‘Friendship is like an extra parachute’: reflections on the way schoolchildren share their lived experiences of well-being through drawings

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The aim of this study was to create a new understanding of health promotion activities in the classroom setting through children’s perspectives. Nineteen Swedish schoolchildren, ages 10-to 11-years-old, participated in health promotion work in the classroom. Through drawings and an exhibition discussion analysing their own and each other’s drawings, they shared their lived experience of well-being and lack thereof. The phenomenological analysis resulted in three themes: (1) friends in good times and in bad; (2) the sunny side of life; (3) the bad and the mean. These themes were understood as friendship being like an extra parachute. Reflecting on the children’s lived experience of well-being and our own role in the research process, the concept of openness surfaced. This we believe is an important ethical aspect of research with children.

Keywords: drawings; empowerment; ethics; friendship; health promotion; schoolchildren; lived experience; reflection

Children’s well-being, their perspectives and involvement

Since Coyne (1998) noted, in the end of 1990, that there was a lack of research with children rather than on children, researchers have raised questions about how research with children can be conducted (see Christensen & Prout, 2002; Kortesluoma, Hentinen, & Nikkonen, 2003). In the same light reflecting on doing health promotion with children instead of doing health promotion for children might be a worthwhile focus in research as well. According to the World Health Organization there is a growing awareness about the positive effects of health promotion activities with school-aged children, although there is a need to increase health promotion globally (WHO, 1995). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) Article 12 states clearly how children have the right to express their own views in all matters affecting themselves. A group of researchers concluded that children should be active participants in all health promotion activities (Hart-Zeldin, Kalnins, Pollack, & Love, 1990). Being actively part of health promotion efforts might even have a health promoting affect all in itself, as we found in a recent study that schoolchildren felt good being included and their experience of health and well-being increased when being met as a ‘we’ (Kostenius & Öhrling, 2006). However, children have a marginalized position in adult society; therefore, ‘society must rethink the position and roles that are assigned to children so that their valuable potential is not lost’ (Kalnins et al., 2002, p. 223). Children’s potential is in focus when the European Network of Health Promoting Schools links schools and health. A health promoting school works for a positive climate which is important when young people form relationships, make decisions and develop their values and attitudes affecting their health and well-being (ENHPS, 2006). Therefore the aim of this study was to create a new understanding of health promotion activities in the classroom setting through children’s perspectives.

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Applying phenomenology to research with children in mind

This study is based on a phenomenological lifeworld ontology, which poses methodological consequences. According to Husserl (1970) the lifeworld is experienced as ‘the thing itself’ (p. 127) and the basic demand of phenomenological lifeworld research is openness to the complexity of the lifeworld, thus affirming its diversity. There are a number of dimensions intertwined in being humans. Merleau-Ponty (1962) refers to the life of consciousness as the intentional arc which is projecting our past and our future as well as our physical, ideological and moral situation. Husserl (1970) describes human beings as experiencing the world directly and intuitively, through our senses. Researching lived experience is according to van Manen (1990) a way to better understand other human being’s lives. He also suggests always asking yourself first what it is like for the child, as a way of ensuring the inclusion of a child’s perspective.

The children in this study: inviting and respecting them

Bengtsson (1999) describes regionalizing as a way to define an area of research, as it is impossible to study everything in a lifeworld. The regionalizing resulted in choosing a school in the arctic region of Sweden as the Arctic Council (2002) express a need for research in the area of psychosocial well-being of schoolchildren in the north. Alerby (1998) argues that children ages 7- to 16-years-old are able to formulate their thoughts about their lived experience and should not only have the opportunity to do so but be trusted in the process. One fourth grade class with 19 schoolchildren, 11 boys and 8 girls, from a suburban school in the northern part of Sweden, was chosen based on the teacher’s willingness to participate.

Before starting this study the key gatekeepers needed to grant permission for the class to participate in health promotion work during one school year (c.f Piercy & Hargate, 2004). At first the classroom teacher offered to be a partner in the research project after hearing Catrine describing the research plan during a visit, for another purpose, in the teachers lounge. After this the principal was contacted as well as the parents. According to an ethical law in Sweden (SFS 2003:460) informed consent must be collected from children participating in a research project and since they are under the age of 18 the parents needed to give their permission. This was done by both of us through written information to the parents as well as oral information at a parent meeting, giving the parents the opportunity to ask questions. Catrine met with the children in the class to inform them of the research study and their role as partners. Free participation and autonomy was explained and a conversation about what it means was held before receiving permission from the children. Before the research project started it was approved by the ethical committee at Luleå University of Technology.

