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Being touched – the transformative potential of nurturing touch practices in relation to toddlers’ learning and emotional well-being

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Abstract

The article investigates how nurturing touch practices, such as gentle brush massage, finger massage and body massage, are applied in 10 Danish toddler ECEC settings. 13 practitioners contributed to the study with written narratives on their experiences with nurturing touch practices and how they influenced their relationship with the children and the toddlers’ emotional well-being and learning at the nursery or family day care. This qualitative case study is built on a relational ontology and draws on Hundeide’s (2007) concept of a zone of intimacy.

The practitioners describe how nurturing touch practices can enhance their sensitivity and the intersubjective space between them and the child. The practitioners also describe how toddlers seem to become more attentive to their bodies, more relaxed and flexible. The practitioners also reported that nurturing touch practices are voluntary for children and that not all toddlers like to have their body rubbed or fingers massaged. The study invites policymakers and practitioners to broaden their focus on children’s learning and to consider how the mutual relatedness between practitioner and child influence children’s bodily, nonverbal and emotional experiences and participation.

Keywords

Toddler ECEC settings, learning, emotional well-being, nurturing touch, participation, massage, relational ontology

Introduction and research question

In Denmark, as in many other countries, there is currently a wave of policy initiatives aimed at enhancing children’s learning in early childhood institutions (Sommer, 2015). Although a holistic approach to children’s learning is emphasized in the Danish curriculum framework from 2004, an

increased focus on language and cognition as the dominant mediating factors for learning can be observed in both policy and practice (Ahrenkiel, 2015). Not only in school, but also in preschool and nursery, language and oral communication is often considered *the* mediating factor between the child's mental processes and the social context. Cross-disciplinary studies from psychology, neuroscience and education do confirm that language is developmentally linked with cognition and social processes and that the literacy environment of an early childhood education and care (ECEC) setting contributes to children's emergent literacy growth (Guo et al., 2012).

Nevertheless there is a lack of knowledge regarding how nurturing touch¹ as a tactile and relational element of ECEC practice influence the interactions between practitioners and toddlers and children's well-being and learning². In this article I address this knowledge gap by investigating how practitioners in narratives describe their use of nurturing touch as part of the cultural repertoire for children's learning and emotional well-being. . Insight into these relational processes is especially relevant in Denmark, where 86 percent of one-year-olds attend an ECEC setting³. The Danish ECEC sector is also extensive in terms of the numbers of hours spent in non-parental care: 38 percent of Danish children under six spend more than eight hours a day in an ECEC setting (Bech-Jessen, 2015). Insight into toddlers everyday experiences hereunder the tactile encounters between toddlers and those caring for them can help develop a better understanding of children's experiences and the importance of touch encounters, not only for children's socioemotional development, but also for their everyday participation and learning. Focusing on the neglected topic of how touch and tactile encounters influence toddlers' participation in the everyday life of an ECEC setting, the study reported in this article addresses the following research question:

How does nurturing touch and massage, according to 13 practitioners, influence their mutual relatedness with toddlers and the toddlers' emotional well-being and learning in 10 ECEC settings?

Research on adult-child touch encounters

Research suggests that the quality of adult-child interactions is linked to a broad range of outcomes for toddlers (Degotardi, 2010; Dalli et al., 2011). In a series of longitudinal studies conducted by

¹ Harrison (2001) suggests two basic types of touch: (1) procedural touch and (2) nurturing touch. Procedural touch is the basic physical contact as part of daily routines in an ECEC: feeding, nappy changing, transferring etc. Nurturing touch, on the other hand, is more comforting and includes caressing, brush massage and other forms of tactile or kinaesthetic stimulation (Harrison, 2001). Nurturing touch will be used as a synonym for tactile encounters. In this paper massage will also be considered a tactile encounter. According to Cambridge dictionary a "massage" is to rub and press someone's body with regular repeated movements, in order to e.g. relax them. Massages offer the same tactile stimulation as nurturing touch. Either touch encounters or massage practices are **explicit** mentioned in the Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Denmark. In the Danish curriculum "Body and motion" is never the less one of the six themes for ECECs to work with. Among the experiences children should have in this category are; increased awareness of the body, the use of all senses, joy and wellbeing related to an active body.

² The term *ECEC practitioner* covers pedagogues at nurseries for toddlers and family child care providers.

