


# Children's Pictures of a Good and Desirable Meal in Kindergarten — A Participatory Visual Approach

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*In kindergarten, meals are framed and regulated by the adults and ideas within the institution. However, by inviting children to visualise their ideas, they can be included when trying to understand as well as develop the meals. The purpose was to explore children's pictures of good and desirable meals in kindergarten by using a visual, participatory approach together with children four to six years. The children related to various aspects of the meal, emphasising the importance of food, table artefacts and context, defined as platescape, tablescape and roomscape. The result further highlighted the complexity of listening to the plurality of children's voices. © 2019 The Authors. Children & Society published by National Children's Bureau and John Wiley & Sons Ltd*

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## Introduction

Most children aged one to six years old living in the Nordic countries spend a large part of their day in day-care institutions (Christensen and Prout, 2005). Consequently, kindergarten is an important arena where young children, on a more or less daily basis, eat together with other children. This implies that meals also become central in socialising children into 'proper' food behaviour (Wesslén and others, 2002). In school, as well as in kindergarten, children learn about food and form attitudes towards food (Atik and Ertekin, 2013). It is estimated that between the ages of two and three years, children start to categorise and talk about different kinds of food, a competence which is further generalised and developed around three to four years of age (Lafraire and others, 2016). Children as young as three years also start to form a nutritional awareness, seen in their ability to define food as healthy and food that makes you grow (Anliker and others, 1990; Tatlow-Golden and others, 2013). Research findings clearly point to the fact that young children know a lot about food and eating (Schultz and Danford, 2016), but also that they prefer to talk and tell stories about their favourite food (Wesslén and others, 2002).

Based on a post-modern view of children, the child is seen as an active individual rather than a passive object (Qvortrup and others, 1994), which also implies that children have a right to be listened to and be involved in decisions that concern them in everyday life (Johansson and others, 2009). In this sense, children's actions can shape as well as change social life (Christensen and Prout, 2005). This view, described as part of a paradigm shift (James and others, 1998), symbolises a development where children are seen as competent individuals and experts on their own lives with needs, ideas and thoughts that have to be taken into account (Clark, 2010). This has also been clearly stated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989), and especially in articles 12 and 13 where the child's right to express his or her views and have freedom of choice regarding form of expression is emphasised. In 2006, this was further reinforced through General

Comment 7, which emphasises the importance of respecting the views and feelings of the youngest children (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2006). Children's right to express their views in relation to food and meals has also been highlighted in various national documents (see e.g. Ministry for Children and Social Affairs Denmark, 2018; National Food Agency Sweden, 2018) focusing on kindergarten and school.

However, despite an increase in research and development initiatives during the past 10–15 years related to food, focusing on participation of children and listening to their voices (see e.g. Brembeck and others, 2013; Dryden and others, 2009; Johansson and others, 2009), there still seems to be a lack of knowledge about how young children perceive and experience food and meals in their everyday lives (Bruselius-Jensen, 2014), including in a kindergarten setting. Moreover, the question remains as to how young children can be listened to regarding experiences and thoughts about food and meals and how they can be involved in their everyday meals. Previous research has emphasised the problems of relying solely on verbal communication, especially in relation to young children, and the positive aspects of using and combining different kinds of creative and visual methods (Brembeck and others, 2013; Clark, 2010; O'Connell, 2013; Wills and others, 2016). As has been pointed at, there are essential ethical arguments for listening to and including children's voices in research as well as practice, however there are also major knowledge gains in working with methods that aim at strengthening insight into children's perspectives based on the conviction that children are the experts on their own lives (Clark, 2010) also in relation to food and eating (Bergström and others, 2010). The purpose of this study was to further explore young children's pictures of a good and desirable meal in kindergarten by using a visual, participatory approach. Moreover, the research included questions about how to listen to young children's voices and what the methodological challenges might be in applying this kind of approach.

