



Article

'What Are We to Each Other?': Relational Participation as Processes of Positioning, Confirming and Manifesting Relationships

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Abstract: It is generally recognized in research that participation is lacking in social work and is essential to improve. This article presents findings from qualitative focus group interviews with children and parents in Denmark with supervised contact (SC) after placement focusing on what participation is for them. Since SC is a context embedded in conflicting perspectives, enabling a sense of participation can be challenging, making SC an interesting case for exploration. The findings show that for both children and parents, participation is about emotionally engaging in, finding, confirming and manifesting their positioning in the relationship, which goes beyond a traditional rights-based understanding. Based on the new empirical knowledge and anchored in the metatheory of agential realism, the article argues for participation as a relational, dynamic and transcendental concept that revolves around three empirical key aspects: positioning, confirming and manifesting, entangled in children's and parents' experiences, emotions and thoughts about 'what are we to each other?'. Children and parents express orientation towards entering relationships, even though these are challenging. Thus, a major point is the need for further research into the relational and emotional processes of participation with awareness of the importance of the specific relationship.

Keywords: children; parents; participation; child welfare and protection; social work; supervised contact



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1. Introduction

Falch-Eriksen et al. (2021) state that children's participation improves the quality of outcomes in social services, yet it is widely understood that children do not feel involved. Their review of 16 articles focusing on the implementation of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) Article 12 shows that professionals' construction of children as vulnerable and in need of protection can limit children from expressing themselves. Moreover, inadequate participation is often accompanied by insufficient information about the process, particularly when the child is in difficult, emotional situations. They stress a need to develop a rights-based practice, where children are seen as participating beings (Jensen et al. 2020) by professionals not only working for children to protect them, but also with children to establish a meaningful relationship and collaboration (Falch-Eriksen et al. 2021).

McCafferty and Garcia's (2023) review of 14 reviews also related to UNCRC Article 12 shows that both children and professionals emphasize relationships as a determinant factor for successful participation. However, the establishment of relationships is challenged and affected by the child's characteristics, professionals' qualities and attitudes towards participation and the quality of the connection in the relationship. They point to a need for

more research on what participation is for children to engage and support them more effectively in expressing their views, which involves understanding the importance of everyday life and tuning in to the intrinsic values of participation (Bessell 2011; Skauge et al. 2021; McCafferty and Garcia 2023).

Supervised contact (SC) between children in placement and their parents is a context where relationships often are tenuous and embedded in conflicting perspectives, and enabling a sense of participation can be challenging, making SC a particularly interesting case for exploring participation. In previous work based on interviews with professionals, we (Nissen and Ravn 2024) suggest an inclination in practice to tranquilize emotional and social conflicts to ensure stability in and around SC, which can unintentionally blur children's and parents' participation. Thus, we point to a need for carving out relational and emotional practices where children's and parents' participation are not necessarily perceived as mutually exclusive. This article contributes knowledge to this need from focus group interviews with children and parents in Denmark with SC focused on the research question: *what is participation for children and parents in and around SC?*

Firstly, the article offers a brief description of the context for SC in DK. It then describes existing research concerning SC and relevant knowledge and research on participation in general. Thereafter I account for agential realism (Barad 2007), which offers a relational ontology as a theoretical basis of the analysis. In continuation of this, data and the methodology will be presented, followed by an analysis focused on the research question (see above). In the analysis, three empirical key aspects of what participation is for children and parents will be unfolded, namely positioning, confirming and manifesting related to the question: 'what are we to each other?'. Finally, I will discuss the concluding findings and need for further research.

2. Supervised Contact in Denmark

Child protection approaches to the participation of children and parents are highly dependent on the context (Healy and Darlington 2009). In Denmark, as in the Scandinavian countries, a family service orientation has dominated (Gilbert et al. 2011). However, recent legal reforms have instigated a dual child protection and child focus orientation, where the parents' interests and rights tend to be subordinated the rights and the best interest of the child (Nissen et al. 2023; Nissen and Ravn 2024). This is also the case regarding the legal conditions for SC.

In Denmark, children in placement have the right to maintain contact and a relationship with their parents. This complies with the UNCRC, which states that children have the right to "maintain a personal relationship with their parents on a regular basis except if it is contrary to the child's best interests" (Article 9). The authorities organize the extent, place and content of SC based on an assessment of the child's best interest and the purpose of the placement. The decision must give weight to the child's opportunity to develop or maintain relationships as well as the child's wishes. In the Child's Act, which came into force in January 2024, the child gained the right to request that contact with the parents be supported and eventually suspended for a period of up to 8 weeks (§ 103, 2). This right is exceptional, in that it exceeds what is legally considered a minimum of contact; SC less than once a month is considered equivalent to interrupting SC.

