Children’s active participation during meals in Early Childhood and Care Institutions

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# Introduction

How do Early Childhood and Care Institutions (ECCs) arrange their meals? Several studies find that meals are often regulated and managed by adults so that the children have few opportunities for spontaneous speech and expressions (Smidt, 2003; Markström and Hallden, 2009). The meals also appear to be characterized more and more by a focus on health and proper diet (Smidt, 2003). It seems that self-control and strict dietary rules have taken precedence over other aspects of shared meals. If true, this deviates from current ideals about children's involvement, active participation and exploration.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the Kindergarten Act passed by the Norwegian Parliament (2005) and the General Plan for ECCs (FPK2017) focus on the right of children to participate. According to the General Plan, ECCs have an obligation to provide the opportunity for children's participation by facilitating and encouraging children to express their views on everyday activities. The children should be given regular access to participate in and have influence on the planning and assessment of the activities.

The purpose of this theoretical review is to reflect on how ECC staff arrange the meals and how children are given opportunities to actively participate during meals in Early Childhood and Care institutions (ECCs). This is mainly a theoretical study in which I discuss a selection of findings from previous research in light of Norbert Elias's theory of civilization (1994). First of all, I will refer to research on the organization of meals in ECCs. I will then discuss possible consequences when emphasizing rules and routines in light of Elias' perspectives on civilization as a phenomenon. Finally, I will present research that illustrates how to open for children's active participation to a greater extent (Ahlmann, 2010; Andersen and Holm, 2013; Bae, 2009; Bjørgen, 2009; Brunosson, 2012; Grindland et al, 2011; Iversen and Sabinsky, 2011; Johansson and Pramling Samuelson, 2001; Smidt, 2012). The research I refer to is mainly from ECCs in the Nordic countries. Some of the research that has been chosen is from UK and US because they are of special interest for my study.

# Theoretical framework

I take a specific research interest in children's active participation during meals. The understanding of children, childhood and children's participation has changed significantly since the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was adopted in 1989. Children have been assigned their own rights. Both the fields of childhood sociology (James and James, 2004; Dahlberg and Moss, 2005; Kjørholt, 2005, 2010) and childhood psychology (Sommer, 2014) consider children to be competent and active individuals. Children are acknowledged and looked upon as equal actors (Kjørholt, 2005, 2010). They have the right to participate in their daily lives, which means that their opinions should be heard and taken seriously. The change in how we view children has led to changes in the way adults and children interact in different everyday situations (Clark, Kjørholt and Moss, 2005; Åberg and Taguchi, 2006). The question for this article is whether the organization of the meals is sufficiently based on children's active participation.

As a starting point, I refer to the German-British sociologist Norbert Elias and his theory on how the individual's civilization process is associated with strict norms regarding mannerisms, control of temper and control of the body (Elias, 1994). Based on his theory and previous research on institutional meals, I will discuss how meals structured by adults and their rules and rituals, with a focus on strict dietary rules, may foster passivity as well as obedience and increased self-control in the child.

# The meal as part of the individual's civilization

The meal can be seen as one of several arenas where discipline and learning of social forms takes place. Norbert Elias introduces the term civilization in his seminal work: *The civilizing process (Elias, 1994)*.  The Civilizing Process is a broadly, historically and theoretically ambitious study of the emergence of the European nation-state and modern forms of sociability, social behavior and interaction (Olofsson, 2000). Civilization, as a concept, includes a particular focus on body and movements, the individual's development of self-control and adaptation to socially accepted norms (Elias, 1994[1939]). Some movements are considered appropriate, others inappropriate. When it comes to table manners, there are often clear rules for what is seen as appropriate behavior.