³ According to Nordic Statistical

http://91.208.143.100/pxweb/norden/pxweb/en/Nordic%20Statistics/Nordic%20Statistics__Nordic%20Gender%20Equality%20Indicators__Family%20and%20care/chil03.px/table/tableViewLayout1/?rxid=01643a91-8d5f-486e-89f3-3ea2eba91196

NICHD, positive adult–child interaction was found to be a significant predictor of language development and of cognitive and social functioning (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2002). This research often focuses on caregivers’ and toddlers’ facial and vocal behaviour, while a focus on touch is more rare (Stack, 2010).

Tactile stimulation is, as research advocates, essential to both psychological and physical health (Stack & Jean, 2011). Throughout the world, the primary function of touch is the expression of intersubjective closeness (Andersen, 2001) and, as Field (2014) emphasizes, touch is our most social sense. While there is a growing body of literature on the importance of touch for infants, its role in the development of toddlers older than one year of age has not received much attention (Stack & Jean, 2011). Research on touch and tactile encounters with small children is primarily related to *preterm infants* and *maternal-child interaction and attachment*. This research finds that gentle touching has immediate positive effects, comforting and reducing levels of behavioural distress for preterm infants in neonatal intensive care units (Harrison, 2001; Field, 2012). Touch can regulate arousal and modulate the overall level of stimulation, thereby changing the behavioural state (Field, 2012). Tronick (1995) suggests that touch is a component of the mutual regulatory process of the caregiver-infant dyad. He found that the soothing function of touch links touching to emotional regulation and that emotions play a critical part in infants’ evaluation of their goals. Feldman (2011) reports that mothers’ use of affectionate touch increases security of attachment among preterm infants and reduces their likelihood of developing emotional and behavioural problems as toddlers. Gural and Polat (2012) investigated the effects of baby massage on attachment between mothers and their infants. The mothers were assessed using the Maternal Attachment Inventory on the first and last day of a 38-day study period. The mothers gave babies a 15-minute massage therapy session every day and the researchers found that the change in the MAI scores for the experimental group mothers were significantly higher than those of control group. The study suggests that baby massage increases mother-infant attachment (Gural & Polat, 2012).

Although touch is an important element of social interaction, the term is rarely used in studies of adult-child *communication* and *interaction*. Field (2014) found that (1) touch communicates different emotions just as reliably as facial and vocal expressions and (2) that the use of touch varies widely dependent on gender, age and class. There are also large cultural differences in how, whom and when we touch (Field, 2012). In a comparative study, Field (1999) observed parents and children in playgrounds in the US and in France. She found that American parents watched and touched their children less than their French counterparts and that the American children likewise played with, talked to, and touched their parents less. The researchers also reported that the American children displayed more aggressive behaviour towards their parents than the French children (Field, 2012). During peer interactions, the American children had less tactile contact with their peers and were more likely to grab their peers’ toys (Field, 2012).

Research also suggests that touch and tactile encounters are important in creating *intersubjectivity* between adults and young children (Hundeide, 2007), not only as a means to exchange feeling with one another but also to enhance the meaning of other forms of verbal and non-verbal communication (Stack & Jean, 2011). It is also suggested that emotionally attuned

interactions both help infants learn about emotions and provide them with cues as to how to modify their responses (Campos et al., 2004). When it comes to studies of the *tactile encounter and touch in ECEC*, research is very limited and arguably outdated. Research has found that, in ECEC for infants, affectionate forms of touch such as hugging, kissing and caressing decreased as the children grew older (Field et al., 1994). It has also been found that children's stress levels are linked to the quality of their childcare experiences (Sims et al., 2006) and that practitioners' way of interacting with toddlers varies internationally (Andersen, 2011).

Research on touch encounters and toddlers' *learning* is similarly scarce and often related to visual attention (Cigales et.al, 1996). In one such study, a brief period of massage was given prior to a visual attention task. The massaged infants showed more visual attentiveness to the task and learned the stimulus properties faster than those who did not receive massage (Field et al., 2007). Despite the importance of touch and tactile encounters for children's emotional well-being and learning, such studies have been neglected (Nicolas, 2010). To sum up; there is a lack of knowledge regarding nurturing touch in ECECs and how this practice, according to the practitioners, influence the interactions with toddlers and their well-being and learning. In order to grasp the dialectic of the nurturing touch practices, this study is informed by a sociocultural perspective and its relational ontology.

