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Unpacking tensions in community capacity building: A qualitative examination of a co-production process to support children's and adolescents' leisure-time physical activity in public housing areas

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ABSTRACT

Community capacity building is widely regarded as a valuable approach in health promotion and applied across diverse contexts. However, there is a lack of research in applying community capacity building to promote leisure-time physical activity among children and adolescents.

This study aimed to build community capacity to develop leisure-time physical activities for children and adolescents in public housing areas. In this article we examine how participating community stakeholders (municipal employees, social workers, representatives from sports clubs and a sports organization) attribute meaning to a co-production process as part of building community capacity. To explore this, we conducted four focus groups and one individual interview with participating stakeholders and observed 27 co-production workshops. We followed a strategy of reflective thematic analysis and orientated the coding process in Robert Chaskin's (2001) conceptualization of community capacity.

Our analysis shows that the participating stakeholders were more focused on developing activities for children in the area than in building community capacity. The stakeholders' level of commitment to reach their shared vision was challenged by ambiguities in their roles and responsibilities, competition for resources, and frustrations about the research-based design of the project. As many stakeholders measured success by the number of children participating in the developed activities, they perceived the project as less successful when implementation of activities failed, even if initial community capacities were developed.

This article highlights the importance of future initiatives recognising and addressing the tensions involved in prioritizing community capacity building equally alongside the achievement of specific programme outcomes.

1. Introduction

Community capacity building is widely regarded as a valuable approach in health promotion (Simmons et al., 2011; Ubert et al., 2017). The underlying premise is that by developing skills and knowledge, establishing partnerships, fostering collaborative relationships and garnering resources, communities and individuals can be empowered to address health challenges more efficiently. Furthermore, the competencies gained through community capacity building are considered to enable the community to address future health issues, thereby adding a sustainability perspective to the process (Marlier et al., 2014; Simmons et al., 2011).

Community capacity building processes have been employed to address diverse health challenges, particularly in low-income areas, where it has been utilized to promote social change while also mitigating risk factors for unhealthy behaviours (Chaskin, 2001; Loss et al., 2020; Marlier et al., 2014). These processes are often guided by overarching principles such as promotion of local skills, concrete knowledge, and leadership rather than specific models for how to achieve community capacity (Chaskin, 2001).

Despite the diverse landscape of community capacity building processes and inconclusive evidence regarding their effectiveness, the overarching positive rhetoric positions the community capacity building approach as inherently valuable (Craig, 2007; Simmons et al., 2011;

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Traverso-Yepez et al., 2012). However, Traverso-Yepez et al. caution against the assumption that community-driven approaches are straightforward processes as challenges and resistance often arise (Traverso-Yepez et al., 2012). Similarly, a literature review by Ubert et al. (2017) has emphasized that while scholars agree on the importance of community capacity building processes, practical strategies for implementation are often lacking. Their review found that the two most commonly used community capacity building approaches involved forming coalitions and networks and strengthening the competence and awareness within the target population. However, the methodological limitations of the included studies precluded definite conclusions about the effectiveness of community capacity building approaches (Ubert et al., 2017).

Community capacity building has been employed in various contexts and targeted different population groups in order to promote physical activity and sports participation (Marlier et al., 2014). Most community capacity building programs have targeted adults rather than children and adolescents (Loss et al., 2020; Marlier et al., 2014; Ubert et al., 2017). For example, Loss et al. examined capacity building in community stakeholder groups aimed at increasing physical activity among older men. Their study concluded that the initiative successfully established stakeholder networks, which planned and implemented initiatives for the target group (Loss et al., 2020). Marlier et al. (2014) conducted an empirical study of a sports-based community capacity building program in five disadvantaged communities in Belgium (Marlier et al., 2014). They found that residents in the intervention communities reported higher levels of sports participation compared to residents in the control communities (Marlier et al., 2014). The authors attributed these findings to the increased availability of resources for sports, enhanced promotion of sports activities through partnerships, and reduced barriers related to mobility, finances, and commitment (Marlier et al., 2014, p. 1125). Nevertheless, the authors highlighted the need for qualitative research in order to gain a better and deeper understanding of the working mechanisms and context of community capacity building processes (Marlier et al., 2014, p. 1126).

When community capacity building initiatives focus on physical activity or sports participation among children and adolescents, they are often embedded within a broader preventive obesity initiative rather than a stand-alone goal (de Groot et al., 2010; Sanigorski et al., 2008). For instance, the Australian 'Be Active Eat Well' intervention aimed to 'build the community's capacity to create its own solutions for promoting healthy eating, physical activity, and healthy weight in children aged 4–12 years and their families' (Sanigorski et al., 2008, p. 1061). The researchers concluded that the intervention effectively and safely reduced unhealthy weight gain in children.

Overall, the existing academic literature presents an optimistic outlook on community capacity building in promoting health, physical activity and sports participation. Only a few studies, such as Loss et al. (2020), report challenges related to power dynamics and conflicting interests that arose during the community capacity building process. For instance, Loss and colleague show that sport club representatives involved in the process were more interested in getting members to their clubs than in pursuing innovative approaches to support physical activity among the target group in the community. Over time, their interests came to dominate the meetings, leading to reduced engagement from other stakeholders - some of whom eventually stopped attending the meetings (Loss et al., 2020). Insights like these are rare in the academic literature which often focus on the benefits and relevance of community capacity building processes (Traverso-Yepez et al., 2012). Thus, Traverso-Yepez and colleagues argue that the academic literature often neglects to report on the complexities that arise when communities engage in health promotion (Traverso-Yepez et al., 2012). This lack of knowledge calls for qualitative studies that can provide in-depth insights into the interactions and collaborations in community capacity building processes to promote physical activity and sports participation.

This study addresses this need for knowledge (that have not been sufficiently explored and elaborated in the literature) by examining the meaning attributed to efforts aimed at building community capacity. This qualitative investigation focuses on community capacity building processes as they are interacted in a series of co-production workshops conducted within the Assist project to support children's and adolescents' participation in leisure-time physical activity (LTPA) in four public housing areas in Denmark.

The research question that guided the analysis was:

How do participating stakeholders ascribe meaning to the co-production process as part of building community capacity to assist children and adolescents' leisure-time physical activity in public housing areas?