The authorities can also decide that the contact is either monitored (BL § 105) due to the risk of abuse or supported (BL § 104) due to a need for helping the parents in the contact, the latter with the parent's consent. In practice, supported and monitored contact differ with the latter being supervised more intensively and sometimes by more than one supervisor. I refer to both forms of contact as SC because both involve the presence of a

professional, which permeates the contact by a sense of supervision, and both are restricted in time and space.

3. Existing Research on Participation in SC and Child Welfare in General

International research shows that contact between children in placement and their parents is permeated by legal and psychological complexity as well as strong normative expectations, conflicts and emotions among the different actors. There is a lack of knowledge about how to ensure that contact supports positive and sustainable relationships between children and parents (Bullen et al. 2015, 2017; Taplin et al. 2015, 2021; Salas et al. 2021). Huseby-Lie's (2024) review of 37 studies shows that children in placement have multiple perspectives on contact with their parents. The review points to a need for facilitating contact that contributes to positive relationships. However, research (Fitzgerald and Graham 2011; Norsk Fosterhjemsforening 2024) shows that far from all children feel involved in contact and that information about contact is targeted to adults and focused on responsibilities and procedures rather than relationships and rights (Black et al. 2023).

Internationally, the conceptualization of participation is rooted in Arnstein (1969) and Hart (1992) seeing participation as an individual accomplishment possible to achieve at different levels. Later, Shier (2001) and Lundy (2007) added a more multidimensional perspective also focusing on how to support participation. In a Danish context, Andersen et al.'s model for differentiated participation outlines that participatory processes related to achieving ownership and influence are sensitive to communication, the view of human nature and the perception of social work (Andersen et al. 2017; Andersen and Brok 2021). Significant for these conceptualizations is that they maintain an individualistic rather than a relational perspective on participation.

This is confirmed by Skauge et al.'s (2021) review of 44 articles focused on conceptualizations of child participation in child welfare research. Here, a consensus thinking predominately representing a rights-focused goal for collaboration is uncovered, which they suggest can turn participation into a technical matter implying the same thing regardless of the child's unique characteristics. They argue for developing a model for participation with the process as a goal to capture how children's views are fluctuating, and to prevent reducing participation to children's presence and verbal expression in single events.

McTavish et al. (2022) covers 25 articles in their meta-synthesis exploring foster children's perspectives on participation in child welfare processes, which is relevant as most children with SC are placed in foster care. Their research shows that children highlight the quality of the relationships in terms of the adult's availability, confidentiality and inclusivity, but also intrinsic values such as establishing a connection, understanding and sense of belonging. In addition, children experience that their own thoughts, feelings and behaviors affect their ability to participate. Consequently, McTavish et al. emphasize the importance of supporting children's emotions e.g., to avoid a sense of having to hide feelings and needs. A major point is that there is no one way of participating as children prefer different passive and active roles.

Healy et al. (2023) explore professionals' perceptions of barriers to contact between children in placement and their parents based on interviews with 27 professionals from providers and authorities. They state that contact improves children's sense of identity, placement stability, and reduces behavioral problems. At the same time, contact affects children and parents emotionally. Especially relevant for this article, a determining barrier to contact was the exclusion of parents in decision-making and a lack of responsiveness to their practical and emotional needs for maintaining contact. The professionals suggest a

relationship-based approach and Healy et al. point to an urgent need for more research on best practices.

In sum, research shows that children lack participation in and around SC though they have perspectives on contact and benefit from participation. There is a need to value but also to go beyond a rights-based individualistic approach to participation as research shows that children strongly emphasize the relational processes of participation, including their thoughts, emotions and behaviors involved. This also highlights the importance of supporting parents' possibilities to participate. Consequently, there is a need for in-depth research on what participation is for children and parents in and around SC focused on the relational aspects. This article responds to this need empirically as well as theoretically by drawing on a relational ontology.

4. Theoretical Approach to the Practices In and Around SC

Karen Barad's theory of agential realism (Barad 2007) is based on quantum physics and feminist theory and offers a performative, relational ontology. The starting point is that neither human nor non-human is without each other, which is why a phenomenon is the smallest unit (Barad 2007, pp. 333–36). The theory contributes as needed (cf. existing research) with a fundamental relational understanding of participation in and around SC. Barad calls the activity, in which something or someone comes into being, an *intra-action* to emphasize how everything is relationally conditioned, and suggests the concept of onto-epistemology where reality, being and epistemic are connected (Barad 2007, p. 33). Intra-actions are seen as performative enactments, where the material and discursive are mutually implicated, which is why Barad refers to practice as material–discursive (Barad 2007, p. 153). Time and space are also produced through the dynamics of intra-action which opens for multiple simultaneous timelines where past–present–future is constantly open and possible for re-working (Barad 2014, p. 182). Positioning is a specific, temporary localization, and agency is not inherent in the human being, but an enactment seen as a “*doing or being of its intra-activity*” (Barad 2007, p. 178). Intra-actions iteratively re-/configure what is possible and impossible through particular agential cuts, and outside the intra-action there is an ontological indeterminacy and thus “*an infinity of possibilities*” (Barad 2012, p. 214).