### **Foodscape(s) — a concept for exploring meals in kindergarten**

In the Nordic countries, both Sweden and Finland have long traditions of serving hot meals free of charge for children in school and kindergarten (Person Osowski and others, 2012). Even though there are great variations across the country as well as between different age groups, the majority of the children in Denmark are not served lunch in kindergarten and therefore take their own packed meal from home (Glavind and Pade, 2017). However, during the past ten years, the municipality of Copenhagen has, as a result of political decisions, made major changes in order to establish meal orders where meals are served to children on a daily basis, including breakfast, lunch and snacks. As a result, 94 per cent of all children in day-care facilities (0–6 years) in the municipality of Copenhagen are served lunch daily (Copenhagen House of Food, 2018).

In trying to understand the meal in a kindergarten setting, the concept of *foodscape* has proven to be useful. This concept has been used when emphasising the context rather than the food itself, as well as the interaction between food, place and people (Persson Osowski and others, 2012). Foodscape has been defined as 'the places and contexts where children eat and come into contact with food, and the meanings and associations connected to them' (Johansson and others, 2009, 30). Kindergarten is an institutional meal setting with special conditions, which is also expressed in the concept 'kindergartenscape' (Mikkelsen, 2011, 215).

Brembeck and others (2013) described how children related to various kinds of scapes in their everyday life, including taste and the importance of the food itself, routines, people, things, commerce, child (rather than adult) and health. In trying to elaborate on the concept of foodscape, Sobal and Wansink (2007) used the terms *kitchenscape*, *tablescape* and *platescape* together with foodscape to highlight how context at various levels might have an impact on food behaviour as well as food choice. These microscale scapes are discussed

based on the fact that places and objects influence food behaviour, but also on how people relate to, think about and make sense of food and meals. However, these might also be used as a framework for understanding how people, and in this study young children in kindergarten, focus on and make sense of different aspects of their meals.

### **Creative and visual methods for listening to children's voice(s)**

The need to use special methods to explore and understand children's experiences, thoughts and ideas about food and meals might be questioned. Even though there are many similarities when conducting research with children and adults, some differences need to be addressed, especially those related to ability and power (Horgan, 2017; Phelan and Kinsella, 2013; Punch, 2002). In trying to understand, as well as include the perspectives of young children, various creative and visual research methods have been used, aiming at providing the participants with tools to communicate and express thoughts and ideas other than through verbal speech only (Eldén, 2012; Fargas-Malet and others, 2010; Hilppö and others, 2017; O'Connell, 2013). As part of the cultural turn in the 1960s, the use of visual methods within the social sciences expanded, leading to greater interest in the social and cultural dimensions of visual representations (Pink, 2013). However, during the last decade, there has been a significant increase in the use of and interest in visual research methods in research with and by children (Schnettler, 2013). Visual methods have been considered especially useful when studying the taken-for-granted aspects of daily life (Harper, 2002; Wills and others, 2016), relevant when exploring food and eating in everyday life (O'Connell, 2013). Visual methods might create participation, especially among younger children, and they can provide the researcher with more hands-on tools (Pimlott-Wilson, 2012) facilitating the interaction between adults and children and in the sharing of experiences (Hilppö and others, 2017).

Creative and visual methods might include the use of photographs (Harper, 2002; O'Connell, 2013), videos and films, but also drama, role-play, games, toys and play (Matheson and others, 2002; Pimlott-Wilson, 2012). Moreover, drawing and painting have been used to understand children's views and experiences (Brembeck and others, 2013; Bruselius-Jensen, 2014). Drawing has the possibility of providing insight into the experienced lives of the children (Dryden and others, 2009; Eldén, 2012; Hilppö and others, 2017), letting them express their views and perspectives in a more imaginative and playful way. A picture or a drawing can, as Eldén (2012) argues, create a platform for reflecting on a particular phenomenon, and can also make us "listen" more carefully to research participants' experiences (...) (Power, 2000, 18). However, visual and creative methods do not necessarily provide us with a more 'authentic' view of children's experiences (Lomax, 2012; O'Connell, 2013). Instead, the visual represents the world in one specific way and it adds a further dimension to the data than if it consisted only of verbal conversation (Pimlott-Wilson, 2012; Power, 2000). Importantly, however, by letting the children draw, paint and/or to use pictures, they are provided with tools to tell their story (Banister and Booth, 2005).