Rather than focusing on the outcomes of the community capacity building method, this study centres on the processes of which participants negotiate and attribute meaning. In so doing the article seeks to move beyond conceptualizations of community capacity as a static entity or tangible outcome confined to a specific locality, group, or individual. Rather, this article suggests that community capacity building should be analysed through focusing on the interactions among the stakeholders and listening to the meanings they assign to the process.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Community capacity

There are numerous definitions of 'community capacity' (Chaskin, 2001; Simmons et al., 2011). This study adopts Robert Chaskin's conceptualization, which defines community capacity as:

> the interaction of human capital, organizational resources, and social capital existing within a given community that can be leveraged to solve collective problems and improve or maintain the well-being of a given community. It may operate through informal social processes and/or organized effort (Chaskin, 2001, p. 295).

Chaskin operationalizes the above definition into a framework within which he outlines four fundamental characteristics of community capacity: (1) sense of community, (2) level of commitment, (3) ability to solve problems, and (4) access to resources (Chaskin, 2001). These four characteristics will also be used in the analysis that follows.

Sense of community refers to the extent to which community members share common values, norms, and visions, feel a degree of connectedness to each other, and recognize shared conditions. *Level of commitment* involves responsibility and obligation towards what happens in the local area. In this understanding, committed members see themselves as stakeholders who are important for the community's well-being and who are willing to actively participate in fulfilling that role. *Ability to solve problems* refers to the capacity to translate commitment into action, and *access to resources* involves the human, economic, physical, and political resources that members can access both within and outside the local area (Chaskin, 2001).

According to Chaskin, these characteristics are likely present in all communities to some extent. However, for a community to achieve specific goals, a minimum level of these four characteristics is probably necessary (Chaskin, 2001).

In this study we define community as 'a group of people with a common interest or issue (non-spatial)' (Simmons et al., 2011, p. 196). We view commitment and responsibility not only in terms of what happens in a geographical area but also significantly in the relationships between community members and their connection to 'the common interest.' In this light, we examine the meaning-making between the stakeholders involved in the Assist project. We understand this meaning-making as a social process which take place in the interaction between human beings. Thus, informed by a symbolic interactionist framework, we turn our attention towards interactions between the stakeholders.

2.2. Symbolic interactionism

In this study, symbolic interactionism serves as the framework through which we investigate the participants' meaning-making during the community capacity building process. A symbolic interactionist approach has guided the formulation of the research question, the production of empirical material and the subsequent analysis. Symbolic interactionism is not a scientific paradigm in the traditional sense. Rather, it is a perspective on the relationship between individuals and society (Jacobsen, 2017, p. 11).

The symbolic interactionist approach, particularly Blumer's assumptions, emphasizes that meaning is not intrinsic to objects or concepts, whether concrete or abstract, but actively constructed through social interactions between people. Individuals act on the meanings they ascribe to a phenomena (Blumer, 1969). Thus, meanings do not originate within individuals. They develop in interactions. Through these interactions, individuals interpret their experiences and evaluate their actions accordingly (Blumer, 1969). The symbolic interactionist perspective is useful in understanding how participants in the community capacity building process negotiate and define the process. By examining the relational encounters between people, we can shed light on the contested and dynamic processes of community capacity building.

3. Methods

This study is a qualitative investigation within the Assist project. Co-production workshops were used as a strategy to build community capacity to support children and adolescents' participation in leisure-time physical activity and their well-being. The project was carried out in four public housing areas in Denmark.

The qualitative study employed observational methods, focus groups and one individual interview, all of which sought to explore the co-production process designed to enhance community capacity building.

3.1. Co-production and community capacity building in the Assist project

3.1.1. Study context

The Assist project was funded in 2020 b y the Novo Nordisk Foundation under the initiative *Children, Health and Movement*. The Assist project aims to develop and explore methods to support leisure-time physical activity and well-being among children and adolescents (aged 10–15 years) living in public housing areas. The project was a collaboration between Aalborg University and two large Danish municipalities. Aalborg University was the grant recipient and was responsible for distributing the funds among the involved partners which included another Danish university and the community stakeholders affiliated in different organizations, described later. The project was implemented in four public housing areas located in two different municipalities. Generally, residents in public housing areas rate their own health as poorer compared to the rest of the population. Specifically, 26.1 percent of these residents consider their health to be less fair or poor, whereas only 14.8 percent of individuals living outside public housing areas share this assessment (Jensen et al., 2023). The specific four public housing areas for the Assist project were selected since they, for some time, have been in the municipal spotlight due to identified social and economic issues and health challenges among residents (Jensen et al., 2018; Jensen et al., 2023; Rasmussen, 2019). In these areas, the proportion of residents outside the labour market (neither employed nor in education/training) and the proportion of children with social challenges were both far above the municipal average. Furthermore, the number of children and adolescents participating in leisure-time activities was also lower compared to their peers who live in more resource-rich areas.

3.1.2. Participants and procedure

One of the key components of the project was a co-production process designed to activate community capacity at the organizational and network levels meaning fostering collaboration and working on relations between organizations and other collectivities (Chaskin, 2001). An additional aim beyond that of enhancing community capacity was to increase children and adolescents' opportunities for leisure-time physical activity by developing and providing activities in the local areas, a goal which could be characterized as a specific outcome (Chaskin, 2001). Thus, the Assist project intended to work on the importance of community capacity building in itself and through here achieve specific program outcomes. In the empirical academic literature, the concepts *co-production* and *co-creation* are often used interchangeably (Voorberg et al., 2015). However, for clarity we define the strategy for building community capacity as *co-production* and use the concept as a key component of the intervention. Our understanding of co-production is informed by Tony Bovaird's definition of community *co-production* which is:

> […] the provision of services [in this case activities for the children and adolescents in the areas] through regular, long-term relationships between professionalized service providers (in any sector) and service users or other members of the community, where all parties make substantial resource contributions (Bovaird, 2007, p. 847).

The co-production participants were community stakeholders, which included representatives from local sports clubs (volunteers at a managerial level and sometimes a coach), housing social workers, municipal employees, and staff from the regional branch of a general and national sports organization. The involvement of community stakeholders from the different organizations began during the grant application process. Given the long period between the submission of the application, the awarding of the grant, and the official start of the project, several meetings were held prior to the start of the co-production workshop process. These meetings served to revisit the project's objectives and clarify the roles and responsibilities of each organization. These meetings were planned and facilitated by the research team and included both joint meetings with representatives from multiple organizations, and individual meetings with representatives from the organizations separately.