Barad's agential realism dissolves the substance of and focus on the ongoing intra-action which materializes participation in a material–discursive practice. This enables explorations of what participation is for children and parents (Barad 2007, p. 137; Hammen 2016, p. 41) based on a relational ontology that strengthens intrinsic and processual awareness of mutual relationality as a prerequisite for participation. In this Baradian universe, participation can transcend time and space, thereby enabling a sense of being part of a relationship beyond physical contact and simultaneity in presence. Thus, there is not non-participation, but rather different modes of participation enacted in agential cuts of specific material–discursive intra-actions. An implication for a Baradian approach is an attention to how participation empirically unfolds across time, space, matter and meaning, as these entanglements have agency and iteratively materialize participation in and around SC (Barad 2007, p. 178). Furthermore, it implies a responsibility for investigations of the material–discursive practices that produce differences in participation out of a changing relationality (Barad 2007, p. 93). With this attention, the article explores what participation is for children and parents (cf. research question).

5. The Data and Methodology

The qualitative focus group interviews are a part of my PhD in the collaborative research project SOUL involving Aalborg University and six partners within authorities

and providers of SC (Nissen and Ravn 2024). The overall focus of my PhD is the interplay between participation and social work. In 2025, I will conduct an ethnographic study including participant observation and mobile interviews (Ferguson 2016; Ravn, forthcoming).

Focus group interviews can be perceived as performative conversations (Tanggaard 2024, p. 78) where the participants create knowledge collectively (Nieldel et al. 2019) in accordance with a Baradian relational onto-epistemology (cf. theoretical approach). The framing as a group gives access to a “*thicker moment*” (Barad 2014, p. 169) where children’s and parents’ different performances are threaded through an infinity of entanglements in the ongoing iterative materialization of participation (Juelskjær 2019, p. 69). Bringing people in vulnerable positions together in focus groups entails ethical considerations (Hennessy and Heary 2005, p. 6). I confirmed confidentiality to the participants at the beginning of the focus group. In the end, I debriefed by saying that subsequent reactions to the group could be natural and encouraged the participants to contact me or someone they trust if anything should come up. I provided each with contact information on a note to make information readily available, if the need arose.

I conducted six semi-structured focus groups (n:19); cf. Table 1 below. Based on different parameters (the child’s gender and age, foster or residential care, placement with or without consent, the extent of and the conditions for contact as either supported or monitored), the partners in the SOUL project suggested a pool of 18 anonymized children from their existing SC cases. This was followed by a laboratory process of practical planning where the partners and I sought to achieve the broadest possible variation among the children according to the parameters. Following this, their parents were selected. All the parameters were represented. The children’s age ranged from 9 to 18 years with an average of 12.7 years. There was a predominance of boys, foster care with consent and supported contact. The parent group consisted of two fathers and seven mothers of different ethnicities, with almost a half having multiple children with SC, just under a third with SC for 2–3 years and just over two-thirds for 6–11 years. Due to the variation, the selection provided a basis for gaining a nuanced understanding of what participation is for children and parents.

Table 1. List of focus groups and participants with fictive names.

Target Group	District 1	District 2	District 3	Persons
Children	Aiesha and Oscar (FC1)	Mehmet, Gustav, Viggo and Amina (FC2)	Karl, Sigurd and Berta (FC3)	9
Parents	Husein, Maryam, Kirsten and Birger (FP1)	Sara, Susanne, Linda and Karen (FP2)	Signe and Yasmin (FP3)	10
Total	6 focus groups			19

The intention was to access what participation is for children and parents (cf. research question) as an experience rather than a concept (Skauge et al. 2021) following the notion of participation as *being a part of*. The themes of the interview guide focused on how they experienced being a part of the processes in and around SC (Nissen and Ravn 2024), their reflections on what they could wish for to be different, what were the better or harder parts, and in the end, their advice for peers or those who work with SC. The thematic focus of the interview guide was the same for both children and parents, but the dynamic aspect was adjusted according to the differences of the participants (Kvale 1997, p. 134).

The focus groups lasted 60–90 min including a break if needed. I prioritized time for small talk and mutual introduction of the participants to build trust, and I used tools such as post-its and emoji stickers to facilitate and maintain attention (Hennessy and Heary 2005; Krol et al. 2014). I deployed an informal tone in the facilitation of the groups

and encouraged engagement and nuances (Liamputtong 2011; Halkier 2020) by practicing emergent listening (Davies 2014). In addition, I encouraged the participants to ask questions and comment on each other and emphasized that the interview guide was just a starting point for the conversation. They reacted positively to being in the focus groups, were engaged, curious and related themselves to each other enabling an explorative atmosphere. Several of them asked if the group could meet again, thereby indicating an experience of a safe environment allowing them to be themselves.