There are two parts to Elias' work: The first deals with "the history of manners". Through a study of historical books, he describes changes in norms and standards of normality. For example, he explores how table manners and the etiquette of the French court from the 15th and 16th centuries are gradually adopted by the lower classes. Today, these manners are no longer seen as somewhat high-status behavior, but rather as normal behavior. What Elias means by the term "civilized" requires explanation. When Elias says that people in the West have become more "civilized", he does not imply that this is behavior that is better (or worse) than something else. "Being more civilized" is no better than being "less civilized". He is interested in the ongoing process where people are linked together and exercise more self-control and become more sensitive to others and their own behavior. This, along with the fact that the threshold for what makes us feel embarrassed is dropping, is what he calls "civilization”. (Elias, 1994). Through civilization the individual internalizes behavioral patterns, languages, thinking, social values ​​and norms, where prohibition is something taken for granted and seen as normal behavior. In the second part of the civilizing process he is concerned about civilization in a historical perspective (Olofsson, 2000). Different social formations will model different mental structures. For example, as Elias points out, humans in medieval times were qualitatively different from modern humans. One of the foremost civilization goals in modern times is, according to Elias, individual development of *self-control* (Elias, 1994).

In addition to the development of self-control, Elias' key theoretical concept is functional differentiation, figuration and power differences. As he points out, more and more functions and individuals are becoming increasingly interdependent. "As more and more people must attune their conduct to that of others, the web of actions must be organized more and more strictly and accurately, if each individual action is to fulfil its social functions" (Elias, 1994a: p.445). Today's society is characterized by very complex relationships. This requires chains of actions in which the individuals are embedded.

The development of self-control takes place in a varied everyday life. Children learn good manners, mostly defined by adults, such as sitting still while you eat and not making noise with your cutlery and cups. Gradually the individual's body is subjected to a number of disciplinary mechanisms, such as shame and self-control. Elias claims that shame and embarrassment are key psychological mechanisms that, although not usually premeditated and planned, are a prerequisite for and consequence of what he calls the civilization process. The discipline of the child through external regulations is gradually internalized as voluntary self-control and in some cases shame.

Elias' ambition was not to develop a theory on how and why civilization takes place. He primarily wanted to investigate civilization as a phenomenon; how the alleged civilization can be understood historically, what it means and how it affects relationships between individuals and groups and on mental structures. The development of norms for behavior in daily life – blowing your nose, table manners, greetings, but also norms for control of aggressive and sexual impulses – is in some way linked to the development of the state in western society. Elias draws our attention to how social structures fall into the individual's personality structure and how the most private and personal aspects of our lives are also socially conditioned. He clearly shows how the forms of social interactions are, in other words, "the daily bread" of society's political and social structures (Østberg, 2006: p. 14).

What does previous research point out when it comes to organizing meals and children's opportunities for active participation during the meals in ECCs?

# Previous research

Several researchers claim that the institutional meal, as opposed to other activities in ECCs, is predominately structured and organized by staff and characterized by strict routines and rituals both before and during the meal (Bae, 2009; Murud-Riser, 2012). Murud-Riser (2012) describes how meals are characterized by several rituals, where the children are supposed to sit still in their chairs and learn different forms of table manners. This, according to Murud-Riser, provides the children with a sense of security and predictability. However, these rules and routines can easily become rigid and thus impede children's agency. Several studies conclude that meals are not an area that invites active participation from children (see Bjørgen, 2009; Dotson and Cunningham, 2015; Karrebæk, 2013; Markström and Hallden, 2009). When it comes to children's own experience of meals in ECCs, findings from current research seem to point in different directions. While some researchers conclude that the meal (for pupils in years 1-4 in primary school) is the time of the day where children can experience and enjoy companionship with their peers without adult monitoring and control (Nukaga, 2008), others conclude that the meal for many children is associated with adult monitoring and control, stress and hustle and bustle (Turner et al., 1995). On the other hand, relatively few studies have been conducted on how adults can facilitate the shared meal as an arena for children to enjoy fellowship and the pleasure of eating (Andersen and Holm, 2013; Brunosson, 2012; Glaser, 2017; Iversen and Sabinsky, 2011). Shared meals form the very basis for children's further education and "Bildung".[[1]](#endnote-1)