In the workshops, the stakeholders were brought together to solve a common issue by identifying the support and resources necessary to develop ideas for strengthening leisure-time physical activities for the children and adolescents in the areas and co-producing the delivery of these services (the activity offer) (Bovaird, 2007, p. 847). Through this process, the stakeholders could potentially build relationships across groups, which could strengthen the sense of community and level of commitment. The individual level of community capacity, understood as the involvement of the residents (Chaskin, 2001), was addressed in the fifth workshop, where children and parents from the public housing areas were brought together to develop ideas for leisure-time physical activity.

In each of the four public housing areas, 6–8 co-production workshops were conducted over a period of 9 months. The workshop facilitators, one in each municipality, were selected by the municipalities, and the facilitators were paid by the project grant. In one municipality, the research team took also part in the job interview of the facilitator. Table 1 provides an overview of the workshops and stakeholder participation. The names for the four public housing areas are pseudonyms.

A structured script for the content and the organization of the workshops was developed by the research team behind the Assist project and reviewed by the stakeholder participants before implementation. Minor adjustments were made throughout the process in order to accommodate contextual changes. For example, workshop number seven was cancelled at the request of participants in two areas (Skovly and Bakkedal). Additionally, two workshops were cancelled at short

Table 1
Overview of the number of participants in each workshop (wp).

	Bakkedal (seven wps in total)	Skovly (six wps in total)	Solvang (seven wps in total)	Granlunden (eight wps in total)
Wp 1	8	7	9	8
Wp 2	9	8	10	10
Wp 3	10	*Cancelled.*	*Cancelled.*	7
Wp 4	7	5	10	6
Wp 5	8 + 28 children from the area	9 + 42 from the area (children, parents and siblings)	7 + 18 children from the area	6 + 34 children from the area and one parent
Wp 6	7	5	7	4
Wp 7	*Cancelled.*	*Cancelled.*	7	6
Wp 8	5	5	5	4

notice in Bakkedal and Solvang, due to low stakeholder participant sign-ups.

For each area, a facilitator was assigned – this person varied across areas and throughout the process. Prior to each workshop, the facilitator held a preparatory meeting with a member of the Assist research team in order to plan the upcoming workshop. After each workshop, the research team, the facilitators, and a municipal employee met to discuss the workshop experiences and adjust the next steps.

The workshops were held in various common rooms within each area. Participants often sat around a table but also actively moved around the room during some of the idea-generation phases, writing notes to place on the wall or at a table.

3.2. Materials and methods

The empirical material for this article derives from observations of 27 co-production workshops conducted in the four public housing areas, four focus group interviews, and one individual interview with a participant who could not attend the focus group interview but wished to contribute.

3.2.1. Observations

Observations were chosen as the primary data generation method, as this allowed the first author to study social interactions among participants in the real-time process where these actions are constructed (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 100). Through observations, it is possible to observe how participants negotiate, reproduce, or create new meanings in their encounters with each other. The first author observed the dialogue between the participants, the words they used in their interactions and their body language and took field notes concerning the workshop format and process (e.g. structure and facilitation tools), since the interactions took place in this context. Thus, the observations provide insight into the context and processes that evolve over time (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 100).

The first author attended 27 out of 28 workshops, taking detailed fieldnotes, while also participating in introductory rounds, actively listening to participants, and answering clarifying questions about the project's formalities when participants or the facilitator were unable to provide specific answers related to the Assist project.

The observational role and level of participation of the researcher varied from passive observer to active contributor. During the third workshop, the first author contributed to the co-production process by presenting findings from a qualitative systematic literature review of participants, parents, and stakeholder perspectives on family and community interventions (Simonsen et al., 2024). This increased the first author's level of involvement in the workshops, and in one case, the first author stepped in as a workshop facilitator on short notice because the designated facilitator was unable to attend. In these two situations, when the first author presented the review findings and when taking on the role of facilitator, the first author was more of a participant than an observer. Here the first author made brief jotting notes (Emerson et al., 2013) and later developed these at the desk.

The observations focused on verbal and non-verbal interactions between stakeholders, the co-construction of ideas and solutions, and the negotiation of roles and responsibilities between workshop participants. The observation guide was structured in three parts: The first part focused on descriptive observations to examine participant interactions. The second part was guided by the theoretical perspective of community capacity as formulated by Robert Chaskin. The final part was oriented towards unintended consequences, such as frustrations and conflicts arising in the community capacity building. The observation guide is available in Appendix A.

3.2.2. Focus groups

Focus groups complemented observations by allowing insights into participants' interactions on selected topics, their descriptions of processes, their interpretations of actions, and the significance they ascribe to them (Blumer, 1969; Halkier, 2015). All participants in the focus group spoke Danish, and their quotations have therefore been translated into English for this article. All the community stakeholders who took part in the co-production workshops were invited to a focus group in their respective areas. However, due to other obligations, some were unable to attend the focus group. Each focus group comprised four community stakeholders, except in Granlunden, where three participated. Representatives from local sports clubs and municipal employees were present in all focus groups. Staff from the regional branch of a national sports organization participated in all but one focus group (in Skovly), while housing social workers were present in two focus groups (Skovly and Solvang). One stakeholder from Granlunden, who was unable to attend the focus group, still wished to contribute and was therefore interviewed individually. The focus groups facilitated dynamic exchanges in which the participants could share, compare, challenge, or elaborate on each other's perspectives, enriching the empirical material (Morgan & Hoffman, 2018).

The emphasis in the focus groups was on how participants interacted and developed meaning through negotiation rather than on their inner private experiences. In other words, the focus group method, where meaning undergoes co-construction (Morgan & Hoffman, 2018) aligns with the basic assumptions of symbolic interactionism that meaning is created in interaction between people (Benzies & Allen, 2001).

Similarly to the observation guide, the focus group interview guide was structured around questions concerning participants' experiences with their interactions and relationships, the process they had been involved in, and questions related to their roles and the first author's role in the process. The first author's observations of the 27 workshops enabled the first author to ask specific questions and refer to concrete episodes or cases from the co-production process that participants could discuss. The interview guide is available in Appendix B.