I prioritized a strong familiarization with the empirical material and recorded my thoughts right after the focus groups as the analytical work started there (Braun and Clarke 2022). In addition, the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The similarity in how the children and parents talked about and were emotionally engaged in the topic was striking. My immediate impression was that participation was relational to both children and parents. They linked their expressions about being a part of the processes in and around SC to their emotions, thoughts and experiences connected to their positioning as a parent or child in the specific relationship. During the familiarizing process, I generated the inductive question: 'what are we to each other?' to capture the core in children's and parents' expressions about participation. I did not know Barad's universe back then. Subsequently, the metatheory became a way to understand how participation was enacted by children and parents sharing experiences and thoughts about their relationships using both matter and discourse whereby different modes of participation emerged.

Based on agential realism, the conversations in the focus groups are seen as agential cuts of participation in reflexive positionings within the material–discursive practice (Højgaard et al. 2012, p. 75). I systematized the data and generated three initial, empirical themes, namely positioning, confirming and manifesting, which seemed to be significant in what participation was for children and parents (cf. research question). Hereafter, I coded the transcriptions in the themes while maintaining processes of familiarization and enriching how to understand what participation is for children and parents (Järvinen and Mik-Meyer 2017). I worked on renaming in the analytical process and ended with three themes (see below) reflecting aspects of a relational participation conditioned by the boundaries constantly re-/configured within the intra-actions in and around SC.

6. Ethics Statement

The data collection for this article has been reported and approved according to the legal requirements of The Danish Data Protection Agency and ethical requirements of Aalborg University. I have obtained informed oral and written consent from the participants in the focus group interviews. Only researchers associated with the SOUL project and a student assistant who has helped with transcription have access to the interview data, and these are anonymized and do not contain any information that enables identification of persons and child protection cases.

7. Analysis of What Participation Is for Children and Parents In and Around SC

In this section, I present the analysis of what participation is for children and parents in and around SC as material–discursive practices (Barad 2007). Firstly, it becomes clear that the iterative materialization of participation is closely linked to children's and parents' experiences, emotions and thoughts related to the question: 'what are we to each other?'. Secondly, their relationships entangled in the past, present and future reveal a relational participation involving three empirical key aspects: positioning, confirming and manifesting.

7.1. Positioning: Participation as Making and Remaking Sense of Relationships

There is a lot at stake for children and parents when their positioning unfolds as iterative performance in the enactment of participation centered on re-/making sense of the specific relationships (Barad 2014, p. 173). Their expressions revealed emotions of un-/clarity related to the positionings indicating an im-/balance in the relationship entangled in space, time and matter. One example of this is the first excerpt, where Oscar (aged 9) shares his difficulties with understanding why a supervisor is present during the SC:

“The one who’s there to keep an eye on whether dad gets angry, I think it’s nice when he’s there, but I just find it a bit difficult to understand why he’s there (. . .) I think, why is he still here, if my dad isn’t so angry anymore? That’s what I’ve been thinking about; why is it like that? I haven’t seen him [dad] angry since I lived with them. (. . .) Yeah. . . well. . . you could say that my dad is a computer master. He’s good at computers. . . actually. . . you could say that I’ve sat a few times. . . close to the edge of a gamer chair once. . . my dad’s gamer chair, I sat close to the edge, then I fell [before the placement] and then I hit my nose right down on the edge of the table” (Oscar FC1 (condensed)).

The excerpt shows how Oscar does not experience the description of his father as “angry” aligned with his present perception of how his father is when they are together in SC. Due to the lack of alignment, Oscar is wondering and exploring the discrepancy further on in the focus group and ends with sharing his understanding of his father’s positioning based on experiences with the relationships. It becomes clear in the excerpt that participation is entangled with the past. In making sense of the relationships, Oscar uses his experiences to project thoughts and emotions about his present relationship with his father and has the courage to talk about it in the focus group even though it represents a challenging situation. His understanding of participation is relational and material–discursive, embracing both the good part (his father is good at computers) and the hard part (he fell when he was together with his father) and enacts a participation in the relationship reflecting experiences across time and space.

The importance of re-/making sense of the relationship is in line with existing research pointing to a lack of knowledge about the involvement and role of different actors in SC (Bullen et al. 2015). Not only Oscar but also several of the other children and parents expressed a need and courage to talk about challenging emotions along with experiences of not being supported in this, as noted by McTavish et al. (2022) (cf. existing research). In the next excerpt, the mother, Sara, reflects on her positioning in the SC, where she experiences unclarity and a problem of making sense due to contradictory explanations:

“I would like to see him more and have more time and be able to pick him up from kindergarten. Go to activities and things like that. But they have used his diagnosis a few times, where they say, well, he can’t stand it. So that it [the diagnosis] becomes an excuse. (. . .) I’m furious about it, because I mean he should be in a special class. But she says he’s not autistic enough. Then I am told that he is too autistic for me to attend his first day of school” (Sara FP2 (condensed)).