Theoretical framework – emotional well-being, learning and participation

As Stetsenko (2008:477) argues sociocultural theories are based on the notion that social and psychological phenomena are processes that exist in the realm of relations and interactions—that is, as embedded, situated, distributed, and co-constructed within contexts while also being intrinsically interwoven into these contexts. In other words a relational ontology suggest that, emotional well-being and learning are linked to how children develop and change their *participation* in social practices (Lave, 1993). Lave & Wenger phrase it as follows:

‘In our view, learning is not merely situated in practice—as if it were some independently reifiable process that just happened to be located somewhere; learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991: 35).

As a philosophical position a relational ontology suggests that what distinguishes subject from subject and subject from object is mutual relation rather than substance. As stated earlier, investigating the mutual relatedness of touch and tactile encounters is not a common research theme. I find this mutual relatedness relevant not only as a steppingstone towards new knowledge on touch encounters, it might also have broader implications for how we understand learning and emotional well-being.

If a child's emotional well-being develops as an integral part of generative social practice, it becomes important to investigate how responsive practitioners, warm and loving environments, secure attachments and a sense of belonging form the foundation on which toddlers develop emotional well-being (Laevers, 2005). Emotional well-being enables children to engage positively

and confidently with their environment and thereby broaden their participation⁴. In this article, participation will therefore be theorized as a common denominator for both learning and emotional well-being. Participation is a complex process that combines doing, talking, thinking, feeling and belonging. It involves our whole person, including our bodies, minds, emotions and social relations (Wenger, 1998: 56). Learning processes are not only associated with conscious and verbalized knowledge, but with bodily actions and embodied perceptions and sensations. It is not language per se but the intersubjective closeness between practitioner and child that forms the basis for the child's participation. Although the body is something we already have, from this perspective, the body is also something we appropriate (Langaas, 2013). Learning to be affected, as Latour (2004) phrases this appropriation, can occur when a person gives attention and meaning to something he or she had not previously noticed; e.g. a smell or bodily sensation. From this perspective, nurturing touch is a way of relating and a way of giving attention to bodily sensations as they change from tension to relaxation, for example. The child becomes a more attentive, sensitive and affected body, as Langaas (2013) puts it. When an adult or a child learn to be affected, it is presumed he or she becomes more sensitive and knowledgeable about his or her world, and it is theorized that this increased attunement influences emotional well-being⁵.

This focus on embodiment goes against the traditional view that human consciousness (the mind) is formed as a result of linguistic socialization (Hundeide, 2007). Instead, a situated and relational approach supports the view that intersubjectivity rather than language itself is the basis for socialization, well-being and learning (Bråten, 1998; Katz, 1998).

Following this line of reasoning, children's learning is not only a matter of acquiring skills and developing cognitive functions; it is also a matter of who the child can become as a person (Gergen, 2009). When learning and well-being are perceived in light of a child's participation, it becomes apparent that their (1) sense of being, (2) formation of identity and (3) experience of belonging to an ECEC setting as a community are at stake (Bruner, 1997; Svinth, 2017). It also becomes clear that children's participation is influenced by the opportunities and constraints provided by the context and by their interactions with practitioners and other children. How children experience these interactions influences their engagement, curiosity and meaning-making in the situation (Sommer, 2015). This understanding encourages the view that human connection replaces separation as the fundamental reality since a person is constituted by a multiplicity of relationships (Gergen, 2009). The child's subjectivity is grounded in intersubjectivity and, according to Gergen, we must reject a sense of the self as being fundamentally independent of other people. In his view, individuals are, in all stages of life, by-products of relational processes. His vision of relational being implies recognizing a world that is not within persons, but within their relationships (Gergen, 2009). Within this relational approach, the sensory and emotional experiences related to adult-child touch encounters are considered of vital importance (Hundeide,

⁴Emotional well-being is related to capacities of attachment, positive affect, self-regulation and persistence (Laevers, 2005).

⁵ This double-sided character of touch could also have been inspired by Merleau-Ponty's work on phenomenological understanding and his theory of body and intercorporeality. Investigating the relation between the pedagogue's own body and that of the child, is highly relevant but outside the scope of this study.

2007). Hundeide describes how sensitive physical contact, touching and intimate dialogue can bring children and caregivers into a *zone of intimacy*. In Hundeide's (2007) model of human care in the *zone of intimacy*, there are three ways of entering the zone of intimacy: (1) face-to-face communication and intimate dialogue, (2) bodily contact and touching and (3) imitation of sensitive touch and direct participation in the child's activity (Hundeide, 2007: 247)⁶.