3.2.3. Ethical considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all the stakeholder participants prior to the workshops. Given the locally embedded nature of the study, where individuals who are familiar with the specific communities might recognize each other from their involvement in the project, full anonymization was not feasible. In the reporting of findings, we have pseudonymized the participants' names, and we use generalized descriptions for their job functions: employees of regional sports organizations, employees in housing organizations, municipal employees, and representatives from sports clubs (volunteers in the club). The representatives from the sports clubs differ from the other stakeholder

participants, as they are involved in the project due to their affiliation with the local sports club rather than because of their formal professional occupations.

The project is registered following the guidelines in force at Aalborg University during the time the project was carried out.

3.3. Strategy for analysis

The empirical material was analysed using the approach of reflexive thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2022). Reflective thematic analysis is a six-phase non-linear process that ensures a systematic approach while also allowing for continuous reflections and refinement.

During the first phase, familiarization, all interview transcripts and fieldnotes were meticulously read, and the audiotaped interviews were carefully listened to. Concurrently, a table with notes from the process were constructed. The notes were organized into four areas, reflecting Chaskin's four characteristics of community capacity.

Phase two, the systematic coding process, was undertaken by use of NVivo R1 (2020). Field notes and full transcripts of interviews were imported into the program. A code hierarchy was created by the first author using a hierarchical structure based on Chaskin's four characteristics of community capacity and data coded deductively. An additional category focusing on the stakeholders' different perceptions of community capacity was developed, based on the research question. Memos were maintained to ensure consistency and to provide contextual clarity for each code. A table with the theory-informed initial themes, codes, and memos can be found in Appendix C.

In phase three, initial theme development, patterns across codes were identified, with frequent revisits to the research question in order to maintain analytical focus. Codes were excluded if they did not contain a core idea that reflected the research question.

In phases four to six, reviewing themes, refining theme names and writing up, the themes were iteratively reviewed, discussed in the research team, renamed, and condensed. Excerpts from field notes and interviews were selectively incorporated into the reporting of findings to strengthen empirical grounding.

4. Results

Through the reflexive thematic analysis, four central themes were identified, each corresponding to one of Robert Chaskin's central characteristics of community capacity: sense of community, level of commitment, ability to solve problems, and access to resources. Fig. 1 illustrates this relationship.

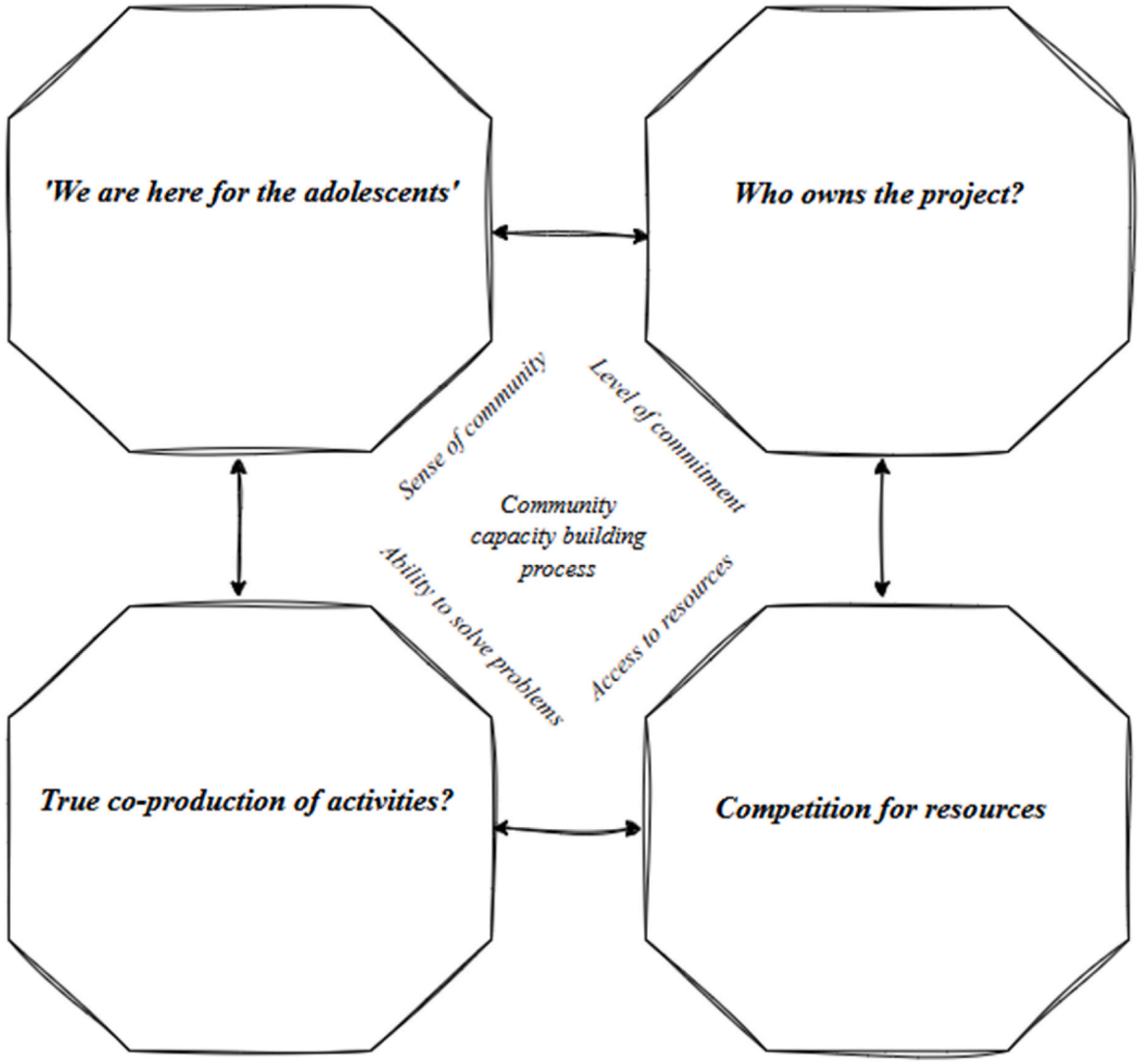

Fig. 1. Display of identified themes and their relation to the characteristics of community capacity as formulated by Robert Chaskin (2001).

4.1. 'We are here for the adolescents'

According to Chaskin, the sense of community among members (understood here as workshop participants) is based on a certain degree of connection between them. What connects the members is an unspecified threshold level of shared values, norms, and visions (Chaskin, 2001).