There is however more to ethics in research with children, which needs to be addressed. The way we see it, the starting point is that every researcher carries a whole set of values and chooses to view the research work in light of these values (see James & Prout, 1995). When doing research, especially with children, it is important to make clear the researchers’ views on children and childhood. In other words, how we as researchers view children will most likely make a difference on how our research is carried out.

We have both been children at one point; we are also mothers as well as professionals in the child healthcare field. Our lived experience has built a view of children and childhood pointing in a similar direction. Kerstin feels that we as adults need to listen to children and value their lived experience. Catrine believes that children ought to be invited to be apart and be trusted and respected in the process. We are in agreement with Eder and Fingerson (2002) that we are living in a world where there exists a power imbalance between adults and children and we need to be aware of this and constantly reflecting on how to minimize the gap.
Although being aware of one’s view of children is of utmost importance, it is not the end of the ethical positioning but the beginning. Christensen and Prout (2002) argue that ‘the perspective of children as social actors has created a field with new ethical dilemmas and responsibilities for researchers’ (p. 477). In other words, even though one favors children’s participation in research, there still needs to be a constant awareness of ethics in every step of the research process. It is important to keep asking questions concerning ethical challenges when involving children in research (Morrow & Richards, 1996). In the honest recognition of difficulties and challenges when researching with children, an openness to solving problems and overcoming challenges is born. We concluded that certain questions were suitable to guide our research work: How can we strive to keep an openness to the children’s lifeworlds? How can we make an effort to convey this openness to the children? What can we do to make them feel comfortable – safe, if you will – in sharing their lived experience? How can we try to make the research process empowering for the children?

Drawings: a tool to share schoolchildren’s lifeworlds

Psychologists have often used drawings for the purpose of assessing children’s development (Cherney, Seiwert, Dickey, & Flichtbeil, 2006). Alerby (1998) adds that drawings have been used for the purpose of therapy but also as a way for researchers to elicit children’s views or lived experiences. In the work of Coyne (1998) drawings were used to establish rapport and to lower anxiety in children, making room for a non-threatening interview. In this article the method was to use drawings as narratives to better understand schoolchildren’s lived experience of well-being and lack thereof (see Groves & Laws, 2003). Backett-Milburn and McKie (1999) offer critique of the assumption that drawings enable children to communicate their thoughts better than through other methods. They suggest that talking to children and taking them seriously creates a true potential for children having their own ideas and explanations heard and understood, which would benefit health promotion efforts. Similarly Driessnack (2005) points at a deficit in using drawings when clinicians and researchers disregard children’s own words describing their drawings. With this in mind we let the children draw and use their own words to describe their drawing, as well as offer their interpretations of the other children’s drawings. This article focuses on schoolchildren’s lifeworlds and their lived experience of health promotion activities in the classroom setting, drawn from data collected during a one-month period of a one-year study. The first health promotion activity with the children, which were also part of the data collection, was defining words. This was done for two reasons. First of all to let the children’s voices be heard from the very start, giving them the opportunity to describe the meaning of words connected to the aim of the research project, instead of letting the researcher’s definitions prevail. We also aimed at making the children feel important, showing them that their thoughts count, and in this way strengthening the researcher–child relationships we had started to build.

The process of the data collected for this article was as follows: Catrine spent time in the classroom as a well known person the children had come to know since the beginning of the school year. The classroom teacher asked the children to brainstorm about the meaning of well-being and lack thereof. She made a mind map of the words the children came up with so all the children in the class could see their ‘collective picture of thoughts’ on the whiteboard. The words from the mind map were written down on pieces of paper by the teacher and folded in a bucket. The children were asked to pick a word from the bucket and then make a drawing symbolizing the word they picked. The children could decide to work alone, in pairs or in a group. If the children picked a word they did not feel inspire them to make a drawing, they picked another piece of paper until they found a word they liked to work with. One boy wanted to come up with his own word, which
he did. The words the children choose to work with were joy, friendship, togetherness, love, stress and anger. They worked on the drawings for parts of two days and finished up with an exhibition, hanging up all the pictures on one wall of the class-room. The child or group presented their drawing first, followed by an exhibition discussion where the children were invited to offer alternative interpretations of the drawings, analyzing their own and each other’s drawings. Catrine took notes while the children offered their thoughts at the exhibition and their comments were considered a first step in the process of analysis.