### **Material and methods**

This study was part of the larger project 'Strategies for developing and improving the public meal for special consumer groups — methods and approaches for user involvement' with the main purpose of learning more about methods and strategies for involving and 'giving voice' to different groups of consumers in understanding, developing and improving the public (institutional) meal. The study was conducted together with the Copenhagen House of Food in Denmark and in close connection with their meal development initiatives. A participatory, visual approach was used to explore and include young children's experiences, thoughts and ideas of a good and desirable meal in kindergarten.

The study was conducted in a public kindergarten in the City of Copenhagen, Denmark that had a specific interest in improving the meals served to the children. After nursery, which defines childcare institutions for children up to three years of age, most children in Denmark attend kindergarten from three years until starting school (Bertram and Pascal, 2016). The kindergarten in the study was part of a so-called integrated centre for 80 children, with a nursery for 36 children and a kindergarten for 44 children. In total, 21 children in kindergarten, 13 girls and 8 boys, aged four to six years and all born in Denmark, participated in the study. The food was prepared and cooked for the children in a local kitchen, and lunch was served every day as were snacks in the morning and afternoon. Breakfast was served for those children who started early in the morning.

### *Data collection*

The study comprised *three phases*; however, the main focus of this paper is on the second phase. In the initial phase, *observations* were conducted to get to know the children and gain insight into the meal procedures, primarily before, during and after lunch. These initial observations facilitated the relationship with the children in the second phase consisting of a *drawing and painting exercise followed by focus groups*. In the exercise, the children worked in groups of two to three and were instructed to think about the meal as the food and drink provided, and also what should be on the tables and in the room where eating was taking place. In addition to the researcher, one pedagogue passively joined the exercise.

The children sat together in a separate play room at a table on which there was a large piece of paper symbolising the room in the kindergarten where they also had their meals. The walls, windows and doors had been drawn on the paper to help the children. To further facilitate the exercise for the children (due to their age) and to try to make it as real as possible, pre-cut pictures of tables were used and the children were requested to put these where the tables were when they ate. In addition, the children had access to pencils, paint and paintbrushes and they were also supplied with numerous pre-cut pictures, representing furniture and interior artefacts such as tables, chairs and porcelain, as well as food items and beverages. These aimed at giving the children the possibility to express their views in different ways. The use of pre-cut pictures in making the pictures also implied that there were elements of photo-elicitation (Harper, 2002; O'Connell, 2013) in the exercise, where the pre-cut pictures worked as 'triggers' for asking questions, for example about why they chose one picture and not another. Importantly, during the exercise, the researcher also asked the children questions about what they drew and painted.

When two groups had completed their pictures, *focus groups* were conducted with these children. In total, three focus groups were conducted with four to six children in each group. Three of the exercises were not followed by a focus group due to other scheduled activities at the preschool. A focus group is considered useful when seeking to gain insight into the experiences and thoughts of the participants and in encouraging people to express their ideas collectively. Moreover, when conducting focus groups with younger children it is recommended that elements of play, fun and creativity are included and that various artefacts are used (Clark, 2005). During the focus groups, the children sat on the floor when they were talking about what they had created and what was important for a meal to be good. Based on this, they also talked about how they would like the meal in kindergarten to be. The children commented on each other's pictures and why they thought a certain table or environment symbolised a good and desirable meal for them. The exercise lasted approximately 30–40 minutes per group and the focus groups lasted about 20 minutes.

As part of the overall project's ambition to develop and improve the meals in kindergarten using a participatory approach, *the last phase* aimed at implementing some of the children's

ideas and thoughts about what constitutes a good and desirable meal. These activities should be based on the children's pictures, and how they had talked about their preferences and desires, aiming to put ideas into practice.