From the outset of the project, all participants in the different areas appeared to share the vision of making a difference for the children and adolescents in the local community. Many emphasized that their efforts should 'bear fruit' rather than remain abstract discussions. There was a collective expectation that collaboration would result in concrete activities benefiting local children. In the process of uniting community stakeholders with different understandings and resources for collaboration, however, some frustration also appeared. A municipal employee described such dynamics:

> We are on the same level in terms of wanting to collaborate and create something for children and adolescents, but as we have also encountered, well, both different understandings and being able to spend time on it (Interview, Sebastian, Granlunden).

The stakeholders had varying perspectives on the children living in the area and how to approach them. The targeted children were often described as unaccustomed to being active (not already members of a sports club) and as likely lacking the skills needed for specific sports activities (e.g., soccer), thus requiring additional resources from the sports club in the form of additional volunteers for a team. Others emphasized the need for 'low entry barriers' and a 'hands-on approach'. Discussion arose around who exactly was the target group, why they were physically absent for most of the process (during workshops and developed activities), and who was responsible for recruiting the target group for the activities.

The discussion also extended to the role of the parents. In Bakkedal, for example, a critically debate concerned parental involvement in supporting their children's participation in organized sports clubs took form:

> *Erik (housing social worker employee) speaks up*: 'In families I know, there's a lot related to finances [to pay for club membership fee], it's a barrier for many. They have money, they can't get municipal financial support, they choose to spend money on something else.' *Erik explains that the children want to be part of a sports club, but that they lack support from home*: 'We have previously provided hands-on help to get some [kids] into the association, [we have] accompanied the children, but as soon as we stop, they quit. It's non-ethnic Danes who have difficulty being part of an association. It's not just the child who is part of the lives in sports clubs. It's the whole family' (fieldnote, Workshop 1, Bakkedal).

The quote underscores the shared understanding that children's participation in sports clubs also places demand on their parents. Many sports club representatives believed that participation in sports clubs should require a financial commitment from the parents, increased parental responsibility, and adherence to sports club norms. These understandings reflected the notion that the children and adolescents (and their parents) should adapt to the sports association's framework and norms, rooted in volunteerism.

During the workshop process, these perspectives were negotiated and shifted. Aligned with the thinking in the Assist project, several participants began to question the primary assumption that local children should be integrated into the conventional framework of sports clubs. Instead, some participants advocated for creating specific activities within the residential areas, close to the children not already members of a sports club. This strategy, they argued, would be more useful than initiating new activities within the framework of the established sports clubs. Initially, this approach of thinking of activity offers outside the sports hall posed a challenge for many sports club representatives. Over time, however, many began to embrace it. This was reflected upon in the focus group in Granlunden:

> Jens (representative from the local sports club): 'To us, it has been a challenge to what we are good at, what we know how to do … Before we realized that it shouldn't actually take place here [at the sports centre]. It should take place in each residential area. This suddenly started to place demands on something that we might not be so good at. Or I don't know if we weren't good at it, but like …
>
> First author (moderator of focus group interview): 'Something you weren't used to, or … ?'
>
> Jens (representative from the local sports club): 'Yes, it's a bit out of our comfort zone, right?'
>
> Oscar (employee at a regional sports organization): 'You are definitely stepping out of your comfort zone. And sometimes you have to do that to make progress, right?'
>
> Jens (representative from the local sports club): 'Yes, of course.'

This exchange illustrates how the co-production process fostered a willingness to challenge norms and reconsider existing frameworks. While disagreements and differing views created tensions, they also generated new insights and paved the way for a sense of community.

4.2. Who owns the project?

The second dimension of community capacity building, 'commitment', is defined as the willingness of an individual, group, or organization to take responsibility for community well-being (Chaskin, 2001, p. 296). In this study, such commitment was expressed in multiple ways: through physical participation in the workshops, the language used to describe the joint project, and discussions of role expectation. Several members continued their participation in workshops despite experiencing challenges because they felt it was important to remain involved. Absence from multiple members, or repeated absences from the same individuals, was perceived by others as a de-prioritization of the project.

The degree of commitment was reflected in the language used by participants, sometimes personifying the project and attributing human characteristics to it. Participants used expression such as, 'The project has learned … ', 'The project's roots', 'The project's spirit', 'From the project's side', and 'The project has control over it'. Personification was especially used when uncertainties arose about the project's organization, expectations of roles, and what was allowed within the project's framework. The absence of a clear 'we' reflected a lack of ownership and responsibility towards the project. Uncertainty about who had the authority to make decisions about changes to the project's framework and project personification contributed to positioning the project as *self-governing*.

Instead of the participants, it was the university that was frequently framed as the decision-making authority. This attitude reinforced the participants' perception that the project was an externally led initiative. When the project goals e.g. to develop activities that children in the area would participate in, were not achieved, frustrations were often directed at the Assist project, which was negatively associated with rigidity and inflexibility:

> Arne (representative from a sports club): 'There is a difference between what can be done in an Excel sheet and what can be done in practice.'
>
> Annette (housing social worker employee): 'We have followed the project's overall goals (*Annette looks at me*) and not twisted things the way you would in real life.'
>
> (workshop 8, Skovly).

This perspective, illustrated by the above quotes, reflects a distinction made between research and practice, with references to real life as

something that project frameworks do not address or understand. The project's status as a *research* project was not particularly valued. While some participants had a neutral perspective on this, others viewed the research protocol as an obstacle to flexibility and adaptation. However, some participants were more positive about the potential knowledge the research project could contribute by pointing to the insights that they were not accustomed to being generated in other community and municipality projects.

The most significant source of frustration, leading to very different levels of commitment, concerned a continuous discussion of the stakeholders' roles which caused tensions among the participants. Throughout the co-production workshop, participants discussed and negotiated role expectations and varied understandings of the content of roles and project responsibilities. Many participants described their respective roles as contributors of knowledge, input, and support, while few perceived themselves as responsible for acting on decisions. Several participants complained about a lack of formal 'doers' or 'runners' in the project, leading people to 'sit on their hands' during workshops.