In the excerpt, Sara expresses “furious” emotions about how the practitioners frame and justify the conditions for the SC and her possibility to attend her child’s first day at school. In her experience, the foster parents, the supervisor and the authorities use her child’s diagnosis as an “excuse”, limiting her positioning as a parent participating in the relationship in accordance with her thoughts and dreams. Other parents also experienced simplified, generalized and sometimes even contradictory justifications in the framing of participation in and around SC (e.g., Husein FP1 and Linda FP2). It is notable that Sara’s emotions are directed towards the contradictory articulation of the justification, and not the

conditions themselves. Thus, how the professionals articulate the conditions of SC matters and is entangled in the participants' thoughts and emotions about their positioning in the specific relationships. Agency is an enactment within the space of possibilities that opens in the specific intra-action, where the material–discursive framing of the SC is of great importance in re-/making sense of the participation (Barad 2007, p. 178). Following this, the next excerpt shows an intra-action where another mode of participation and agency arose when the foster parents of the mother Karen's child were to divorce:

“. . . we are so privileged that our son, he's allowed to be with just one person now. And that's just his foster mom. (. . .) We were two very stubborn parents holding on, that he's not going. He's not going to be moved just because the foster parents are going their separate ways. So, we decided to say, either you allow her to be a foster mom alone or you allow the man to be a foster dad alone. If you can't do that, we'll take him home. Because he's not going to an institution for a few months until you find another family for him. Because it will affect our time [in the SC] together. Because he'll act out and have a hard time being in it. Because he has so little to do with us. To do with me. Two hours are not much. A month" (Karen FP2 (condensed)).

In the excerpt, Karen tells about how she thought and acted, when she worried about how the foster parents' divorce would affect her child and her possibilities for participating as a mother in the SC. Karen uses her experiences of the specific relationships and expresses a clarity about the best conditions for her positioning given the limited time and space for participation, and this agential cut enables a power to act. In the next excerpt, Sigurd (aged 14) shares a similar reflexive clarity about his positioning in the relationship with his father, but the intra-action does not enact a similar agency:

"He [dad] doesn't want a supervisor anymore. Apparently, it is him, who can decide that. (. . .) I would rather have a supervisor than just being alone with my dad. Because we never do anything together. With a supervisor your dad can figure out to do something with you. (. . .) When a supervisor was present, we did something all the time. (. . .) But now he just looks at his phone and watches football or something. I just sit. Because I don't have anything to do" (Sigurd FC3 (condensed)).

In the excerpt, Sigurd expresses an imbalance in the present re-/making sense of their mutual positionings in the relationships as his father "*just looks at his phone*" when they are together. Sigurd's experiences of and reflections on "*when a supervisor was present, we did something*" becomes a starting point for thoughts about the participation and for re-/making sense of the relationships. His thoughts about 'what are we to each other?' are not confirmed by his father and a discontinuity emerges in the intra-action, which becomes decisive for their positioning as well as the space and matter of the SC (Højgaard et al. 2012). The excerpt shows that the boundaries of the enactment of participation is not only conditioned by the municipality, but also influenced by the experiences of children and parents and their mutual relationships.

7.2. Confirming: Participation in Relationships as an Emotional Challenge

Emotions appear as an unavoidable part of and affects how participation unfolds materially–discursively across time and space in and around the SC (Barad 2007, p. 234). Children and parents expressed how SC affected them before, during, after and in between the SC due to often emotionally difficult experiences of the relationships such as broken relationships, lack of well-being due to abuse, mental illness, etc. According to them, the different and often sad emotions were not, or to a limited extend, confirmed, leading to discomfort, uncertainty and/or a sense of abandonment connected with a lack of knowledge

and a feeling of being left alone with their emotions. An example of this is the next excerpt, where Karl (aged 11) shares his emotions of sadness and uncertainty during the six months where he did not see his mother:

“I was a little sad inside. It’s not the first time my mother is in prison. I think this is the third time. I told my foster parents. It helped a little. So, I wouldn’t have to go and think about it so much. So, I’m trying to get it a little bit out of my brain. (...) I don’t know why I didn’t see my mom. (...) After 2–3 months I asked, if I could, and we received a paper, where one of my foster parents could sign that I could see her. Then some time passed, before we send it in” (Karl FC3 (condensed)).