### *Ethical considerations*

Several ethical considerations have to be made when including young children in research and development projects (Banister and Booth, 2005; Fargas-Malet and others, 2010; Phelan and Kinsella, 2013). Guidelines from the Swedish Research Council (2017) and the Danish Data Protection Agency were followed during the research process, and the overall project was approved by the regional ethics review board in Lund, Sweden (2016/698).

### *Analysis*

When conducting qualitative research, the analytical process starts already in the field and is considered to be an ongoing, iterative process where constant reading and reviews take place. Both the exercises and the focus groups were video-recorded and then transcribed, involving a translation from Danish to Swedish and then to English. The transcripts included not only what the children talked about, but also comment about the pictures made and whether the children collaborated in any way and the emotions they expressed. The notes made during the observations were primarily used to gain a pre-understanding of the field; they have played only a minor role in the final analysis.

The transcripts were thoroughly read several times in order to find and mark central aspects related to the aim of the study and the questions in focus. The transcripts were also read through while at the same time focusing on the pictures, following what the children talked about by simultaneously looking at their pictures. With inspiration from thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), the initial reading and coding process was followed by a process whereby the codes were ordered, redefined and thereafter put together to create central themes. Three central themes relating to the children's perceptions of a good and desirable meal in kindergarten were finally identified: 'A good meal is good food', 'The importance of table artefacts' and 'Playful meals'.

In the analysis, the verbal material and the children's *talk about* their pictures provided the main data for interpretation. Previous research has also shown that children's talk about pictures can give more than a formal, visual analysis of the pictures themselves as they can help us understand their meanings (Clark, 2010; Eldén, 2012). In the presentation of the result, the names of the participants have been changed to ensure anonymity.

## **Results**

### *A good meal is good food*

The pictures created by the children often suggested that the food and drink were the most important aspects in defining good and desirable meals in kindergarten. This was especially apparent during the focus groups where the children were encouraged to talk about what they thought about their own pictures as well as the other group's picture.

Interviewer: Why do you think that (table) is the best?

Mikael: Because it has pizza and water.

Two girls in another focus group also highlighted that the food and drink served was especially important in a good meal.

Interviewer: Why do you choose that table?

Line: Because there is juice and pizza, and a glass with juice.

When Niels and Jette were asked what they thought made a good meal they both came up with their favourite dish.

Niels: I know something, it's Spaghetti Bolognese.

Jette: Is it your favourite dish?

Niels nods with a happy face.

Jette: Mine too.

When talking about the food, rice pudding was repeatedly mentioned as a symbol of good food and was important in defining what a good meal was like. This was something considered desirable by most of the children and several children also drew rice pudding.

Interviewer: What is the best thing with that (table)?

Lotte: The food

Interviewer: And what is best with the other?

Petter: The rice pudding.

Several of them acknowledged that rice pudding was associated with Christmas, but even though it was not Christmas time when the study was conducted, many children anyway drew rice pudding. They also talked about what should be on top of the rice pudding, such as cinnamon, sugar, butter and apple, in order to create a good rice pudding. Rice pudding was further connected to something nice and cosy. During the focus group, Mikael pointed at one of the tables on the paper when he was describing what he had made.

Mikael: (...) And then I have made a nice, cosy table with rice pudding, and candles and a spoon and also a pat of butter and some water.

In another focus group, the children also tried to put into words why rice pudding was so good.

Line: That there is cinnamon and sugar on top.

Annika: And butter.

Interviewer: When do you eat rice pudding?

When it is Christmas, all the children answer.

(...)

Interviewer: Why is rice pudding so good?

Annika: It is something that you look forward to. It would be boring if you were going to eat rice pudding all the time.

Rice pudding, being a strong representative for good food among the children, was connected to joy, hope and anticipation, showing the central role of symbolism in food among the young children. The children's statements were not saying that they would like to eat rice pudding all the time, instead, they associated the dish with positive emotions and joy (Figure 1).