Frustrations flowed when participants felt that greater demands or tasks were placed on them than they believed their role in the project entailed; some participants felt they had fulfilled their role while others had not. This was particularly evident in relation to the issue of recruiting children and adolescents to the activities they had co-produced, a significant challenge in three of the four areas (apart from Solvang). In the example below, the participants described a situation where they had developed a new activity in a local area but hardly any children took part:

> Dorthe (a representative from a local sports club) looks at Andrea: 'Yes, but that's the problem: you don't have any children, or have you found more?'
>
> Andrea (municipal employee) replies: 'I have found more.'
>
> Lise (municipal employee) looks at Dorthe: 'I also think you should remember that Andrea, Erik, and Simon are doing everything they can. There isn't just one person responsible for recruitment. It happens collectively.'
>
> Dorthe responds: 'I'm frustrated. I expect that Andrea and Erik will bring the families.'
>
> Gitte (facilitator) corrects: 'The target group.'
>
> Dorthe: 'We have delivered. I'm frustrated that Trine [the instructor] is left with nothing.' *Dorthe refers to the fact that hardly anyone has shown up for Trine's activities*.
>
> Lone (representative from the sports club) addresses Dorthe: 'But at the same time, it takes a long time to get something started.'

These negotiations around roles and expectations highlight the complexities of co-production and the varied ways in which degrees of commitment and frustrations manifested themselves throughout the process.

Despite these challenges concerning participant commitment to and ownership of the project, instances of strong commitment were also observed. For example, a sports instructor in Granlunden emphasized that financial compensation for his work was secondary to ensuring children's and adolescents' participation in sports activities. Similarly, in Skovly, two participants proactively introduced a new workshop participant, demonstrating commitment to the project's goals and status, while a municipal participant in Bakkedal, an area where the co-production process was marked by frustrations regarding structure, roles, expectations, and recruitment challenges, took responsibility for addressing these issues and encouraged all participants to leave their frustrations behind and look forward. Furthermore, in Bakkedal, members planned an informal event to engage children and gather their input on activity preferences. Although the plan was never implemented, it reflected an attempt to overcome recruitment challenges through alternative approaches.

4.3. True co-production of activities?

According to Chaskin, the third characteristic of community capacity building, 'the ability to solve problems', concerns the ability to translate commitment into action through formal and informal means (Chaskin, 2001, p. 297). In the Assist project, the co-production workshops function as the primary formal means for building community capacity, while informal processes were also at play. Below follows an analysis of the theme capturing the participants' understanding of the formal function of the co-production workshops, focusing on how they interacted and engaged in the process of ascribing meaning to co-production. Particular attention will be given to the participants' ability to solve problems and achieve common goals.

Participants coalesced around the overall goal of developing and delivering movement activities for children and adolescents in the local housing areas. The intended process involved idea-generation, prioritizing among the suggested activities, formulating action plans, and assigning responsibilities to organize weekly activities, while also evaluating these at the next workshop, and adjusting accordingly. The facilitator managed the co-production process by structuring the workshops to support this trajectory.

During the idea generation phases, all participants contributed actively, and the process was marked by a positive atmosphere and creativity, with members acknowledging each other's perspectives and contributing ideas. The participants described these idea-generating sessions as 'inspiring' and filled with 'good ideas'. Yet, the enthusiasm was followed by equal degrees of disappointment and frustration when the implementation of the activities did not immediately lead to large groups of children and adolescents participating.

When moving from broad ideas to specific action plans for only one or two prioritized activities, several challenges arose related to both the process of moving from idea to action plan and participants' perceptions of their roles and resources. Many participants saw their roles as co-creators and contributors, few viewed themselves as 'owners' and 'doers', a situation that led to role strain and disengagement. Thus, the majority of participants perceived their role as delivering knowledge (head) instead of action (hands), which significantly impacted their ability to move from ideas to action and develop movement activities during the co-production processes (the specific outcome goal). Furthermore, participants later noted an imbalance in time allocation. According to them much time was used for brainstorming but not enough for actual action planning. Opinions were divided on the process of delegating tasks: some described the situation as 'unclear', with a lack of delegation of responsibility, while others described it as 'dictatorial', and felt that they had been assigned tasks by the workshop facilitator that exceeded their capacity. Sustaining momentum between workshops posed an additional challenge, as participants found it difficult to communicate between workshops, keep each other updated, and make collective decisions via email, all of which further obstructed the translation of commitment into actions.

Despite these difficulties, perceptions of successful instances of co-production also emerged. In these situations, participants effectively collaborated to develop action plans with specific tasks and clear responsibilities, such as making a poster about the activity, providing an instructor, arranging access to a hall or gym, contacting a department board, and helping with recruiting the target group. For instance, a case from Skovly demonstrated the financial issues that many disadvantaged families face in relation to children's sports participation. Discussions about this issue among participants led them to seek out ways by which these families in an easier manner could apply for funds to pay club fees and to get help with practical issue related to their children's sports participation. As a result of these discussions, a sports club representative agreed to bring up the issue with the sports club board and to propose to train one person in the club to assist families with economic

and other practical issues related to accessing the sports club. In addition, a municipal employee would contact the national sports associations in order to promote the need for new practices regarding funds application.

When workshop participants succeeded in making concrete plans and saw the purpose of the work needed to bring the idea to life, the co-production workshop was experienced as a rewarding process. This feeling of concrete success was in stark contrast with what some participants experienced as long, energy-consuming deliberative processes where no concrete agreements were made. The field note below provides an example from a workshop in Bakkedal, where the co-production process was perceived as meaningful for the members involved:

> *We rise from the table where we have been sitting for the past few hours. The evening's workshop is over. Susanne (municipal employee) smiles at Andrea (municipal employee):* 'Well facilitated.'
>
> Erik (housing social worker employee): 'I don't feel drained of energy now, either.'
>
> Stine (employee at a regional sports organization): 'How can we leave here today with what we've achieved? Is it because of the involvement workshop [previous workshop]? Is that why? Is it because things have become clearer?' *Stine looks at the researcher.* 'You need to analyse that a bit.'
>
> Erik (housing social worker employee): 'I also think it has something to do with us trying things that didn't work […]. Now we're doing something that, to me, is true co-production. Out in the community.'

The emphasis on 'true co-production' as something that is related to trying things 'out in the community' that might not work immediately aligns with the participants' shared vision of doing something for and within the local area, even though participants acknowledge that this process may entail some mistakes. Throughout the process, participants expressed varying understandings of co-production. Nevertheless, common themes included creating something together with a shared purpose, strengthen and helping each other in joint contributions to the process. When actions were driven by a few or a single actor, the participants did not regard the process as genuine co-production.

