Asma and Mikkel are playing in the large outdoor sand pit at a kindergarten situated in a social housing area. The toy shovels dig into the sand with a crunchy sound, while the children form sand cakes from wet sand and spread fine dry sand over them with their hands. The Arabic speaking pedagogue Sara tells me that Asma’s parents, who are from Syria, do not like the sandpit; it has an ‘awful smell’. 'Then I tell them that sand is rather normal in Denmark,' Sara says.

Sand is an important material in our everyday lives. Sand surrounds us as an element of the soil, the ground of the beach, a main component of building materials, and, if you grow up as a child in Denmark, a key feature of any playground. In Denmark, sandpits were introduced in public playgrounds in Copenhagen as early as in 1908 with the aim of providing clean, safe and healthy spaces for natural activity and creativity (Coninck-Smith 2017), and today, any kindergarten or public playground offers access to a sandpit. However, to newcomers in Denmark, the daily outdoor play in sandpits, even in cold and wet weather, is often a reason for surprise, and becomes a topic of discussion between parents and pedagogical staff. Understanding the ’normality’ of sand becomes an indication of integration.

Children’s play in sandpits is linked to the coupling of childhood and outdoor life in nature (Taylor, 2013), which seems particularly strong in the Scandinavian countries. Here, outdoor life is strongly connected to the national identities, and cultural conceptions of childhood emphasize ‘free play’ and autonomy in outdoor settings (see e.g. Wagner & Einarsdottir 2008). However, in everyday activities in kindergartens, proper ways and places of playing with sand are constantly negotiated in interactions between children, pedagogical staff, parents, playground infrastructures, weather, sand, soil, water, and mud. With inspiration from, among others, Ingold (2011) and Winther (2017), this paper explores how the properties of sand are sensed and negotiated by children and adults in a context where children’s outdoor activities are linked to politicized questions of belonging and immigration.

Keywords: Sand, senses, politics, belonging, kindergarten