Hundeide suggests that sensitive, affectionate touching that leads to a close embrace is the prototype of closeness and must be applied with sensitivity and respect for the other person's boundaries as a spontaneous response to the other's expression and appeal.

Method

Qualitative research describing lived relational patterns in detail is required if we intend to grasp the dialectical constitution of touch encounters and how they influence children's well-being and participation in ongoing practice. This qualitative case study therefore attempts to describe and analyse the *social situation* (Hedegaard, 2012) of established nurturing touch practices in 10 toddler ECEC settings in Denmark⁷. It is not the efficiency of a specific touch/massage practice that is investigated, neither a cause-effect relation between the touch and children's well-being. Rather I want to investigate how practitioners describe the social situation and the mutual relatedness of their nurturing touch practice. As Bruner (1997) suggests, narrative knowledge created and constructed through stories of lived experiences helps make sense of the ambiguity and complexity of human lives. The aim is therefore to understand how situated interaction, with its entanglements and non-verbal exchanges, influences the intersubjective closeness, according to practitioners. A first-person perspective is employed in order to clarify the 'uniqueness' of the practitioner's experiences (Manen, 1991) and to grasp the relational approach and practitioner's reflectivity. Thirteen practitioners participated in the case study (seven pedagogues from nurseries for toddlers and six family child care providers – all female). The practitioners had between two months and eight years of experience with various nurturing touch practices in ECEC settings. Some of the practitioners used touch as a regular scheduled activity, i.e. on a daily or weekly basis; others used it more spontaneously in everyday situations. Inspired by Hansen (2009), the author on one of the workshops invited the practitioners to write narratives addressing three topics: (1) the practitioner's

⁶ Hundeide suggests as a way into the zone that the adult first establish contact by imitating the child's gestures and initiatives, and then gradually developing this imitation into communication and participation in the child's activities. According to Hundeide this is a way of responding by following the child's initiative. As long as a child produces expressive or goal oriented initiatives and actions, it is always possible to start a simple communication by initiating a cycle of turn-taking (Hundeide, 2007: 250).

⁷ The settings were part of a two year long participatory research and development program called "With the Child in the Centre" (Broström, Hansen, Jensen & Svinth, 2016). The Project was financed by the 16 participating municipalities who also did the selection of both settings and participants to the project "With the Child in the Centre". The 13 participants in the case study reported in this article, were among the 90 participants in the author's research workshop on "practitioner-toddler interaction and learning in 0-2 ECEC settings" (Svinth, 2017). The 13 practitioners were the only one in the group with a regular touch practice extended beyond everyday physical contact like holding a child, caressing a child and procedural touch. I meet the participants on 16 occasions at workshop meetings at two different campuses in two Danish cities. I was external researcher and did visit the participating settings.

nurturing touch practice with 0-3-year-old children, (2) how the touch practice influenced the practitioner's relational practice with the child and (3) how the practitioner experienced the touch practice as influencing children's well-being and participation. 13 practitioners took up the invitation and wrote each a narrative which on average were two pages long. The narratives were collected at a following workshop meeting.

Ethical Considerations and limitations

I made an open call for participants to come forward for this case study on one of the workshop meetings. Both practitioners with good and bad experiences were invited to share their stories. Participation in the case study was limited to practitioners with an ongoing touch/massage practice and I verbally informed the group that participation was voluntary. I did not reject any, either did I select among those who signed up for the case study. Using practitioners' narratives as a research method to detect not only issues related to the practitioners (first-person perspective) but also to the children (third-person perspective) has some limitations. One limitation is that children's experiences with touch and massage are reported by those who initiated and provided the nurturing touch – the ECEC practitioners. Although the practitioners were instructed not to limit their response to positive experiences, the practitioners might nevertheless be biased toward confirming positive experiences with nurturing touch. It is likely that an observational study might nuance or even challenge the practitioners' narratives. It is also important to stress that although this is not an intervention study, it is relevant to emphasize that touch encounters can be powerful forms of contact and must be applied with sensitivity and respect for the child's perspective (Hundeide, 2007).

Analysis and results

Central themes in the narratives were identified through a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A thematic analysis is characterized by a quest for patterns in the material. In Braun and Clarke's approach, a theme is comprised of 'something important' in the material in relation to the research question. This 'something' is in this paper narrowed down to two themes: (1) The practitioners' narratives on how an intersubjective closeness developed *during* touch encounters; (2) The practitioners' narratives on how touch encounters' influence toddlers' emotional well-being and participation *after* the encounter⁸.