In recent years, several researchers have studied the meal as an arena for developing a democratic practice. Grindland conducted a qualitative study on disagreement as a democratic practice for a meal fellowship, and analyzed adult conversation with children in meal situations, categorized respectively as a discourse of order and exploring. Her research is based on empirical material from seven research conversations with four groups of staff in Norwegian ECCs. The conversations took place around lunch meals where Grindland attended together with the children and staff. She discusses how the two discourses in the conversations can create different conditions for conflicts as democratic processes during meals in ECCs (Grindland, 2011). Johansson and Pramling Samuelson conducted a qualitative study based on two different meal situations and looked at how the care concept is practiced differently by staff (Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson, 2001). The project includes data from 30 child groups from all over Sweden (Johansson and Jansson, 2001). Recent studies on meals in ECCs and schools point out how important it is to accommodate children's (and adults') spontaneous expressions during meals (Bae, 2009).  Bae`s research draws attention to interaction and non-intentional learning with respect to meals. The data material is based on a micro-analytic examination of dialogues between preschool teachers and students in two ECCs in Oslo, where interaction in three different meal situations was video-recorded at regular intervals over a year. Based on the analysis of the video material, two categories were developed to distinguish between different levels of interaction, namely spacious and narrow patterns (Bae, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2009). Similar research also points to playfulness as essential during children’s meals to ensure that they develop a positive relationship with food (Ahlmann, 2010; Smidt, 2012). In other studies, the meal has been studied as an arena for interaction (Klette et al., 2016) and for children's learning and edification (Nissen et al., 2015).

# Routines, rules and the development of self-control

The meal constitutes an important arena for civilization and education with its focus on custom and proper handling of eating utensils, seating, rituals for serving and eating food, passing food to others and so on (Sabinsky and Iversen, 2011: p. 28). According to Elias, the ability to maintain self-control is a sign of social distinction. The adult's external regulation of the child's body is internalized and gradually becomes part of the child's self-control. The children learn what is considered appropriate and inappropriate behavior at the table in addition to what one can and cannot say. Foucault talks about appropriate behavior as the taming of the body and about the obedient, effective and respectable body (Foucault, 1975). These exercises are enforced by adults in the form of linguistic commands, such as "sit still at the table", "do not waste food", and a good meal culture. In our Western culture, the general rule is that we sit around a table when we eat. Furthermore, there are rules for how to sit in our chair, e.g. the children are expected to sit quietly in their chairs and not tilt or swing around. Interestingly, according to anthropological studies there are 132 ways to sit around a meal, and only 30 of these include chairs (Bugge, 2005; Bugge and Døving, 2000). Many of the eating rules are related to cultural rituals and perceptions of aesthetics. It can therefore be challenging to understand and accept the eating rules of other cultures when they deviate from the norms we know. For example, eating with your fingers and from each other's plates is considered by many to be unhygienic (Sørhaug, 1996).

Smidt claims that adult-controlled meals can easily assume the form of *moral ceremonies*(Smidt, 2003: p. 44) that are characterized by adults controlling that children bring healthy food from home which they have to eat before they leave the table. When children try out behaviors, they receive sanctions when these violate the adults' rules. The discipline of the body and self-control are included as a key part of this meal practice, as Elias points out in his theory of the civilizing process. The adults' task is to a large extent to ensure that the children comply with rules and norms. This form of adult control can make the child associate the meal with something negative. Adult control and reprisals can make the child passive and not an active participant in attaining *food literacy*, which is described as a lifelong process that increases our competences with respect to choice of food, knowledge of food and cooking so that we can develop a critical, reflective and conscious understanding of food (ucl.dk, 2013). At the Center for Mad, Krop og Læring (Center for Food, Body and Learning), University College Lillebælt, Morten Kromann Nielsen et al. work with the subjects of food formation and meal education. They refer to food literacy on their website (ucl.dk, 2013). However, children differ in how quickly they can decode and read expectations and social conventions that are applied during meals. Children who do not follow or master the norms for self-regulation are unconsciously categorized as non-social because of their uncivilized behavior (Gulløv, 2012).