The excerpt shows how Karl tries to gain relief from the sad emotions connected to the positioning in a relationship with his mother without seeing her. Karl associates not seeing his mother with periods of waiting for people to give permission and papers to be filled out. Karl has experiences with his mother being in prison, and it does not seem that the imprisonment itself causes discomfort. Yet the waiting time seems to leave Karl in a sort of empty and not confirmed positioning. The entangled emotions in the enactment of participation crosses spaces and materializes in his attempt to get it “*out of my brain*” as a way of coping with the boundaries of his positioning in the relationship. Several of the children and parents mention waiting time for decisions about SC and the placement, often associated with a lack of knowledge (Viggo FC2, Sara FP2, Husein FP1 and Signe FP3). This, along with their expressions of abandonment and sad emotions entangled in their participation, affect the agency of doing and being in the intra-action (Barad 2007, p. 178). In the following excerpt, the mother Yasmin shares an experience of trying to comply with her impression of the municipality’s approach to emotions:

“You can’t show emotions. Sometimes the municipality says something and makes up some things, so I don’t want to be with my girls at all. Because I don’t dare to see them. Once I listened to what the municipality said about emotions and my daughters came to see me, I was just completely neutral. And my big girl, when she saw me, she said: What’s wrong with you, mom? You’re not normal. Why do you look so different? I said to my daughter, I’m really sorry” (Yasmin FP3 (condensed)).

In the excerpt, Yasmin says how she has experienced that hiding her emotions leads to a participation which could not be confirmed by her daughter as it did not reflect the “*normal*” Yasmin. Her effort to comply with what she perceives the municipality “*makes up*” materializes a participation that leads to discomfort and abandonment to an extent where she says: “*I don’t want to be with my girls at all*”. The excerpt shows how experiences and emotions affect the SC and, if not confirmed or supported, can disrupt participation. According to Yasmin, the daughter expresses that she “*look so different*”, indicating a lack of alignment with how the daughter usually experiences her mother in their specific relationship. Later in the focus group, Yasmin shares that she is alone with her emotions after the SC and her expression “*I don’t dare to see them*” shows that these entangled emotions can have a crucial influence on the courage to maintain the relationship. Signe, who participates in the same focus group as Yasmin, offers her perspective on the topic and shows how a different enactment of agency is possible:

“I’ve always felt that the municipality shouldn’t decide if I show emotions to my child. I should be allowed to hug my child. I should be allowed to sit and cuddle when we watch TV. And they know that at the municipality. I don’t give a damn if they say I can’t. (...) It’s because it’s difficult for your child. Your child has been placed and should have no attachment to you. Every child has the right

to see their parents. No matter if you've committed violence to your child or if you've been the most wonderful person in the world. But you can't be so attached to your child that you show emotions. You can't hug your child; you can't do anything. You can't rub their back and say, oh, you're so good or something" (Signe FP3 (condensed)).

The excerpt shows how Signe experiences that the municipality dictates that children and parents with SC "should have no attachment" to each other regardless of whether the parent has "committed violence" or "been the most wonderful person". Signe rejects this kind of relationship by saying that "the municipality shouldn't decide" and insists on confirming her positioning as a mother by showing emotions with hugs and cuddling. Hereby, the enactment of participation is aligned with her thoughts about being a mother and what she thinks is every child's right, enabling a positioning oriented towards maintaining an emotional relationship with her child.

7.3. Manifesting: Participation as a Way of Doing and Being the Relationships

Children and parents are oriented towards participation. Their relational, material–discursive participation becomes a potential in manifesting 'what are we to each other?' despite the conditional and emotional dimensions of SC (Barad 2007, p. 334). The children and parents pointed to decisions concerning the SC and more random circumstances as conditions affecting their participation and everyday life. Despite this, they simultaneously talked about tuning in and made suggestions for manifesting their positioning and participation in the specific relationships. Hereby, different modes of participation emerged as ways of being and doing relationships, in some cases transcending the time and physical space of SC, showing children's and parents' motivation for relationships. The latter is exemplified by the next excerpt where Mehmet (aged 17) shares his emotions and thoughts about the better and harder parts of the SC:

"I wouldn't do anything differently [about the SC]. I'm not sure my mom would remember what times it was either. We had the same schedule for the last 9–10 years. (...) The good thing about SC is that I usually get to see my mom. See how she's doing. And see that she's still breathing. Because she's a hardcore drug addict, so... just to see that she's doing okay. (...) Even if she's asleep, she's still there. It just gives me a sense of comfort. ... Lately it's been hard because I've really noticed that she can act quite childish when we're together. Sometimes I just feel like she's like a drunk 14-year-old or something..." (Mehmet FC2 (condensed)).

In the focus group, Mehmet says that SC is in the daytime due to decisions of the municipality and the needs of the foster parents, and he misses out on school, which is irritating. However, despite this, Mehmet is oriented towards participating in the relationship with his mother, manifested material–discursively in the presence of a sleeping mother "Even if she's asleep, she's still there". Mehmet shares that the better part about SC is seeing his mother "still breathing", whereas the harder part is that his mother can act childish and be "like a drunk 14-year-old". Over time, Mehmet has tuned in to his experiences of their specific relationship and would not "do anything differently" because "I'm not sure my mum would remember". The materialization of participation manifests his positioning in doing and being the relationship under the specific conditions and gives Mehmet "a sense of comfort".