Discovering children’s lifeworlds in their drawings

The data consisted of the children’s drawings and the notes from the discussion at the exhibition. The process of analysis was done in three steps by Catrine: seeking meaning, theme analysis and interpretation with reflection inspired by van Manen (1990). After each step the progress was discussed with Kerstin. The seeking meaning consisted of viewing the drawings and transcribing the notes from the open discussion to a computer text document. The text was read a number of times, and together with writing down what first came to mind when viewing the drawings a sense of the whole was obtained. The second step of the process was theme analysis, trying to determine what experiential structures could be found in the drawings and the notes from the discussion. We looked for differences and similarities in the drawings and the text, trying to keep an eye out for different aspects, patterns and variations. The text and the drawings were organized into different experiences in several steps and finally reduced to broader themes of the children’s lived experience. The third and final step was interpretation with reflection, a process of recovering the embodied meanings in the drawings and the text (see van Manen, 1990). We were trying to view the drawings and text from as many different angles as possible, somewhat similar to how Merleau-Ponty (1962) describes viewing a phenomenon. He gives an example of viewing a house from different angles. Still using the house metaphor, it is like viewing a house (the child’s) from the inside of another house (the researcher’s) who also has been a child at one point. It is through our own experience as a child we can understand the children we are trying to gain an understanding about (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker, & Mulderij, 1983). However, in this process we were fully aware that our interpretation was just that, an interpretation and nothing more, as we never can be the other person, living their life (see Schutz, 2002).

‘Get the picture?’: schoolchildren’s lived experiences

The schoolchildren’s lived experience of well-being and lack thereof in drawings and text from the discussion at the exhibition was based on a three step process of analysis. This process resulted in three themes: (1) friends in good times and in bad; (2) the sunny side of life; (3) the bad and the mean.

Theme 1: friends in good times and in bad

This first theme was made up of the schoolchildren’s descriptions of themselves together with others in social settings. This theme seemed to override both Theme 2 and 3 as both the good in life and the hard times can be shared with others as well as be increased by others. To describe friendship the children used the words ‘respecting each other’, ‘keeping secrets’ and ‘having fun together’. The children expressed how being there for each other and inviting others to be a part of the group was important. One child said ‘a real friend says come and tag along’. A number of times this theme overlapped with Theme 2, expressing the good things in life. The children noted that the drawings showing togetherness and friendship had dimensions of the wonderful
things in life. Words the children used to describe this were, for example ‘happiness’, ‘fortune’ and ‘love’. They talked about laughing and playing together and about times being filled with overwhelming feelings of joy, appreciating being part of a good relationship. Although there were a lot of positive dimensions of friendship there was some sadness too, overlapping with Theme 3. When one child said ‘friendship is being with someone’, another child added ‘or not being with someone’.

One of the drawings (Figure 1) pictures an arrow piercing the heart, which could be hurtful. According to the children pain could be one aspect of friendship. One child explained this by saying ‘Love can maybe start with a fight’. The children described being a friend no matter what happened. Being there for each other and being able to count on each other was expressed by the children in these quotes: ‘Help is on its way’ and ‘He is saving me’. Friendship was having someone to share life’s challenges with. The drawings were symbolizing the togetherness with two people holding hands being happy (Figure 2 on the next page). In one picture there was a heart in front of the two people symbolizing the love between them.

Friendship in good times and in bad, was understood as the children shared life’s ups and down with a significant other.

**Theme 2: the sunny side of life**

The second theme expressed the schoolchildren’s bright and enjoyable experiences, which were connected with a high level of well-being. The children used the words ‘love’, ‘summer’, ‘caring’, ‘honesty’, ‘joy’ and ‘happiness’ to describe what they considered the sunny side of life. The drawings show happy people, favorite activities or things. One of the children in the group who drew a happy girl said ‘the happiness shows in her face and in her glittering eyes’. There was a lot of happiness together with others. Being in love with someone, holding hands and sharing life was a wonderful experience. The two children who left the faces blank in their drawing explained that they did this so that anyone could picture themselves as being one of the people in love (Figure 3 on the next page). Love was not exclusively for a boy and a girl but love was possible between friends, between a parent and a child or between whomever.
Nature was also included in the joys of life with blue skies and flowers. The children shared their experience of well-being connected to having a home and feeling safe as well as being able to enjoy life. One child exclaimed ‘All children have the right to play’. The sunny side of life was understood as the children were showered with the great gifts of life.