The practitioners' narratives on how an intersubjective closeness developed during touch encounters

Traditionally, touch encounters are perceived as a technical tool where an active practitioner provides a series of tactile pressures to the body of a passive child. However, according to the practitioners' narratives in this study, touch encounters are much more than that. They are first and foremost dialectical encounters constituted by both adult and child. Although the practitioners

⁸ By selecting these two themes there are other relevant themes that are not addressed in the analysis. One potential theme that is indirectly excluded by this analytical focus is the practitioners' reports on children who turn down an invitation to a nurturing touch encounter. All practitioners had nurturing touch as a voluntary activity, and two of them explicitly stated that not all children are interested in e.g. finger or brush massage.

found it challenging to describe how non-verbal and tactile interaction emerges and develops as relational processes, there is a common pattern of both intimacy and reciprocity in the narratives. It becomes apparent that insight into the child's experiences in the here-and-now encounter is something the practitioner must strive for. Almost all of the practitioners underlining the importance of being open to the child's perspective:

'During the massage, I experience that I become very curious about what the child likes and doesn't like. What is the child trying to communicate? If I am not open in this way, it will not be a good experience for the child.'

Another practitioner states:

'I experience a sense of intimacy and of caring; an openness towards sensing what the child likes during the massage. It is an exchange: giving and receiving. I feel we are more equal and I sense the child as a human being in these encounters.'

A third practitioner has the following description:

'I would almost go so far as to say that when we open ourselves to the child in this way, we get a more positive and far more multifaceted impression of the child. This is of great importance to the encounter and the opportunities offered to us both. We become more attuned to each other when I open myself to what the child tries to communicate non-verbally. When is it enough? Does the child want more?'

In the narratives it becomes visible how the practitioners try to open themselves to the child's perspective in the here and now. They get engaged in what the child wants, how the touch/massage feels and how it affects the child. Sometimes this intersubjective closeness is used to detect an uncomfortable child or a rejection of a touch encounter. The mutual relatedness becomes in other words visible in the narratives both as an attunement not only to the child's enjoyment but also to its rejection. Aline with Hundede's (2007) suggestion the practitioners in this study become more emotionally attentive during a touch encounter, and they describe how the encounter makes it easier for them to recognize the child's expressions and utterances. The quality of this tactile and embodied intersubjectivity influences not only what the child experiences and becomes in the moment of the encounter, but also what the practitioner experiences and becomes. Some of the practitioners reported that these intense moments of tactile encounter became a turning point in their relationship to a particular child. . Also Feldman (2011) underlines that affectionate touch is one among several components that shape the caregiver's sensitive style and therefore serves as a cornerstone of young children's social-emotional growth, or relational becoming as Gergen (2009) would phrase it. The narratives display the dialectical nature of a touch encounter and illustrate the transformative potential it has not only for the child but also for the practitioner. As Hundede (2007) suggests caring for others is not only something we do for others, but something we do in order to recreate our own human subjectivity – our deepest moral core. A practitioner writes:

'I am far more aware of my own bodily expressions and impressions. The touch encounter makes me feel happy and positive and I encountered the child differently

after the massage. It is like a barrier between us has been removed..... When I touch a child, I sense that both the child and I are being touched.'

Another practitioner reports the following experience:

'I think the child and I become more equal due to this practice. The close physical contact during the massage sessions makes it more appealing to me to face the child on an equal footing. I develop a stronger desire to see the child for who he or she is..... I am sure we both develop a sense of closeness where we appreciate each other's company more.... The massage also makes me more available to the child; I learn a lot about the child during our touch encounters. How is she or he right now?'

A third practitioner phrases it:

'I have noticed an increased willingness to enter into dialogue with the child; an increased willingness to open myself to the child's perspective instead of telling off.'

The practitioners in this study describe how their own affectedness in the situation is a prerequisite for their attention to how the child is affected. As the excerpts above suggest, the practitioners' commitment to care is nurtured in the encounter. The nurturing encounter invites the child into the caregiver's *zone of intimacy* and her empathic identification is elicited as Hundeide (2007) would put it. Similar to Bruner's (1997) notion of a 'meeting of minds', this zone of intimacy is established through the communication of different perspectives and the sharing of motivations. This study suggests that a zone of intimacy can be founded on a meeting of bodies, which has particular relevance when it comes to young children with limited verbal language skills.