Even though meals can be reduced to moral ceremonies, various forms of positioning can also arise between children according to the kind of food that is eaten, how it is eaten and how to comply with the current rules governing the meal (Smidt, 2003). The children and the adults position themselves by making moral assessments of the content of the lunchbox. Whole-wheat bread represents what is healthy and acceptable, while buns and white bread are unhealthy and unacceptable. In Denmark, bread made of rye has been given a similar distinctive symbolic status and potential. Jakobsen (2012) describes this as the *Rye-Bread Community*. Whole-wheat bread and rye bread are associated with moral judgments which include and exclude individuals (Jacobsen, 2012). Just as clothes can act as a form of social camouflage, the individual's lunchbox can signal adherence to food norms. Children whose lunchboxes are filled with proper and healthy food are drawn to each other, while those with boxes filled with "wrong food" are excluded. The rituals surrounding the meal can therefore include groups of children and exclude others. This relates to the extent to which individual children identify and conform to current rituals and community norms. For some children, the rituals surrounding the meal can become a venue for reprisals and sanctions from the adults (Smidt, 2012). These children are therefore at risk of marginalization (Karrebæk, 2013).

As described above, the institutional meal is often structured by the adults and characterized by routines and rituals both before and during the meal (Bae, 2009; Murud-Riser, 2012). Routines and rituals help create a framework for the meal. At the same time, this preoccupation with table manners runs the risk of impeding meaningful conversation. One of the staff responsible for the youngest children (1-3 years of age) explains it this way:

…“if we’re too preoccupied with having the children sit properly in their chairs, we can miss what occupies them; in other words, we risk forgetting to listen to and see the children's expressions and thus lose the ability to understand. A child who reaches across the table can be told to sit properly and we’ll never learn anything about his or her focus, intentions or emotions. However, if we’re attentive and maintain a focus on the desire to understand the children, then there can be meaningful interaction between us” (Murud-Riser, 2012: p.79, author's translation).

Whether the meal is characterized by meaningful interactions for the children or not will depend on the adults' values ​​and attitudes. Based on previous research, I will present examples of how adults can facilitate meaningful interactions during meals which are characterized by children's involvement, active exploration and food literacy.

# How can ECC staff promote children's participation and food literacy?

Studies have shown that promoting children's active participation and encouraging involvement are crucial actions when attempting to impart knowledge about health and healthy life choices to children (Wistoft, 2008).

Grabowski and Aagard-Hansen conducted a creative attempt to work with health communication for children from three to five years of age by using children's theater that combined elements of education and entertainment ("edutainment"). Children's curiosity and motivation are greatest in situations where they experience that they are acknowledged as active participants and included in the organization of activities, like preparing for a shared meal. However, the importance of taking into account the age of children is also pointed out in the analysis, as younger children need another type of involvement than older children (Grabowski and Aagard-Hansen, 2011). Some of the findings from this study are relevant when it comes to meals in ECCs. Allowing the children to actively participate, to involve themselves and to have actual influence on health and nutrition dissemination are key points. Involving the children in deciding the menu, setting the table, cleaning up after the meal and cooking is important for their food literacy. The children are most able to utilize their knowledge of nutrition when they are allowed to think creatively and combine different forms of knowledge in new ways. Grabowski and Aagard-Hansen point to the importance of showing trust and respect for the way children do things, even though their way of doing things differs from the adult's way of doing them (Grabowski and Aagard-Hansen, 2011). This is consistent with acknowledging the child as a subject and co-worker and involves respecting the child's limits, allowing for the child to resist and giving it the opportunity to change the existing food culture. The adults play an important role as co-creators together with the children in creating a shared understanding of the meal as a social setting.

The adult as a co-creator of meaning and understanding during the meal is not at all obvious to everyone. In a recent study, researchers analyzed videotapes of thirteen one-year-olds who ate lunch in eleven different Norwegian ECCs (Klette, Drugli and Aandahl, 2016). The purpose of the study was to investigate the interaction between the staff and the children based on recognized elements of positive interaction. The researchers were quite surprised by what they found. The study showed few positive interaction sequences during the meals. The main pattern was that the thirteen one-year-olds sat completely silent and ate without interacting with adults or other children. The researchers studied the atmosphere around the tables during the meal and found that the ECC they characterized as having a good organization of their meals had a pleasant atmosphere. They observed smiles, laughter and eye contact. However, this was mostly the case for the oldest children. In the ECC classified as having a poor organization of its meals, the atmosphere was not pleasant: these meals were characterized by unruly children and a tense atmosphere. Some ECCs were very quiet during the meal. The staff in some ECCs showed no facial mimicry and communicated neither amongst themselves nor with the children.