Several of the other children also expressed that manifesting participation by being part of the SC involves missing out on school (Oscar FC1, Viggo FC2 and Karl FC3) or disappointing friends (Aiesha FC1 and Amina FC2). The excerpt with Mehmet shows how time and experiences are important for tuning in and manifesting participation in the

specific relationships, and as we saw previously (see Karl and Yasmin above), confirmation is needed, and a sense of abandonment can emerge. The parents explicitly expressed how manifesting participation in SC can make them feel emotionally untuned with themselves, e.g., the mother Karen says that in SC: *“you are not allowed to be yourself”* (FP2) and the mother Susanne says: *“I didn’t feel like. . . me at all”* (FP2) (see also Maryam FP1). Both children and parents emphasized the importance of an alignment between their thoughts and emotions about their positioning in the specific relationships and the manifestation of participation. The next excerpt is an example of this, where the mother Linda gives her advice to other parents with SC:

“Be careful that you don’t feel that you are not your child’s parent. That’s what I feel several times. I am not my son’s mother. (. . .) I don’t know a damn thing about my son’s school. At all. (. . .) If you got more information, of course, about what is happening. But I don’t get it. I get it once a year, that’s when I get to know what is happening. (. . .) Because otherwise. . . I’m practically my child’s babysitter. For two hours, when my child just needs to be looked after so the foster family can have time off” (Linda FP2 (condensed)).

In the excerpt, Linda shares how she thinks it is important to *“feel”* like a parent and how a lack of knowledge about her son’s school can make her feel like a *“babysitter”* who looks after her child when the foster parents are off. Linda has fortnightly SC for two hours with her son (aged 9), and in the focus group she says that she has always wanted to have more time with him. However, as the excerpt shows, Linda tunes in to the conditions and points to other ways of participation to emotionally engage in being a mother, e.g., more regular information than at a meeting once a year. Gaining knowledge becomes the key to a transcendental material–discursive participation in her son’s school and the possibility of manifesting Linda’s positioning as a mother.

There are similarities between on the one hand how positioning and confirming are aspects of relational participation for children and parents (see sections above), on the other hand how they both are emotionally engaged and motivated in manifesting participation in the relationships. However, a discrepancy arises in what manifestation of participation is for children and parents (as seen above), which can reflect different conditions and possibilities for participation. The children are focused on integrating SC into their everyday lives in the context of the placement, such as their school, leisure activities and friends, where SC can be disruptive regardless of their orientation towards the specific relationship and the emotional significance. For the parents, participation in SC is rather something that integrates their everyday lives revolving around their thoughts and emotions about being a parent. This discrepancy is visible in the next excerpt, where Aiesha (aged 11) shares her advice to parents with SC:

“That parents respect children who are not quite ready to see them. (. . .) So instead of doing it first [at SC], maybe the parents could just sit and talk, or do something with the things they have brought to the SC, and then the child could come maybe half an hour, fifteen minutes or five minutes later” (Aiesha FC1 (condensed)).

In the excerpt, Aiesha emphasizes the importance of parents respecting that children may need time for adjusting and tuning in. The excerpt shows that an asymmetry in the relationships can occur as well as differences in needs for manifesting ‘what are we to each other?’ (see also Sigurd above). In the end of the focus group, Aiesha adds a comment with regards to the role of the foster parents: *“. . .there are children who are actually happy that they [the foster parents] are there [during SC], so if the children get sad, they can just go to them.”* (FC1 condensed). Both children and parents suggest that a supervisor, foster parent, etc. could

support manifesting participation, tuning in and potentially enhancing the relationship (see Sigurd above, Viggo FC2, Berta FC3, Kirsten FP1, Sara FP2 and Signe FP3), but the presence could also disrupt the intimacy of the relationship. For example, the mother Yasmin (FP1) shares in the focus group that talking with her daughter about menstruation as a way of manifesting her participation as a mother is difficult because the contact is supervised by a man. Likewise, several of the children (Oscar FC1, Berta FC3 and Karl FC3) talk about relaxing and cuddling with their parents as ways of manifesting relationships, but the supervisor's arrangement of activities hinders this.

In between SC, the children often participate in other relationships. Several of the parents talk about the need to know about these and in particularly the school (see also Sara and Linda above, Susanne FP2 and Kirsten FP1) as a key to manifesting participation material-discursively. In the following, the father Husein shares an example of how he experiences knowledge influence his doing and being the relationships:

“... you don't know what your children are doing and you're always thinking about what your children have done. For example, before she was placed my daughter was on a trip with the school and I got many pictures from the teachers there: Now she's on a tree, now she's gathering leaves, now she is doing this... and then, we start talking together, me and her. But when I don't know what my daughter is doing, what should we talk about? And that hurts inside me” (Husein FP1 (condensed)).