The practitioners describe how, in the process of touching the child, they themselves are touched by the child. They are affected by what they sense the child communicates and adjust their practice accordingly. The practitioners thereby provide a deeper and more sustainable basis for care (Hundeide, 2007). Applying a sociocultural understanding, it is important to emphasize that this sense of responsibility for the other is not only a personal competence, but is situational, interactive and part of the cultural repertoire of an ECEC setting. I will elaborate on this issue in the next section and in the discussion of the study's findings.

The practitioners narratives on how touch encounters' influence on toddlers' emotional well-being and participation after the encounter .

According to the narratives the potential of touch encounters extends beyond the establishment of intersubjective closeness and zones of intimacy; it involves a broader notion of community relationships and relatedness. In this section, I will analyse how touch encounters influence toddlers' emotional well-being and participation. The way in which both adult and child become co-creators of their relational being is brought to life in the vignette below:

'In our nursery we have a boy who is a year and eight months; his name is Adam. His language skills are not well developed. He has often had conflicts with the other toddlers; he would hit and bite when emotionally challenged. It was very difficult for

us to help him to adjust his level of arousal when he got upset. I decided to try a new approach in order to reach him; I started to give him a finger massage. One after the other, I softly squeezed his fingers. Sometimes I would speak quietly to him during the massage; at other times we were both silent. The encounter usually lasted around five minutes. At first, I offered him finger massage when he was calm and in a good mood, but slowly I started to offer it to him when he was tired, sad or in affect. After a few weeks of regular practice, he started to come to me to have his fingers massaged. Usually he didn't say anything, he just stuck his hand out in front of me. Now he sometime approaches me even when he is tired or upset extending his hand. I don't know exactly what he experiences, but I think the touch encounters help him cope with anger and challenging situations.'

Within a sociocultural perspective, it is relevant to study how touch encounters can contribute to changes in children's emotional well-being and participation. In the above vignette, it becomes apparent how the practitioner guides Adam to notice how this affectedness can be changed in ways that make it possible for him to challenge previous patterns of interaction and thereby his emotional well-being and participation. The intersubjective space between them is expanded by the practitioner's initiative to provide finger massage - not only during, but also after the nurturing touch encounter. Both parties become more attuned to each other and modify their behaviour in a relational dance where tactile encounters engender a new intersubjective space and a new form of participation.

In the practitioners' narratives, there are many different descriptions of how this change in well-being and participation occurs after a touch encounter. A common theme in the narratives is the regulatory effect the touch encounters have on children in affect. Research has already established that the touch encounter, among other things, stimulates the mutual regulatory process of the caregiver-toddler dyad (Tronick, 1995). It has also been found that the mere presence of touch is effective in generating positive affect in small children (Stack & Jean, 2011). This runs parallel to Tronick's (1995) finding that the smoothing function of touch links it to emotional regulation and that emotions play a critical part in toddlers' evaluation of their goals. In the vignette with Adam, the practitioner's finger massage moved the toddler from inattentiveness to attentiveness of his affective state. When Adam realized that the finger massage helps him cope with the bodily sense of frustration and anger, a more embodied body is created, to use Latour's (2004) term. Several practitioners describe how this regulatory process is visible after touch encounters in their ECEC:

'Marcus (two years and two months) experiences a lot of conflicts with the other children. He usually gets very upset and emotionally distressed by these conflicts. Sometimes he avoids playing. I began to use massage to help him cope with these situations. What I experience is that, during the massage, he sort of reconciles those strong emotions. The massage comforts him much more than words. His breathing becomes steadier and his body relaxes more and more. Slowly he became ready to start playing again.'

According to the practitioner the nurturing touch has calming effects on the toddler both during and after the encounter. Several of the practitioners stated that the touch encounters make it possible for children to return to play or a group activity in a more fruitful manner. Marcus' change in participation is guided by the way the practitioner gives attention and meaning to the situation and his affective state (Rogoff, 1995). To maintain the child's attunement to his or her own body, there must be a caregiver who guides and helps the child in an appropriate manner when a stressful situation arises, as in the examples above. It also becomes clear how the body is something the child has, but is also something the child appropriates (Langaas, 2013). As Sheets-Johnstone (2002: 138) suggests, children are apprentices of their bodies. By paying attention to the body and by staying attuned to its signals, they learn complex details about their relational being. In this study it becomes apparent that children as young as toddlers are able to take this learning even further; they can learn to sense the cross-modality of a gentle stroke with a brush on their skin, a soft calming voice and the increased relaxation of a tense body. When the toddler learns to be affected, he or she becomes more sensitive to and knowledgeable about his or her world. Several examples of this are found in the narratives:

'Sara asks for brush massage when she is upset. It calms her down and transforms her frustration and makes her ready for play.'