Figure 1. An example of a drawing where the main focus was on the food. In the top right corner, there is a table with five portions of rice pudding with cinnamon. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

### *The importance of table artefacts*

When defining a good meal, the table artefacts were also recurrent in the children's pictures and in how they talked about the importance of the way the tables were set. Various table decorations were connected to something that was perceived as good, but also to something nice and cosy. Several symbols of 'hygge' (Danish word meaning 'nice and cosy') were used, such as tablecloths, flowers and candles. Many children talked about the decoration as something that created a festive atmosphere beyond the everyday uniformity of eating and drinking in kindergarten. Some of the table artefacts used were familiar and spoken about as things they had at home, but also used on special occasions in kindergarten.

Beatrice: Yes, when we have a party, and when we have a party table.

(...)

Interviewer: Why should there be a tablecloth?

Disa: Because then it's nice.

Flowers were also often used in the children's pictures and these were described as something nice to have on the table when eating.

Interviewer: What would you like to have in order to have a nice meal?

Katrine: Maybe a plate. And flowers.

(...)

Mikael: Maybe a vase if there is one (note: he looks among the pre-cut pictures).

It was not only tablecloths and flowers that were used as table decorations to create a good meal in kindergarten, but also candles and lamps. These artefacts were talked about as

being perceived as nice and cosy, and were mainly used on so-called special occasions (Figure 2).

Interviewer: When do you have flowers and candles on the tables?

Maja: When we eat together and when it is Christmas.

Interviewer: Is that during special festive occasions?

Stine: Yes.

However, even though these table artefacts were mainly spoken about as something that contributed to a good meal, making it nice, cosy and festive, they were also referred to in terms of their more *practical functions*. For example, two children talked about the importance of placing the flower under the table because there it is dry and sheltered. The use of a cloth on the table could also be motivated with their practical functions.

Henrik: There should be a cloth on the table.

Interviewer: Why do you think there should be a cloth on the table?

Henrik: I just think so.

Mette: Because otherwise you spill on the clean, nice table.

Moreover, the extra light from a lamp was talked about based on its more practical functions, also mixing different contexts and times in their thoughts and ideas.

Niels: So you can see properly. So if you are old you can see properly.

Interviewer: Are you old then?

Niels: No, but when I'm getting old.



Figure 2. This picture exemplifies a focus on the table artefacts, using candles, flowers, tablecloths and carpets to illustrate a good meal. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



*Playful meals*

Elements of play and fun were also present in the children's pictures and imaginative voices were heard. Most often these voices articulated aspects related to the room and the physical context. Different colours were used, for example, on the walls and on the floor, but the food itself was also given colours, shapes and contours that differed from reality. This could result in the rice pudding being blue or the pizza purple.

Emma: I have made a purple pizza with cucumber and blackberry.

There were several examples of how play and imagination were involved in the children's visualisations. For example, Jacob drew a monkey at one of the tables, which he later described was a real monkey that also needed food. Victor wanted a chair that looked like a giraffe and Trine painted butterflies at her table. Jette drew a pistol, however, she later clarified that it was a water pistol for hot summer days. Different contexts and situations were mixed together, as in Henrik's drawing of an indoor playground.

Henrik: Shouldn't we paint a playground?

Interviewer: A playground? Where should that be?

Henrik: It should be here (note: he pointed at the paper)

Mette starts talking about how many slides they have outdoors.  
(...)

Interviewer: Would you like a slide in here?

Henrik nods firmly.

Shortly after, Henrik exclaimed that he had now made a slide around one of the tables. Later, he talked about having grass inside and, after a while, Mette also became increasingly inspired by the playful elements in the picture.

Mette: I am just making a little shortcut here (note: she paints a line around one of the tables)

Interviewer: A shortcut to where?

Mette: To Henrik's table and to my table and to Dea's table (note: she draws a line to all the tables)

Interviewer: So you can walk around?