How can adults be more open to the input from children and children's desire for participation?

*The playful approach of children*

Ahlmann (2010) provides several examples of how children are actively involved in planning a meal. The children decide what to serve, how to present the food and new tastes, and help to decide how the meal should be enjoyed.

“Eating must never be based on required behavior. The children are active in deciding what food is to be served. For birthdays, the birthday child is allowed to compose a menu and then invite the other children and the ECC staff to partake in enjoying it. In addition to allowing children to choose food when they are having their birthday, a couple of children are always helping the staff in setting the table and presenting the meal to the others. Before serving the food, the chef tells his/her helpers about new ingredients and flavors, which they in turn redistribute to the other children. How the meal should progress is also decided upon by the helpers. Perhaps everybody should listen to a story while they’re eating, or perhaps they should only enjoy a “whispering meal”, where it is only allowed to talk ever so softly and quietly. In this way, the children are active in the meal and through dialogue with the chef and talking about new spices, ingredients or methods. This creates awareness of how different foods can taste, as well as knowledge of different raw materials” (Brunosson, 2012: p.10, author's translation).

Having a perspective where children are active participants in acquiring food literacy means that one should allow the child to approach the meal on its own terms. Furthermore, it means that the adults are facilitators of possibilities for the child to experience being an active partner, and as a consequence this enhances the possibility that the child will experience success and feel the joy of food and meals (Løkken, 2012). Such an approach requires that the adults look at children's play and playfulness as a key part of children's own cultural creation (Corsaro, 1994), and a part of the their edification process and the learning of food literacy.

Løkken (2012) has written about the social interplay of toddlers in ECCs in several of her works. Play, for example during the meal, is not only a meaningful act and approach to children, but primarily an "appropriate" way of being human at this age. Play and movement are parts of the toddler's way of life. If you prevent children from playing with the food and each other during the meal, you also prevent them from unfolding themselves as people (Andersen and Holm, 2013). Berit Bae (2009) describes how play and humor between adults and children make the child want to connect the meal with something enjoyable.

Kristin (sitting and playing with tissue paper, she pretends it is a turtle) her body facing her ECC teacher. She pushes the "turtle" forward until it reaches the hand of her ECC teacher, and says, "Here, here, he came and bit you" (She leans forward, looking intensely at the "turtle" by the hand of the adult; happy facial expressions).

Fl (turns attention to Kristin and says in a thin voice) "Oh, he came and bit me" (moving her hand up to her mouth).

Kristin (looking at her ECC teacher, smiling happiness showing all over the face, repeats the same movement again)

Fl (repeat with playful voice)”Ouch” (Bae, 2009: p.11)

Both have their attention on the "turtle" until another child interrupts with questions and the ECC teacher turns her attention towards him. Kristin is as a very quiet and reticent girl in other situations, for example during circle time. She is reluctant to take the initiative and engage with her ECC teachers. However, during meals she unfolds somewhat more. This is apparent by her playful interactions with the things on the table. She pretends that the tissue paper is a turtle, inviting her ECC teacher, with a humorous remark, to engage in playful dialogue. Her ECC teacher confirms her playful invitation both through nonverbal and verbal communication. Bae (2009) interprets this as Kristin's ability to engage the adult in a mutual exchange while setting the premises for the playful dialogue. Kristin experiences that her intentions are taken seriously and that the adult is following her lead. Sharing a moment where they are both focusing on the tissue paper, they are engaged in a mutually playful interaction (Bae, 2009: p.9). Bae's study was based on dialogues between ECC teachers and children. As a part of her research process she developed two categories to distinguish between interactions of different quality, namely spacious and narrow patterns (Bae, 2004, 2007, 2009). Dialogues characterized by spacious patterns allow children's resistance to a larger extent than dialogues characterized by narrow patterns.