Although activities were developed in all areas, implementation varied. Some activities were established early on in the process, while others emerged after the fifth workshop, where children and adolescents were directly involved in the development of ideas for activities. Recruitment of children and adolescents for participation in the new, local activities, however, remained a challenge in all areas except Solvang. The recruitment issue caused significant frustration among the workshop participants.

For many participants, the co-production process contributed to developing their knowledge capacity and relational capacity – key dimensions of community capacity. Participants applied insights gained during the co-production process in other professional contexts and formed new networks that facilitated future collaborations. These elements were valued by some participants. However, for those primarily motivated toward the specific outcome of developing activities for the target group (viewing community capacity as a means), the project was perceived as less successful when implementation failed. This contrast in attitudes highlights the contested nature of community capacity building: while some participants valued knowledge exchange and relationship-building, others measured success in terms of tangible outcomes, such as the number of children and adolescents participating in the developed activities.

4.4. Competition for resources

Chaskin describes that a key characteristic in community capacity is economic, human, physical, and political resources. Communities with capacity can gather internal or external resources that can support their development (Chaskin, 2001, p. 297). Through the thematic analysis, 'competition for resources' was identified as a key factor in explaining how participants in the co-production processes perceived their capacity to obtain/mobilize different kinds of resources.

Participants held different positions in their organizations, this influenced their perception of how much authority they had to utilize the resource allocation for the project. In Skovly and Bakkedal, participants employed under a manager struggled to determine how much working hours and effort they could allocate to the project. For example, a municipal employee took on a substantial task, only to later find out that the manager did not approve of this level of involvement. These tensions highlight the significant interactions between role negotiation and the use of resources that took place throughout the process, inhibiting community capacity building.

Resource mobilization was especially hindered when the project was seen as a detached research initiative rather than a prioritized initiative to support the participants' organizational agendas and strategies. This issue was elaborated by Oscar, an employee of a regional sports organization, in a focus group interview in Granlunden:

> The reason you are involved should be because it fits into your strategy for the next few years. […] The same goes for me, so that I can see that the hours and resources I put into the project here actually align with X's [name of organization] strategy. Otherwise, it becomes a separate track that is easy to jump off: 'There were also other things that were more important.' But if you succeed in creating that purpose […] 'We have a common vision and are aware that if we succeed here, we all succeed with what we are otherwise working on.' I just don't think that this was clear enough from the start.

Oscar's reflection underscores the importance of aligning community capacity building processes with broader organizational agendas. When a project resonates with professional priorities, participants are more likely to activate resources, gather them in the project, and succeed in multiple arenas.

The Assist project was undertaken and coexisted alongside other initiatives with similar visions and target groups. Participants expressed concerns about 'overexploiting' or 'cannibalizing' each other's resources, as the projects draw on the same relationships, physical spaces (rooms), and organizations. The Assist project, in its capacity as a research project, was often positioned as a potential 'competitor' to related types of initiatives, an issue that was particularly pronounced in Skovly, where a community stakeholder eventually withdrew from the co-production process. The stakeholder, however, remained interested in the insights generated through the child and parent involvement processes (the fifth workshop) in the Assist project, illustrating that resource sharing is not solely about availability but also about strategic alignment and perceived values.

Returning to Chaskin's framework, the analysis suggests that *access to resources* is not enough to ensure community capacity building. The *activation* of resources is contingent upon strategic alignment with existing initiatives and professional role and preferences. When community capacity efforts compete rather than complement, sustaining engagement becomes difficult. Furthermore, when participants struggle to mobilize their own resources, they also face challenges in reaching external ones, that for example could be used to engagement children and adolescents in the local area in the developed activities.

5. Discussion

Our findings reveal the contradictions that can emerge in community capacity building processes, thus challenging the dominant assumption that such processes are inherently valuable.

While the participants shared a common vision of supporting children's leisure-time physical activity, the process of translating this

vision into action was fraught with tensions. These included competing priorities, role ambiguity, competition for resources, and perception of the research protocol as an obstacle. Moreover, the level of commitment to the project was not static but presented an ongoing negotiation affected by institutional constraints and individual motivations. Most of the challenges and contradictions described here are not unique to the Assist project. They reflect broader structural and organizational complexities that arise when community capacity building efforts interact with research-practice collaborations.

Thus, Chaskin (2001, p. 315) already identified several complications in translating community capacity building into action based on two earlier case studies. Chaskin cited key challenges such as collaboration between participating organizations, ambiguity of roles and expectations, conflicting interests, and costs related to participation. However, while Chaskin emphasizes the need for community actors to act on a common agenda and develop 'a working consensus – a basic agreement about goals and means' (Chaskin, 2001, p. 316), our findings suggest that even when participants initially have a common agenda and agree on collaboration processes, negotiating and interpreting roles and commitments remain fluid throughout the entire process. This fluidity underscores the dynamic nature of co-production, where initial agreements do not necessarily translate into sustained engagement. We have also found that participants' commitment was subject to negotiation both among the participants themselves and between them and their respective organizations, illustrating the complex interplay between individual agency and institutional constraints and interests. A recommendation for future community capacity building and co-production efforts is to take the dynamic nature of participatory processes seriously. This entails continuously revisiting the understanding of role distribution - both among participants and within their respective organizations - throughout the process. This involves not only agreeing on role labels (e.g., "recruitment") but also discussing the actual content of each role and the meanings different stakeholders assign to them. Furthermore, while role distribution can help delegate tasks and break down complex issues into manageable parts, ongoing dialogue should also include negotiation around how roles are interconnected and how individual contributions can support one another. Such efforts appear essential for enabling "True co-production", where participants collaborate rather than work in separate tracks, as the findings also illustrate.

A key finding in this article is that the participants primarily viewed co-production (as part of community capacity building) as a means to an end, the end being to develop successful activities for children and adolescents in the local housing areas. Community capacity building was not considered a goal and constitutive element in itself. This finding aligns with Laverack and Labonte's argument that community capacity building in health promotion is often affected by tensions between being considered an instrumental element in reaching health-related goals and being a constitutive element in itself (Labonte & Laverack, 2001, p. 111). When participants in Assist did not perceive community capacity as a goal or as important as the program outcome, including the unavoidable mistakes as part of the processes, they placed less emphasis on sustaining the structures and relationships developed through the project. This finding helps explain why some of the initially developed capacities by participants were not seen as integral to success but rather as secondary to achieving immediate program outcomes.

