers too, but the DDA ruled out that option, owing to concerns over the children's privacy (Datatilsynet 2012). As placed children talking to social workers, their stance on Skype was, and is overtaken by the DDA (the same applies to Facebook and other popular forms of IT). No matter what any specific child may think about Skype, they are positioned in relation to the DDA, which will always interfere and overtake their position on the matter.

#### Excerpt 3: Children bring networks of other participants to Teledialogue

As Teledialogue commenced with workshops and test runs, the children started speaking and acting in novel ways, as they came with multiple and sometimes surprising others. As the biological parents learned that their children would be participating, they started calling the project manager to inform him of their child's situation, as seen from their position, because they too were affiliated, implicated and potentially affected by the participation. Some parents are now actively participating with their children alongside, foster parents and pedagogues, whereas others have barred their child from participating. Similarly, the boyfriends of some of the young girls are acting with the girls. For instance, one couple are arguing between themselves about whether *they* want more dealings with social workers.

However, children are not determined by the NCC report, social workers, boyfriends or adults. For instance, some of the placed children want less, not more contact with social workers. Or, rather, they struggle with the dilemma of both being

intimately related to the social system and trying to escape the supervision and interference of social workers in their lives. Some of them cannot be included as participants in Teledialogue, as they simply do not want any dealings with us or social workers, whereas others do participate, although with a good deal of ambivalence.

Many children do conform to the inscribed purpose of increased contact with social workers, but not for the same reasons that motivated their inclusion and shaped the project on their behalf. For instance, one girl wants to participate, but prefers her social worker to stay clear of her private life.

Interviewer: Those challenges [...] do they belong to your private sphere or do they

concern the social worker?

Girl: No, it is something we deal with ourselves! [...]

Interviewer: What would you like to do from now on with the social worker?

Girl: I want more contact!

Interviewer: About what and in which ways? Not necessarily about anything?

Girl: No, just more.

Interviewer: But what would this communication be like?

Girl: Just that we talk more.

Interviewer: Simply a general interest in what you are doing?

Girl: Yes.

The girl prefers to strengthen her relation to the social worker through small talk. To her, Teledialogue should build trust, rather than solve problems. Or, at least, it should solve problems only after building trust. On the other hand, her social worker is concerned with current and pressing problems related to specific persons in the girl's life, and wants to talk about those. However, since the girl is more closely related to these persons, and includes them in her participation, Teledialogue must find another constellation and other concerns to address.

Children, thus bring with them a network of people, institutions, reports, histories, problems and concerns. These elements constitute children as participants, they mediate and form the participation of children and they shape the participation of others. For instance, the girl's social worker may only participate if she is willing to engage in small talk and we can only do workshops if we listen to parents and include boy-friends. If participation is considered a relational achievement, a network process, there is always something or someone trying to participate through and with something or someone else. Participation is partial and overtaken. In Teledialogue, children are both there *and* not there, they themselves speak, *and* are spoken on behalf of and they participate in all sorts of surprising ways.

#### Discussion: Implications of participation as a matter of concern

With PD developing a polyvoiced perspective on design, with complex and blurred constellations of users, contexts and purposes (Halskov and Hansen 2015), ANT seems to offer a suitable vocabulary for analysing and debating the fabric of participation. In general, ANT affords participation to be treated as a matter of concern, as an unsettled affair in each case. As we have argued, participation in practice is intimately intertwined with all sorts of formative and situated relations, never fully realised nor completely absent. These insights have been synthesised through two analytical concepts derived from ANT: (1) participation as *partially* existent throughout the full diversity of project activities and (2) participation as always *overtaken* by numerous others. We have exemplified these through the Teledialogue project, where children are inscribed

into reports, and participate as such throughout, where a government body overtakes the children's stance on privacy, and where friends, family and loved ones inevitably participate with and through children. Moreover, taking participation as matter of concern, as partial and overtaken, implies the confrontation of other and more principal challenges in every design process. As elaborated below, this renders uncertain the being of participants, the time and place of participation and the validation of different forms of participation.

#### Participants are not stand-alone subjects, but network configurations

There are no authentic participants representing only themselves. As we have seen, when children ask for more contact with social workers, when they decline the use of Skype or insist that social workers should stay clear of their private lives, they do so through acts that are *overtaken* by others that unfold through networks of relations. This necessitates increased attention to how participants are configured and mediated by reports, budgets, family, friends, designers, design activities and so forth. Although ANT affords no possibility of unearthing authentic and unconfigured children, it provides an opportunity to analyse and evaluate how children participate in relation to such numerous mediators. Thus, the *intentionality* of participation is analytically downplayed, in order to emphasise the process by which actors come to influence the design, regardless of how and when (see also Albrechtslund and Lauritsen 2013; Gallagher 2008).