Or:

'The massage makes it easier for Chris to handle situations that would otherwise frustrate him'

A third practitioner makes a similar observation in her ECEC:

'The massage appears to make it easier for the child to be around other children'

The vignette below gives an insight into how this change in participation can come about in practice:

'I have a boy (two years six months) who often gets into conflicts with the other children. His language skills are rather poor and he gets upset and frustrated when he can't make himself understood. He often withdraws from play and starts to run around aimlessly. I started to offer him brush massage in these situations; slowly but steadily he starts to acknowledge that the strokes feel good and starts to relax. Gradually, he becomes calmer and eventually starts to play again without running into trouble with the other children.'

The toddler acquires what Langaas (2013) terms a more attentive, sensitive and affected body. According to the narratives the touch encounters provide the toddlers with opportunities to open themselves to other children's perspectives. Several practitioners experience that children seem to be better able to shift perspective following a touch encounter. The toddler's embodied perceptions and sensations open up for a flexibility that is often very difficult for toddlers to exhibit.

‘Fredrik used to bump into the other children, unaware of the boundaries of his own body. He experienced a lot of conflict as a result. After weeks of regular massage encounters, I have noticed that he sometime adjusts his body to make room for another child to pass. That is something he has never done before.’

This flexibility and adjustment could be theorized as an increase in Fredrik’s intersubjective closeness resulting from his experiences with touch encounters, but it could also be theorized as a change in his well-being and participation since Fredrik now experiences fewer conflicts..

As Latour (2004) suggests, acquiring a body is a progressive enterprise that produces both a sensory medium and a sensitive world. The excerpts above illustrate how touch, according to the practitioners, can be an integrated part of children’s participation and play with other children, but also how touch can contribute to the adaptability of the communication and the interaction between toddlers. The toddlers’ responsiveness to one another seems to be enriched by the nurturing touch practice. When the practitioners describe their touch encounters it also becomes apparent how tactile and non-verbal forms of communication can become an integral part of the cultural repertoire (Wenger, 2009) for interactions in an ECEC setting. More importantly, it becomes apparent how the cultural repertoire for children’s learning and participation is shaped and developed by a mutual relatedness which is also visible during nurturing touch practice in these settings. Instead of just affirming the status quo, the practitioners’ nurturing touch practices encourage the toddlers to develop their participation. By doing so, the toddler can experience the practitioner’s affirmation of who he is in the present moment, but he also experiences what he is about to become.

Touch as a diverse and adaptable modality is more than just a channel of communication. Although the tactile modality provides an important means for caregivers and toddlers to maintain a connection with each other, touch encounters also have the potential to nurture a toddler’s relational being and participation. In other words, this study supports Trevarthen’s (1995) claim that human development emerges from a non-rational, non-verbal, concept-less and entirely non-theoretical potential for participation and communication with other persons. This claim is based on the assumption that it is intersubjectivity rather than language itself that constitutes the basis for the child’s well-being and participation. As Katz (1998) argues, intersubjective exchanges provide a foundation not only for relationship formation and socialization, but also for learning. Additional insight into these non-verbal and embodied relational processes is vital if we want to understand how toddlers’ well-being and learning are co-constructed, not only verbally but also bodily, in their moment-to-moment participation in toddler ECEC settings.

Discussion

In this study, I have analysed how practitioners, through nurturing touch encounters, include toddlers in their zone of intimacy, thereby eliciting their empathic identification with the children. I