*Resistance and productive disturbances during the meal*

The child proves itself as person with independent opinions through resistance, and received in turn a reaction and in some cases a reprimand. Thus, the individual learns something about him/herself and how his/her own actions correspond or are in conflict with existing practice. Gradually, the child learns to use its knowledge responsibly in relation to his/her own life and the rest of society in a way that is embodied and experienced and not "tacked on". Within this context, Larsen (2015) introduces the concept of productive interference, based on poststructuralist thinking, as an expression of desired resistance. She argues that disruptions in educational work can have a positive effect and also destabilize practice and established thinking. One form of productive disturbance may for example be cheerfulness (Sandvik, 2000). Similar productive disturbance and resistance strategies are discussed in Dotson and Cunningham (2015), such as silent protests, body language, breaking rules by talking when it is not allowed, facial expressions, shaking heads and facial mimicry to signal disgust, and refusal to eat. Children's resistance strategies signal self-esteem or that they simply do not want to eat. Their opposition may also have more or less hidden agendas, for example the wish to test limits and try to get the upper hand over the adults. Placing their thumbs on the table in an unprotected moment, when the rule is all hands shall be under the table, can be a strategy to try to outwit the adults. Bae describes the meaning of playful interaction as follows:

“Instead of being rejected, or that adults refer to rules that disallow play at the table, the participating children are allowed to engage and experiment with their own humorous initiatives. The ECC teachers’ accepting attitudes to humorous initiatives create the conditions necessary for learning that sharing humor around the meal is okay. Provided that such interactions are repeated and given space, what is learned can be that the meal is associated with feelings of joy“ (Bae, 2009: p.9, author's translation).

The adult's receptiveness to playful ways of interacting increases the children's pleasant experience with food and makes the meal more joyful.

*The staffs co-responsibility and care for children's pleasant experience of food*

Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson (2001) have examined in more detail how the concept of care is practiced during a meal situation. In their study they examined two different ECCs and two different approaches adults use when interacting with children. In the one ECC, the adult enters into a caring relationship with the children by approaching their lifeworld. This is exemplified in the following observation:

"Britta watches Billy, sitting with his pacifier in his mouth and a comforter around his shoulders. He does not eat much. ‘You look really tired,’ Britta says, stroking him on the cheek. Lea wants ketchup. She takes the ketchup bottle, ketchup splashes out of the bottle and onto her plate. Her plate is filled with quite a lot of ketchup. Billy wants milk now, and pours it himself. When Peter attempts to eat his dinner, Britta helps him. They both hold on to the spoon and Peter takes heaped spoons of rice. Some of it falls off and onto the table. He then takes several spoons of Sausage Stroganoff, all by himself, and also pours milk. ‘You really like Ketchup Lea,’ says Britta. ‘Lea and I started at the same time,’ says Britta ‘so we’re a bit special,’ she continues. She looks at Lea and laughs" (Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson, 2001: p.94, author's translation).

The ECC teacher, Britta, acknowledges, attentively and carefully, that Billy is tired. She allows the children to eat on their own and does not react to Lea having squeezed a lot of ketchup onto her plate. Thus, she expresses confidence that the children themselves are able to consider how much they can eat. She trusts Billy to measure how much milk the glass can hold. Peter gets a helping hand instead of the adult taking over. The ECC teacher ignores the rice that spills onto the table (Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson, 2001). Through her practice, the teacher exhibits closeness and care towards the children. She helps the children without taking control away from them. Her actions demonstrate respect for the child as a subject and her belief that the child can cope with some adult support.

# Discussion and conclusion

The starting point for my study is the fact that the institutional meal, as opposed to other activities in ECCs, is predominately structured and organized by adults. According to previous research, strict adult management and copious rules impede children's involvement, exploration and spontaneous speech (Bae, 2009; Murud-Riser, 2012; Smidt, 2003; Markström and Hallden, 2009). Another important aspect is that meals appear to be more and more characterized by a focus on health and proper diet (Smidt, 2003). This deviates from today's ideals about children's involvement, active participation and exploration.