#### Participation is not limited to designated events, but always partially at play

Participation does not only arise only during designated design events, or through inclusive methods. Rather, participation becomes a partially existent aspect of the whole project, from the very first formulations to the point where the design is no longer. In Teledialogue, the report children were thus participating from the outset, and are still part of the project today. Similarly, children who are present during interviews, chat sessions and phone calls are also present as 'cases', when designers interview social workers. All these forms of participation may be productive for designing Teledialogue. However, it remains an ongoing analytical task to evaluate how such participation actually plays out and to whose benefit.

## There is no gold standard for participation, only an imperative to account and investigate

When participation is a matter of concern, it is not possible a priori to consider some forms of participation to be more authentic or ethically superior to others. And, neither is it possible to establish a dichotomy between participation and non-participation. Rather, participation is configured and may come in many forms. PD involves all sorts of different participants, such as reports, spokespersons, media accounts, drawings, statistics and so forth. So, the scope and liberty of what may qualify as a participant is considerably broadened. But with this freedom follows the obligation to account for, legitimise and argue for the relevance of this or that configuration of participants.

In design research, one often finds a concluding section entitled: 'Implications for design'. So, what are the implications for design that follow from the discussed challenges, from participation as partial and overtaken? Or, more generally, what are the implications of relating ANT with PD, as intended in this special issue?

First of all, it should be noted that the result is not a specific method or typology, as may be found in Sherry Arnstein's influential analysis of participation, for example (Arnstein 1969; also see Hart 1992). To Arnstein, participation is synonymous with the intentional influence that participants have over project decisions, which may be evaluated according to a typology or ladder, ranging from no participation, through tokenistic participation, to full participation. Thus, Arnstein proposes a way of prescribing degrees of participation anchored in subjective intention. In contrast, ANT is an analytical resource for studying processes and things-in-the-making, and as such, is unable to ground participation in specific actors or to prescribe certain forms of participation over others. On the other hand, the ontological assumptions of ANT entail that ideas, concepts and theoretical arguments are no less real or consequential for practice than methods, tools, IT systems or typologies. After all, taking participants to be networks, rather than subjects, is bound to displace the attention of both designers and researchers. Therefore, ANT-based analyses may very well have performative effects, although they are difficult to pinpoint beforehand, because it all depends on how ANT is picked up and brought to work.

Throughout this article, we have argued that participation should be considered a *matter of concern* rather than a *matter of fact*. If taken as a matter of fact, then the practices and processes involved in bringing participation into existence go unnoticed. Participation as a matter of concern, on the other hand, recognises and makes evident the work and processes required to bring things into existence. Moreover, in keeping with Latour, the problem with matters of fact is that they reduce the world and its many processes into somewhat concrete entities and imply an ontology in which things are ideally knowable and manageable.

We have aimed to demonstrate that participation is not a matter of fact, but a distributed, heterogeneous and relational process. Importantly, this is not a novel insight to many designers, but it seems that these aspects of participation are not well articulated in the design literature. We argue that many contributions do not address the uncertainties of practising participation, precisely because succeeding in participation is considered to be of the essence in PD. Thus, our contribution is to foreground the uncertainties and difficulties of participation and argue that it is never optimal or complete. This insight suspends the dissatisfaction we might experience with regard to practising participation, and thereby facilitates more thorough explications of participatory practices, relieved from the pressure of succeeding. Explicating uncertainties and ambiguities may open up different ways of articulating participation, and, as such, new potential for researching, organising, learning and teaching participation.

ANT places participation in an entirely different territory. We may no longer succeed, but that does not make participatory activities any less important or worthwhile. On the contrary, we may be more inclined to articulate the always partial and overtaken forms of participation. Participation becomes an empirical matter to be continuously assembled and articulated. This also implies that designers and researchers may produce accounts of, and arguments for, participation, which make explicit the choices, politics and contingencies of participatory practices – the always partial qualities of participation. The construction and reconstruction of participation escape the privacy of projects and instead become public affairs.

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 In Denmark, pedagogues are trained professionals working with all aspects of children's lives, both inside and outside institutions.

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