find that the touch encounters not only provide an opportunity for the practitioners to develop their sensitivity toward the child, but also increase the practitioners' commitment to care, which is vital for the development of 0-3-year-old children. When considered from a sociocultural perspective, I suggest that touch encounters are an important means for practitioners and toddlers to maintain and develop intersubjectivity. Although a toddler's physical contact with caregivers is valuable and a critical component of children's healthy development, touch encounters are often not a part of the cultural repertoire in ECEC settings. In some countries, concerns about paedophilia have resulted in official 'no touch' policies within ECEC settings, reducing the use of tactile encounters and suppressing discussion regarding the consequences when touch encounters are excluded from ECEC settings. According to the US-based National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the spread of such 'no touch' policies represents a misguided effort to protect children that fails to recognize the importance of touch to children's healthy development. While both practitioners and ECEC settings have a legal and ethical mandate to protect children in their care, in order to do so they must consider the benefits of touch encounters and the role touch plays in healthy child development. Since warm, responsive touch conveys regard and concern for children of any age, the NAEYC recommends that ECEC settings do not implement 'no touch' policies to reduce the risk of abuse⁹. In other words, there is cause for concern when an increase in 'no touch' policies, particularly in Anglo-American countries, means that practitioners are required to refrain from touching the children in their care (Johnson, 2000). Instead, this study invites policymakers and practitioners to broaden their focus on children's learning beyond linguistic and cognitive development by placing greater value on children's bodily and emotional experiences and competences.

Limitations

Although I did not intent to exclude negative aspects of touching practice, the narrative solely contains the positive sides. In this case study, I have therefor only addressed the opportunities related to nurturing touch encounters. In line with the study's sociocultural perspective, it is important to stress that, as well as providing opportunities for development and learning, the context and the child's interaction with the practitioner also sets certain constraints which influence how children's emotional well-being and participation are formed and transformed. It would be highly relevant to further investigate potential negative aspects of touching practices, Furthermore; the study is based entirely on the narratives of practitioners. Although the children are very young, it would also be relevant to conduct either observations or interviews with the toddlers in pursuit of a child perspective.

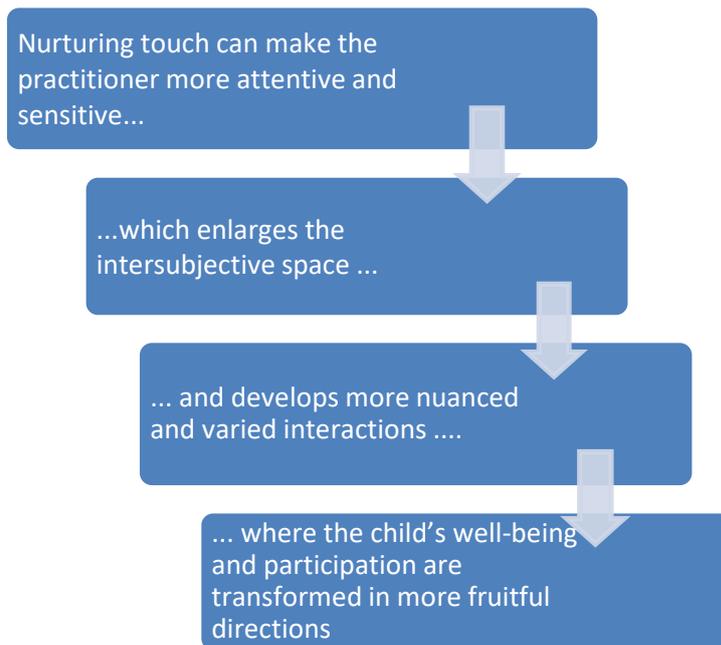
⁹ The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Prevention of Child Abuse in Early Childhood Programs and the Responsibilities of Early Childhood Professionals to Prevent Child Abuse. Washington, DC: NAEYC, 1996. <https://www.naeyc.org/files/naeyc/file/positions/PSCHAB98.PDF>

Conclusion

Throughout the world, the primary function of touch is the expression of intersubjective closeness (Andersen, 2001). In alignment with the findings of Campos et al. (2004), this study has shown that emotionally attuned interactions both help toddlers learn about emotions and provide them with cues as to how to modify their responses in ways that transform toddlers' participation in ECEC settings.

Earlier research suggests that family interactions shape children's views on physical contact (Fleck & Chavajay, 2009). In this study, my findings show that when nurturing touch encounters are integrated in the cultural repertoire of an ECEC setting, it can shape children's embodied being. Nurturing touch encounters, as emotionally attuned interactions, enlarge the intersubjective field between the practitioner and the toddler. In other words, the intersubjective exchanges during nurturing touch provide a foundation not only for relationship formation and socialization, but also for learning. To sum up, I suggest that nurturing touch has the potential to transform children's well-being and participation, as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: The potential of nurturing touch



In conclusion, this study suggests that an unbalanced emphasis on language as the primary path to learning neglects the potential of non-verbal communication and bodily encounters for developing the intersubjective space, as well as for supporting children's well-being and participation.

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