**Theme 3: the bad and the mean**

The third theme expressed the schoolchildren’s experiences filled with pain and sorrow. To describe this, the children used words like ‘tough’, ‘scared’, ‘feeling sick’, ‘stress’ and ‘being angry’. One drawing show malice by picturing a bloodbath, people fighting and faces with pain.
written all over them (Figure 4). There are strong feelings of anger and revenge in this drawing, and one child explained ‘I get so angry I catch on fire’. Being hurt with lips cut open and one person almost being strangled expressed the suffering in the wake of anger.

Stress is depicted as a strain in life making the children feel sick – like one child said, ‘the well-being disappears’ – and another told a story of a dad who was in such a rush his car caught fire. The children described negative experiences, for example having to be in a hurry not knowing if it will be possible to manage to get where you need to be on time. There were dimensions in the children’s lived experience of feeling despondant and dejected. Sometimes life feels like a race, a race not able to win – as one child explained, ‘Time is running away’ (Figure 5).

The bad and the mean, was understood as the children had to struggle with lives challenges.

Figure 4. A detail of the schoolchildren’s drawing symbolizing anger.

Figure 5. The schoolchildren’s drawing symbolizing stress.

Picture this: discussing and reflecting on our new understandings
The understanding of schoolchildren’s lived experiences of well-being and lack thereof was guided by words used by the children; joy, friendship, togetherness, love, stress and anger. From the children’s drawings and the exhibition our analysis arrived at three themes: (1) friends in good times and in bad; (2) the sunny side of life; and (3) the bad and the mean. The central notion in all the three themes seemed to be of a social kind where friendship played an important role for the children. One of the drawings captured a rescue action where one boy saved another boy. The children’s own analysis included descriptions of being helpful to each other and saving one another. This could be understood as friendship is like having an extra parachute to unfold when
your own is not opening up. In good times the extra parachute is there as a security when gliding through the air enjoying the scenery from up above. However, in times of trouble the extra parachute is saving your life. This could very well be pictured, like a detail in one of the drawings of a person parachuting (Figure 6).

Friendships are according to the children in this study an important part of life, helping children cope with life’s challenges. Including ways to build and strengthen friendships can therefore be an important part of health promotion activities. We as adults, be it parents, teachers or researchers, need to ask ourselves ‘How can we help children build friendships with other children?’ and ‘How can friendships play a role in our relationships with children?’

Reflecting over the children’s lived experience of well-being and lack thereof and our own role in the research process, the concept of openness seemed to surface. This we believe is an important ethical aspect of research with children. Figuratively speaking an open parachute is helpful but a parachute packed away is, in time of need, not doing much good. When trying to achieve openness in contact with the children, two of the questions we continuously asked ourselves were connected to openness: ‘How can we strive to keep an openness to the children’s lifeworlds?’ and ‘How can we make an effort to convey this openness to the children?’ We have had the opportunity to reflect continuously through discussions among ourselves, but also with peers and others. Catrine, who documented the process, also kept a research diary. The first two questions concerning openness have been challenging because openness is, just like many words, open to interpretation. We regarded the challenge with openness as partly an ontological question, closing in on reality and how it can be understood. The ontological questions can be answered with Husserl’s (1989) phenomenological concept ‘going back to the things’. The two leading principles for this thinking are firstly turning towards the things, living or material, as a subject is turning towards another subject. Secondly humbleness towards the things is shown where openness to the complexity of the lifeworld is a pre-requisite. Due to this we believe that adopting a phenomenological lifeworld perspective, as we have done, is one part of our openness.

Openness we regard as a good thing when doing research with children; however, there is a limit to how much openness is possible. An example is Husserl, who in his quest to reach the true essence of ‘the things themselves’, developed transcendental phenomenology. We are joining the epoché critics choosing the existentialistic branch of phenomenology, sharing the understanding that the lifeworld can be studied. However, we are disregarding the belief of bracketing, when a
researcher ignores his or her pre-understanding. Pre-understanding plays an important role in our ability to understand another human being. Lippitz (1983) argues that the researcher’s view of children’s lifeworlds from a distance is inadequate, ‘the closeness of them, which they allow us, the participation in their life, makes our understanding possible’ (p. 64). However, the meaning one gives another human being cannot be the same as their own, but merely an interpretation (Schutz, 2002). Catrine engaged in participating observations while collecting data from the exhibition discussion. This was helpful when trying to understand children’s experience of well-being and lack thereof, as Catrine emerged into the children’s lifeworlds while they were reflecting over their own and other’s lived experiences. In face-to-face meetings a change in perspective can take place, seeing the lifeworld as the children do (Bengtsson, 1999). This change of perspective is considered to be an ideal situation in phenomenological lifeworld research (Bengtsson, 1999).