Laverick and Labonte developed the concept of a parallel-track model as a way of co-considering the goal of health outcomes and community outcomes (Labonte et al., 2002; Laverack & Labonte, 2000; Vatcharavongvan et al., 2013). The parallel-track model suggests that health outcomes and community capacity should be pursued simultaneously, as a parallel track to a given health promotion program, rather than treating capacity building as a means to an end (Labonte & Laverack, 2001, p. 115; Labonte et al., 2002). Their model positions community capacity building as being of equally importance as the health promotion outcome itself (Laverack & Labonte, 2000). Although the Assist project from the outset intended to focus on the importance of both community capacity building in itself and to achieve specific program outcomes—namely, the development of movement activities for children in local areas—this dual purpose was not clearly reflected in the perceptions of those involved beyond the research team. Several factors may explain this. One possibility is that this dual purpose was not sufficiently communicated or cultivated throughout the process. Another explanation could be that many of the stakeholders, within their respective professional roles, were accustomed to working toward clearly defined outcomes and measuring success by the extent to which those outcomes were achieved, rather than focusing on the process itself and the competencies that might emerge through it. Future research in how to engage communities in supporting children and adolescents' leisure-time physical activity could benefit from more explicitly addressing these challenges and working systematically with a parallel-track approach.

Methodologically, this study focused on the interactions between participants in a co-production process, using observations of workshops as the primary method, supplemented by focus group interviews. This approach provided rich insights into the 'engine room' of co-production processes, illuminating not only the participants' perceptions and experiences but also dilemmas, frustrations, and negotiations. However, the co-production process extends beyond formal workshops. Many activities took place 'behind the scenes' in the interval between the workshops, influencing what transpired during these. A more embedded ethnographic approach, e.g. a go-along approach also capturing informal interactions and behind-the-scenes negotiations, might have provided different insights into the overall process. However, using a go-along approach following all the involved participants outside the workshop room would be time-consuming and difficult to practice. Instead, by combining workshop observation with focus group discussions, this study was able to capture both immediate interactions in the workshops and participants' perceptions of these interactions and the overall process in a retrospective light, providing a robust account of the complexities of community capacity building.

As a final remark in this discussion, attention is drawn to the degree of children and adolescents' participation in the Assist project. The co-production process was designed to activate community capacity at an organizational and network level. Children and adolescents from the public housing areas were only invited to participate in the fifth co-production workshop, primarily at a knowledge-sharing and informational level (idea generation) (Wong et al., 2010). If the aim of the Assistproject had been to achieve a higher degree of youth participation, such as engagement in decision-making and actions, this would have required a different research design, for example one inspired by Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). In YPAR children and adolescents are engaged as co-researchers or partners to take action and develop solutions to a complex issue (Lindquist-Grantz & Abraczinskas, 2020). YPAR has previously been used as a health intervention design to increase youth voices in decisions concerning issues they wish to address in their community, related to opportunities for physical activity (Anselma et al., 2020; Lindquist-Grantz & Abraczinskas, 2020). Some studies show that when youth are involved in participatory action research, the community capacity to promote social change increases, as well as the effectiveness of the program (Kim, 2019). Based on these findings, a higher degree of youth participation in Assist might have mitigated the recruitment challenges associated with the co-produced physical activity offers - challenges that led to frustration among stakeholders in Assist. However, YPAR projects also face challenges and barriers (Kim, 2019). Among others, these include relational challenges (e.g. limited trust and power imbalance between youth participants and adult researchers), and ethical issues (e.g. potential risks to youth in terms of emotional distress and interpersonal conflicts (Kim, 2019). Taken together, both the challenges and the positive potential must be considered when determining the degree of youth participation in community capacity building efforts.

6. Conclusion

This article examined how participating stakeholders ascribed meaning to a co-production process as part of building community capacity to assist children and adolescents' leisure-time physical activity in public housing areas.

Our analysis showed that most participating stakeholders did not perceive the co-production process to build community capacity as a valuable track. Instead, they prioritized achieving the specific outcome of developing activities for children in the area, often treating capacity building as an incidental by-product rather than a core objective and an essential collective competence to solve problems together. While stakeholders initially aligned around a shared vision of supporting children and adolescents' leisure-time physical activity, their level of commitment was continuously negotiated throughout the process. Ambiguities in content of roles and project responsibilities, competition for resources, and frustrations adhering to a research-based design that they considered unflexible further complicated engagement. As a result, the participants often distanced themselves from the project, leading to a lack of ownership and difficulties in mobilizing and activating resources.

A key contribution of this article is the insights offered into critical perspectives on co-production and community capacity building processes, which challenge the assumption of their inherent value. We have shown that the value of capacity building is not intrinsic but socially constructed and invariably contested among participants. While some stakeholders valued knowledge-sharing and relationship-building, others measured success through immediate programmatic outcomes. For some participants, community capacity building was but a means, for few, a noble end in itself. This divergence in priorities created tensions that ultimately influenced the project's trajectory and outcomes.

These findings have important implications for the design and implementation of future co-production processes and community capacity building initiatives. Those actors who want to pursue community capacity building as an equal important outcome as a specific health outcome need to ensure that their project accords with stakeholders' existing roles and organizational priorities so as to sustain engagement. When co-production efforts are perceived as competing with, rather than complementing, participants' existing commitments, co-production efforts risk being side-lined or failing altogether.

Ultimately, this article underscores the need for a more critical and reflexive approach to community capacity building that acknowledges its tensions and actively seeks to address them. Rather than assuming that community capacity building always has a positive value for the participant or to be a straightforward process, practitioners and researchers must engage with the complexities of meaning-making, negotiation, and strategic alignment that shape the perception of success or failure of such initiatives.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Camilla Bakkær Simonsen: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Charlotte Overgaard:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Sine Agergaard:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization.

Ethical considerations

The project is registered following the guidelines in force at Aalborg University during the time the project was carried out.

Informed consent to participation and publication of results has been conducted (written and explained verbally) by all stakeholders.

Data availability statement

Interview guides and observation guides are available.

Interview transcripts and field notes from observations are not available due to GDBR regulations.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmqr.2025.100657.

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