Mette: Yes

Mette proudly showed the path she had made and how easily they could move between the tables. Henrik and Mette's playful picture showed how they wanted the room to mirror not only fantasy and imagination, but may also be seen as a symbol of the joy of being outdoors, and eating outside. When they presented their picture during the focus group, they talked enthusiastically about their indoor garden with water, grass and paths also contributing to a good meal (Figure 3).

As with the use of various table artefacts, there were also elements of practical thinking in designing the room where the meals took place. For example, one boy painted a blue colour under one of the tables and he explained that this was newspapers, in case someone spilt the food. For the same reason, another girl drew dots on one of the tables which was said to be a fence preventing the food from falling on the floor. Playful meals were about being

imaginative, integrating different contexts when talking about good and desirable meals. Niels started to paint the floor white, however after a while he began to paint over the white with black. When asked what the black was he answered (Figure 4).

Niels: When it's dirty it's black.

Interviewer: Do you like it when it's dirty?

Niels: Yes, a little, then you don't have to be inside, because I don't like being inside, I'd rather be outside. That's why I'm painting it dirty.

(...)

Interviewer: Do you like to eat outside as well?

Niels: Yes, I like to eat outside.

Interviewer: What's nice about eating outside?

Niels: Then you don't have to be inside and sit at a table and wait. Sometimes you have to wait a long time.

In understanding the children's thoughts and ideas of a good and desirable meal in kindergarten, it is crucial to listen to their many voices, some of which are easily heard by looking at their visual presentations, while others need to be further explained in order to grasp their meanings, using the pictures as an important communication tool.



Figure 3. An example of the focus on the environment and the room where the meal is taking place. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]



Figure 4. The picture by the boy who painted a black floor in the middle as a symbol of his desire to be outdoors. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

### *Improving foodscape*

As a result of the children's pictures, the pedagogues, together with the children, started to make changes in the meal environment in the kindergarten, focusing on the table artefacts and decorations that were used during the meals. The children made flowers out of yarn that were put into vases, there were candles on the tables, and Danish flags were made from paper and put on the walls. In this way, the children could also see the connection between what they had made and talked about, and what was then a real and practical result. The pedagogues planned on involving the children in decorations for meals, and to use Fridays as the day when the children's decorations were used and new decorations were made. This implementation resulted in the children being part of a process of change, and the pictures worked as an inspiration for continuing developing the meal environment.

### **Discussion**

The visual method approach used in the study was considered to be a suitable way of listening to, as well as including young children's experiences, thoughts and ideas of a good and desirable meal in kindergarten. In their visualisations, the children related to the various foodscapes defined by the microscale scapes: *platescape*, *tablescape* and *roomscape* (Sobal and Wansink, 2007), as well as to some of the scapes identified by Brembeck and others (2013). The children integrated various contextual factors at different levels in their pictures; they also valued and gave meaning to different aspects in the environment when defining a

good meal. Most children focused on the food and drink and, by doing so, related their ideas of a good meal to the notion of *platescape* (Sobal and Wansink, 2007). This implied focusing on the plates, bowls, cups and bottles, as well as the food eaten. The children often mentioned their favourite dish or drink as their immediate answer to what makes a good meal, which also emphasises the notion of *taste* (Brembeck and others, 2013).

Moreover, the children put a lot of effort in how the tables should be set, pointing to the meaning of *tablescape*, as well as the importance of *things* as part of the foodscape (Brembeck and others, 2013). Different artefacts were used such as tablecloths, candles and flowers in order to make the tables nicer, cosier and more festive, symbolising 'the good'. Besides the food and drink on the tables and the table artefacts, the children also made visualisations about how the room should look, including the furniture, light and colour, defined by the *roomscape* (Sobal and Wansink, 2007). Using multiple colours and integrating play and fun into the interior of the room, the children visualised how the room for the meal should also be a room of imagination and fantasy. In this sense, the children created their own platescapes, tablescapes and roomscales when relating their ideas and thoughts of a good and desirable meal. Taken together, these microscale scapes illustrated the kindergarten *meal-scape* from the children's perspectives.