Connected to method we reflected on two more questions: ‘What can we do to make children feel comfortable and safe in sharing their lived experience?’ ‘How can we try to make the research process empowering for the children?’ We experienced bringing the openness questions to the level of methodology as one of the biggest challenges, as we needed to balance the responsibilities of being a prepared and organized researcher while at the same time leaving room for the children. In reference to the UK Children Act, Coyne (1998) describes the challenging effort of trying to strike a balance between the need to recognize the child as an independent person and so ensuring that the child’s views are fully taken into account, and the risk of casting a burden on the child of solving problems which should be dealt with by the adult. To overcome this we made a framework for the research project where we took the responsibilities of leadership without making key decisions on our own but leaving room for the children’s lived experiences to be the content. Leaving some of the control to the children and viewing them as partners was a bit like walking without a map, but we were confident that the children would draw the map for us. The methodological framework started taking shape at the very first meeting, with the children talking about free participation and having an alternative plan if someone did not want to join, as well as discussing confidentiality and anonymity. Catrine, who spent time with the children, promised confidentiality and said that the children had the right to influence the content of the well-being activities.

Morrow and Richards (1996) warns that ‘adult researchers must be aware that they have the power to interpret data in any way that they please’ (p. 103). This is echoed by Davis (1998) who raises the concern of researchers not being aware of their professional and personal preconceptions, and suggests that reflective inquiry is one way to overcome this problem. Morrow and Richards (1996) adds that ‘children, as a powerless group in society, are not in a position to challenge the way in which research findings about them are presented’ (p. 102). With this in mind we decided to involve the children in the process continuously, keeping an open dialogue and reflecting over their contributions. Part of the framework was letting the children define the concept of well-being with their own words. We built the health promotion work on their definitions, as the drawings were based on their words. They also had the freedom to choose the words they liked as well as work in teams or individually, to make the best work possible. Our non-controlling approach left decisions to the children, and asked them to take part of the responsibility. Catrine tried to make the openness explicit by telling the children that the goal was to understand what they had experienced, stressing that there was no right or wrong – just different experiences. Showing the drawings at the exhibition and hosting a discussion whereby the children got to interpret others’ drawings reinforced the openness to their thoughts and ideas.

It became evident that openness is about respecting children. Morrow and Richards (1996) argue that it is important not to take children for granted or give them provisional status but meet them with respect, underlining that ‘respect needs to become a methodological technique in itself’ (p. 100). According to UNICEF’s Right Respecting School there is a link between respect and
health (UNICEF, 2007). There are arguments for engaging children even further in the research process, involving them in the data collection itself (Matthews, Limb, & Taylor, 1998) as well as interpreting their own data (Morrow & Richards, 1996). Making room for the children’s agenda and encouraging children to do the asking and talking in a group can be seen as another way to empower children (Matthews et al., 1998). Viewing children as partners and thanking them for taking part in the discussions is important, as well as sharing the fact that without their assistance there would be no research project (Matthews et al., 1998).

Alard (1996) argues that acting as an advocate, helping children to verbalize their opinions, helps the empowering process. Booth et al. (1991) concluded that ‘power can be healthy’ (p. 31) and this power enables human beings to actively participate in their own health. Ghaye and Ghaye (1998) also describe empowerment as enabling and they suggest that empowering teachers can be done through reflection-on-practice. We suggest that the enabling within the empowerment process with the children we met was not a question of who was empowering who, but rather the reciprocal character of the reflection process itself. Making possible a reflective process together with the children about their lived experience, letting their voices be heard can in itself be empowering, although empowerment is much more complex than just ‘giving a voice’ (Ghaye, 2005). Putting these thoughts together there would be a connection between reflection, empowerment and health. If reflection aids the empowerment process, which in turn adds to the experience of health and well-being, the children taking part in this study were offered a healthy research process. The metaphor of friendship as an extra parachute could be compared with having extra social security. How can we help children pack that extra parachute with health promotion activities?