In the excerpt, Husein tells how he in the past before the placement has experienced that knowledge and pictures supported his ability to manifest his positioning and participation as a father. After the placement, Husein experiences: “*I don't know what my daughter is doing*” and the lack of knowledge becomes a barrier to manifesting ‘what are we to each other?’ which “*hurts inside*” him. The excerpt shows that like the children (see Aiesha above) parents can need support and time to tune in, and that lack of knowledge in being and doing the relationships can be painful. The mother Maryam follows up in the focus group and shares an episode from the summertime: “*We have brought them stones and markers and then my daughter says, is it okay, dad and mom, that I write your name on these stones and take them home? It means so much to us that our children still think of us.*” (condensed FP1). This is an example of how artifacts can also contribute to manifesting a positioning in the specific relationships using both matter and discourse in enactment of participation across space and time (see also Kirsten FP1).

8. Discussion of the Concluding Findings

This article has explored what participation is for children and parents in and around SC. The analysis unfolds a relational participation, where children's and parents' performative positioning, confirming and manifesting in relation to ‘what are we to each other?’ is central. Thus, the article contributes new empirical knowledge about what participation is for children and parents in and around SC that values but also goes beyond a rights-based individualistic approach to participation (cf. existing research).

A key finding is that children and parents closely link their *positioning* as a child or parent in a specific relationship with the processes of participation. An important aspect of participation therefore becomes re-/making sense of the relationships, where they use their experiences, thoughts and emotions related to their positioning. Thus, the children's and parents' understandings of the positionings in the relationship are significant for their participation. This highlights the importance of the professionals' articulations and framing of the SC. To the extent that these do not capture that children and parents are entangled in specific emotional relationships, they can cause unclarity and estrangement in the participation. Another key finding is that *confirming* is an important aspect of

participation. Confirming can be challenging as enactment of agency is affected and entangled in the conditions and possibilities within the material–discursive practices in and around the SC. The analysis reveals that participation in SC can transcend space and time, where uncertainty and a sense of abandonment can arise if relationships are not confirmed and supported. A final aspect of participation is children’s and parents’ orientation towards *manifesting* their participation in the relationships. Different modes of manifesting participation are revealed in the analysis as ways of being and doing the relationships. Similarly to positioning and confirming, manifesting can transcend the physical SC and enact modes of participation through knowledge and artifacts. Time, tuning in and different possibilities for manifesting participation are central and difficult emotions are revealed, but also potential for support. Thus, the analysis demonstrates that participation for both children and parents in and around SC is relational and concerns emotional processes related to their positioning in the specific relationships. However, the relationships can be asymmetrical due to differences, and this can influence especially the manifesting of participation. For children, participation may be about integrating SC into an everyday life with many different relationships, whereas for parents it rather integrates an everyday life that revolves around thoughts and emotions about being a parent.

In the analysis, agential realism provides a relevant ontological approach where the relationality between children and parents is a prerequisite to understand participation. Moreover, the metatheory offers an approach where the enactment of participation is seen as material–discursive entanglements across time and space. This allows for the identification of differences in as well as potentials for participation in and around SC. Agential realism does not deal with what is outside the intra-action as the agential cuts are enacted from the inside (Barad 2007, p. 179). A point of criticism may be a lack of attention to how power, structures and professional constructions carve out possibilities for participation (Nissen and Ravn 2024). Although this is important, it is not the focus of this article in the exploration of what is participation for children and parents in and around SC.

The findings point to the need for understanding participation as a relational concept with a dynamic, transcendental feature entangled in children’s and parents’ experiences, emotions and thoughts about their positioning and the specific relationships. This is in continuation of former research showing the intrinsic value of participation. However, this article unfolds more detailed empirical knowledge about what participation is for children and parents as a necessary step for improving participation (Falch-Eriksen et al. 2021). The findings confirm that conversations about participation should not be limited to (only) decision-making in a rights-based approach (Ulvik 2015; Skauge et al. 2021) and that there is a need to facilitate participation in and around SC for the purpose of contributing to positive relationships (Huseby-Lie 2024). That said, data and analysis of focus groups cannot enlighten the interplay in and around SC where positioning, confirming and manifesting are enacted and emotions of un-/certainty, un-/clarity and dis-/comfort are shaped. Thus, there is a need for deeper explorations of the relational dimensions in the material–discursive practices in and around SC, and how professionals can facilitate and support processes of participation linked to children’s and parents’ experiences of their relationships. Therefore, the focus group interviews will be followed by ethnographic studies of this (Ravn, forthcoming).

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

SC	Supervised Contact
SOUL	Supervised Contact: Support and sustainable development in vulnerable children's everyday life

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