In kindergarten, meals are often framed and regulated by adults and the ideas of the institution. Based on this, the children are both regulated and encapsulated by kindergarten structures. However, by inviting the children to shape, create and visualise their thoughts and ideas of a good and desirable meal, their voices can be raised, heard and given meaning to. Additionally, by doing so, they can also be co-creators of their everyday meals (Bruselius-Jensen, 2014), meaning that the visual method approach can have implications both in research and in practice (Clark, 2010). Listening to children needs to be embedded into practice, creating a 'culture of listening' (Clark, 2005, 500) among professionals within early childhood care. The study design, whereby the children's pictures resulted in changes in the meal environment, illustrated the potential of using visual prompts to involve the children in processes of change. As Horgan (2017) stated, even though power inequality never can be completely erased, the use of visual methods might help building in capacity in children. This potential was also demonstrated by Clark (2007) where young children were involved as active participants in a process of changing the environment in kindergarten.

However, and importantly, listening to the *voices* of children is challenging. The notion of 'an authentic' child voice that should be possible to 'capture' just by using the right set of methods and approaches has been criticised (Eldén, 2012; Lomax, 2012; Spyrou, 2011). This study further points to the importance of being open to the fact that there are multiple voices to listen to, and in the study the children expressed different, parallel voices in their thoughts of a good and desirable meal. Drawing a monkey at the dining table, a purple pizza, or indoor playgrounds, can be seen as expressions of *the playful voice*. This was also addressed in the work by Bruselius-Jensen (2014) where play seemed to be a crucial element in understanding the children's views of a good meal. Previous research has also pointed at children favouring the playful features of food, including food in various colours and shapes (Atik and Ertekin, 2013; Elliot, 2009). In creating a good meal, the importance of table artefacts was recurrently visualised and talked about. However, at the same time, the children expressed a *practical voice* when clarifying the importance of having a tablecloth, so that the table did not become dirty, or napkins in order to be able to dry one's hands. Tablescapes inevitably reflect social norms and values and this practical voice was often closely related to *the voice of the adults and/or institution*, expressed as internalised, institutional rules of what might be a good meal, but also good meal behaviour (e.g. no noise, not spilling, not

shouting, asking nicely for more food, and correct behaviour at the table) (Wesslén and others, 2002). This adult or institutional voice is further related to the concept of interpretive reproduction, implying that children adopt information from the adult world and use it in their own relationships (Persson Osowski and others, 2012). Hansen and others (2016) also highlighted the complexity of kindergarten meals, where the children, on the one hand, should be involved and have a say, but also, on the other hand, where meals are characterised by regulation and normalisation, primarily focusing on societal and institutional ideas of what children should and should not do. This also implies that there is a need to relate to the kindergarten context and how children negotiate with and act within this adult, institutional reality in order to understand their visualisations of the meal.

Listening to young children's voices takes time and engagement, and requires insight into the complexity of voices (Clark, 2005, 2010; Lomax, 2012) as well as how to transform these into practice. Moreover, the importance of situating children's voices has previously been acknowledged (Eldén, 2012; Khoja, 2016), implying that voices need to be understood based on the social and cultural context. This also includes the importance of recognising ethnic and cultural diversity among children in a particular context, which, however, has not been thoroughly investigated in this study based on the participating group of children. Ideas of what is a good meal might differ between cultures, but there are also cultural differences in relation to children's abilities and possibilities to express their views. This study was conducted in a cultural setting where listening to children is part of the democratic view that should pervade the activities in kindergarten (see also Clark, 2010). In contrast, in the study by Khoja (2016), the reluctance of the children in kindergarten in Saudi Arabia to express their views initially surprised the researcher. There is a need to be critical about how, and in what way, children's voices are shaped by the specific social and cultural context, and how voices, as a consequence, are products of the specific context and its social relations (Spyrou, 2011).