**Drawing conclusions: a reflective conversation**

There is a value in inviting others (participants, professionals in the studied field and/or peers) to the research process, to receive feedback on works in progress, which according to Bauer and Orbe (2001) also adds to the trustworthiness of the study. We choose to share the first draft of this article with a critical friend and the feedback resulted in a reflective conversation between the two of us. The following is a summary of that conversation; it will be the end of this article and hopefully also a starting point for continued discussions about how to appreciate schoolchildren’s lived experience, guiding them, involving them and empowering them to create health promotion activities.

Kerstin: When I reread our article with the feedback in mind, I wondered what it means to be listened to.

Catrine: And I have been thinking about how far we did what we intended to do when trying to meet the children in the class with openness. To listen I guess is one way to be open.

Kerstin: Yes, and there is more to the listening act as I believe it is right then when you put your thoughts into words and someone else is there to hear them, that will affect your health in a good way.

Catrine: But how do you listen to help increase someone’s experience of well-being?

Kerstin: I think that by focusing and paying attention to the schoolchildren’s needs, interests, state of well-being, as well as their expressions, you listen with what I would call ‘a sensitive ear’.

Catrine: And if we as researchers and the classroom teacher involved in the study indeed had ‘a sensitive ear’ in the interaction with the children we began to build a ground for mutual exchange. But it’s a little scary to go in the classroom with no plan of action other than listening, isn’t it?

Kerstin: Remember though how we met all the parents and said that our aim was to describe and understand their children’s experiences of health and well-being?

Catrine: Yes I do, and we did say to them just like we told the children that the schoolchildren are the main focus and therefore the well-being activities will be based on their participation. That’s openness right?

Kerstin: Yes but there is also a need to be open in each step of the research process.

Catrine: Like when the children got to define the words and then draw symbols?
Kerstin: That’s where the drawings come in. You can let the children draw pictures, collect them and analyze them but with the exhibition we added something important, a space for the children to tell their story …

Catrine: … while the rest of the class was listening and in a sense helped to carry the child’s story, helped to share the joy or to ease the pain.

Kerstin: They were supported to talk in an active listening climate and they were also able to receive their own feedback by hearing themselves speak and also understand themselves better through the others’ responses.

Catrine: The exhibit included not only feedback on the spoken word but the rest of the group gave their thoughts on what they saw in the drawings, ‘a picture is like a thousand words’.

Kerstin: That’s when the untold became visible and turned into spoken words by others.

Catrine: So who are we in this process? Are we researchers, friends, the children’s advocates?

Kerstin: I have played a different role than you Catrine. I have been a representative from the university meeting the teacher and the parents to show the dignity of the study. You on the other hand have been more like a facilitator, a guide or an enabler for the children and maybe a mentor or a coach for the classroom teacher.

Catrine: I agree but what would best show that ‘alongsideness’ that I have hoped to achieve?

Kerstin: And not only making the ‘alongsideness’ explicit but what would also best show the empowering aspect, which is adding to the sense of well-being?

We received these comments in the review process ‘You ask the question, “How can we strive to keep an openness to the children’s life worlds?” In what ways was this put under pressure? How successful were you in doing this?” and ‘We felt a key sentence was spoken by Kerstin who said, “there is also a need to be open in each step of the process”’. What are your more detailed reflections on this please?’ Our further thoughts on this are that being open is to begin with not easy, even though we constantly have reflected on how far we succeeded to be open to the children’s thoughts and experiences. We believe that a genuine interest to listen to children is a prerequisite for openness, as well as to be able to communicate an I-hear-you-and-appreciate-you message back to them. However challenging there is a need to create time to reflect together with the children, since we are convinced that it is in the human interaction we grow, learn and better understand ourselves and others. This we tried to do as the classroom teacher asked the children to reflect on the process individually and in groups after each project session, using both written and oral communication. Catrine and the classroom teacher wrote reflections individually and discussed these either in a face-to-face meeting, via mail or by phone. The children’s comments after the first session made us realize that we were rushing them with our excitement and at one point a child described not feeling comfortable choosing even though we said ‘you can choose’. Maybe this can be avoided by asking questions like, ‘Are you feeling comfortable with the pace?’ and ‘We are saying you are free to choose, how can we make you feel comfortable to do that?’

Looking back at the research process together with the children we can say that we were open enough to make the children feel comfortable in sharing their lived experience as we were open to their positive comments as well as their critique and responded to both. The openness was an evolving process guided by reflection, sharing thoughts and listening with a ‘sensitive ear’. Another challenge though is documentation: how can the openness be put on the page so that others can be enlightened and learn from that?

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