In this article I have discussed a selection of findings from previous research in light of Norbert Elias' theory of civilization (1994). According to Elias, developing table manners and self-control can be seen as part of the individual's socialization and civilization into society (see Elias, 1994). On the one hand, table manners and rituals during meals create a safety and predictability frame. On the other hand, strict rules prevent children's active participation, initiative-taking and meaning-making, and reduce the enjoyment around the meal. I maintain that the adults are not always fully aware of why they act the way they do when preparing for and sitting down to meals in the ECCs.

My aim with this article has been to reflect on the way meals are arranged in the ECC and to discuss how the staff can increase children's participation during the meals. My main findings can be summarized as follows:

*Facilitate children*'*s participation and children*'*s food literacy.* Allowing the children to actively participate, get involved, determine the menu, set the table, cook and clean up after the meal, is important for their food literacy. Grabowski and Aagard-Hansen (2011) point to the importance of showing trust and respect for the way children do things, even though their way of doing things differs from the adults' way of doing them.

*See play and playfulness as an important part of children's own cultural creation* *during the meal* (Løkken, 2012; Corsaro, 1994). Play during the meal is a meaningful act and way to approach children. Play and movement are parts of the toddler's way of life. If you prevent children from playing with the food and each other during the meal, you also prevent them from unfolding themselves as people (Andersen and Holm, 2013).

*Facilitate and learn to cherish children*'*s resistance and productive disturbances during the meal.* According to Sandvik (2000), an example of productive disturbance is cheerfulness. Dotson and Cunningham (2015) illustrate how resistance strategies, such as silent protests, body language, breaking rules by talking when it is not allowed, facial expressions, shaking heads and facial mimicry to signal disgust, and refusal to eat can be seen as productive disturbance and a key part of children's meaning-making processes. Children often have a natural urge to resist, which elicits different reactions from adults. Through adults' reactions, and in some cases reprimands, the children strengthen their self-understanding.

All in all, table manners and routines are to some extent a natural and necessary part of shared meals. Nonetheless, strict rituals during meals may prevent children from unfolding as human beings. A caring practice will, in this context, involve assessing whether the child wishes to participate or not. Children have the right to participate, but differ as to what level and how much they want to participate, depending, among other things, on the child's age. It is, however, important that children are given the opportunity to participate during the meal if they wish to do so themselves.

The children learn to use their knowledge responsibly in relation to their own life and community, something that is an important part of a child's further education. The same process applies to children's food literacy. Strong adult management of the meal can be an obstacle to the child's development of food literacy. This development of food literacy is linked to the adults' care practices and whether they choose to include the children in the planning of a meal. As with other everyday situations, children can explore and develop during the meal. Children's active participation and involvement are key conditions for understanding that shared meals are a democratic arena for children to enjoy fellowship and the joy of eating.

The shared meal is much more than the food that is served and eaten. A meaningful meal is about the joy of food, taste, interaction and playful exploration. The question is then to what extent does the meal in ECCs include the cultural differences of food, rituals and rules? It seems that gender and culture are less emphasized in the research I have referred to in this article, with the exception of the rye-bread community described by Jakobsen (2012). To what extent does ECCs undertake cultural considerations when they arrange the meals? This may be an interesting point to pursue in future studies.

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1. There is a *distinction between socialization, teaching, and education*. This distinction is quite common, however, there is a specialdistinction in the German reflection on education between 'Erziehung' and '*Bildung*'.'Erziehung' can be translated with the term 'education'; but 'Bildung' does not havean equivalent in many languages. The English or French 'formation' is close to it. At the same time, it is not fully feasible to translate 'Erziehung'with 'education'. Behind the problem of correct translation stands the factthat German educational theory emphasizes a specific *phenomenon* in the educational process, i.e. 'Bildung'. <https://docgo.net/bildung-a-basic-term-of-german-education-dr-helmut-danner-cairo-in-educational-sciences-9-1994-cairo>

   [↑](#endnote-ref-1)