In addition, when a researcher entering a new cultural context it requires not only time in the field, but also openness with regard to the use and applicability of the methods. Children participate and engage with methods differently and not all children prefer to draw and paint (Banister and Booth, 2005; Scherer, 2016), implying the importance of being flexible and providing the children with alternative modes of expression. In this study, the children were given the opportunity to use pencils, paint and paintbrushes as well as pre-cut pictures to visualise their thoughts and ideas. However, when choosing a particular set of pictures, there is always a risk that this will impact how the children visualise and think about the meal. The ambition was to balance this with offering a large number of different kinds of pre-cut pictures and motifs. The absence of people in the pre-cut pictures was compensated by asking the children questions such as 'Who is sitting at this table?' and 'Is it important to eat with others?'

In the study, the children tended to mix various contexts, people and social relations in their thoughts and ideas of a good and desirable meal. For example, when being asked who they would rather eat with, the children could reply their families, despite the focus being meals in kindergarten. They also related to their homes when talking about candles as something cosy. This was also found in the study by Clark (2010) where the children often linked their ideas and observations of the environment to their families. The children were also moving between indoors and outdoors, where the drawing of an indoor playground was motivated by the desire to have it more 'outdoor-like' inside the kindergarten. This enjoyment of outdoor activities and play has also been explored in other studies (Clark and Moss, 2005; Dupree and others, 2001). However, this further points at the difficulties for young children to manage, or even care about, the framework set by the researcher. For example,

some children said that they chose to paint with a certain colour because they liked it. There is a continuous need to balance between play and fun, which the methods aspires to, and the research task (see also Pimlott-Wilson, 2012), but also to view children as agents in their responses to the research task, which might result in reluctance or in creating something beyond the research task (Scherer, 2016). However, this further urge for the need to have a continuous dialogue concerning the pictures. In the study, the children's pictures worked as an 'entry-ticket' for talking about and sharing experiences about meals (Sutherland and Young, 2014). Some children were more prone to talk while making their picture, while others were more silent. However, during the focus groups the children described and commented with enthusiasm on the pictures, which further emphasises the importance of including verbal reports as part of the visual approach, in order to understand the meanings attached to the pictures (Clark, 2010; Hilppö and others, 2017; Pimlott-Wilson, 2012).

## Conclusions

In conducting research with young children, we need suitable communication tools and a methodology that fits the participants' level of understanding, knowledge and interest, but without underestimating or undervaluing their abilities. In this study, a participatory visual approach was used to explore young children's experiences, thoughts and ideas regarding meals in kindergarten. The children expressed the importance of cosiness and playfulness in a good meal, while at the same time relating to the practical adult/institutional voice, focusing on rules and regulation of what is considered to be proper table behaviour. The study highlighted the need to be open to the multiplicity, as well as complexity, of voices in children's visualisations of a good and desirable meal in kindergarten, but also that these voices need to be understood in relation to the specific setting and its relations, also defined as the *kindergarten(meal)scape*.

There are not only ethical arguments, based on global as well as national documents stating the rights of the children and their role as active participants, but also several motivations for listening to the voices of children based on them being an important source of knowledge in understanding and developing meals. This makes their perspectives useful both in research and in practice. The study has emphasised the ability of young children to be actors in their own meal situation by engaging them in visually elaborating what is important in a good meal and how they would like the meal to be in kindergarten. Hilppö and others (2017) previously stated that visual methods have primarily been used retrospectively or in relation to aspects in the moment, suggesting that there is an undervalued potential in the use of visual methods for depicting, inspiring or creating future scenarios.

The strength of visual methods lies in their ability to create joyful yet flexible and including platforms for exchanging experiences and ideas between children, as well as between children and adults. They are simple and concrete, yet complex. In relation to food and eating, often seen as the most mundane of social activities, the visual approach helps us see beyond the limitation of words. When approaching young children's experiences and thoughts, this is both encouraging and challenging. By listening to the voices of young children, and the integration of contexts, relations and ideas that are part of these voices, their perspectives can be included in gaining a better understanding of, as well as fundament for, the development and planning of meals in kindergarten.

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