

Having lunch with my friends - Participatory research involving children – openings, opportunities, obligations and considerations

Ida Kornerup, Ass. Prof. Ph.d. , University College UCC, Copenhagen, Department of Research, Development and Internationalization. Research Program for Didactics and Learning Environments.

Kira S. Christensen, Ass. Prof., University College UCC, Copenhagen, Department of Research, Development and Internationalization. Research Program for Didactics and Learning Environments.

Keywords;

Children's rights, children's voice, children's participation in research

Introduction

The aim of this paper is, through an empirical research study, to focus on how to involve children in research and developing processes. The paper will present and discuss a case study involving four groups of children at the ages of three to five years. The case is part of a larger participatory research study investigating learning environments in Danish preschools.

Due to a European focus on effective preschool practice, many preschools have been enrolled in educational programs and projects aiming to develop more effective and high quality practice. In most of these projects the focus for development is the pedagogical staff, though both The Conventions on Children's Rights and The Danish Act on Daycare highlight children's involvement in daily life as a right and as a vital part of a democratic learning environment.

(4). Day-care facilities shall give children co-determination, co-responsibility and an understanding of democracy. (Danish Act on Daycare. ACT no. 501 of June 6, 2007)

From the outset this research project has sought to question the fact that, in spite of the obligation of preschools to give children the right of co-determination, children are rarely involved and given a voice in the development processes of care and education in preschools. Therefore this paper is centered on the following questions;

- How can researchers, the pedagogical staff and children collaborate in participatory research?
- What happens when we involve children and ask them to participate in daily life decision-making and development processes of preschool learning environments?
- 'What considerations must be taken into account by researchers in connection with involving children

The aim of the overall research project is to investigate how preschools can develop and offer high quality-learning environments for all children. The purpose is to develop knowledge and methods that will qualify preschool teachers' competence in offering high quality care and learning environments with a focus on children's learning potentials. In the research project, we investigate different types of learning environments, but in this paper we present a specific empirical case where researchers, pedagogical staff and children collaborated on how to develop lunch as a high quality learning environment. Our theoretical approach to learning is interactionist and sociocultural theory (Mead, Blumer, Bruner, Lave and Wenger, Vygotsky), and therefore in this paper 'high quality learning environment' refers to a learning environment that is capable of providing access to participation for each individual child, challenging the present zone of knowledge and offering a community of learning and social interactions.

In the empirical case, the research object was a study of lunchtime. The aim was to understand and develop lunchtime as more than just eating a meal. To study the daycare lunchtime the children were enrolled as co-researchers. As well as having little knowledge on how children experience their learning environments, we also were in need of methods to involve children in these processes. Therefore, the methodological perspective on how to carry out the involvement process and the ethical considerations in these processes became a vital part of the research study. In this paper, we analyze and discuss the openings, opportunities, obligations and considerations of the involvement process. The point of departure will be the specific case study, but throughout the paper we open our questions toward a more general focus on the involvement process of children in research and development processes as a window of knowledge on children's perspectives on daily life, including the learning environments. We will also discuss how it affected the pedagogical staff to listen to the children, and how the staff reacted and changed their procedures and preschool practice due to another optic and view of the children's intentions and actions.

Methods/methodology

Our overall methodological approach is participatory research in the sense of collaboration between researchers, pedagogical staff and children.

In the theoretical and methodological approach we use micro sociological and interactionist theories (Goffmann, Mead, Blumer, Bruner), but we are also inspired by and use methods from theories and methods on empowerment research (Hart, Clarck, Hartcourt, Moss, Veale and others). Using interactionist theory forces the researcher to focus on actions, co-actions, lines of co-actions and interactions. We are interested in studying 'participation' in the sense of actions, and throughout the study we constantly focused on how to remain open to, and give opportunities for, children's participation and being active in the research process.

In the paper, we will analyze and discuss the empirical data and focus not just on using the methods, but also on the necessary ethical considerations in a process of involving small children in these kinds of methods. We have been specifically interested in developing not only methods that encourage verbalized participation, but also methods that invite and open up to more visual and body-oriented ways of giving a voice to children. Our empirical studies show that collaboration and involving younger children calls for a mixed methodological approach.

Why involve children?

As stated in the beginning, children have a political and legal right to be involved in decisions. Since the convention of children's right in 1989 was enacted, there has been an increasing effort to involve children more and more both legally but also as part of a daily life practice. In the Scandinavian countries children's involvement in many ways has been imbedded in the development of the welfare state, as part of the increasing democratization and humanization strategies, as part of new views and theories of the child and childhood within psychology and sociology (Samuelsen et al. 2011, Moss et al. 2005). In both families and pedagogical practices children were more seen and heard, but it is still not a legal practice in Denmark to involve children in practice developing processes. The Danish 'daycare act' is very open for interpretation, and it is only stated that involvement is to be understood as co- processes.

Our project shows, that involving children is not just a question of *children's right to involvement – it becomes a way to gain new knowledge and generate a higher professional knowledge. We have found, that the creation of collective knowledge (professional's and children's) is a didactic grip on how professional knowledge, the optic of the professional's and their actions are linked to children's participatory potentials.* These findings becomes an essential argument for emphasizing the link between learning environments for professionals and learning environments for children, and for the connectedness between, how professionals meet and understand children and how the prerequisites for participation either opens or closes for the children. To involve children becomes a way to gain professional knowledge and a way to higher the quality of preschools.

How do we involve the children?

The challenges were many. First of all children have diverse prerequisites and repertoires for participation and second, children are in an inferior position to adult. This means that power relations are always present, not just between adults and children, but also between the children.

The participating children were a diverse group of children, with different nationalities (some not speaking Danish) and between three and five years of age. Our goal was to provide a diverse range of opportunities to allow the children a voice into the development process. Therefore the methods used in the involvement process were a mixture of methods with inspiration from Clark, Hart, Jungk and others. The process were divided into 3 steps and carried out during a four-week course. In this period the children took photos during lunchtime, focusing on what they liked and disliked. During the first three weeks they created posters using the photos, documenting their lunchtime. The second step was to elaborate on the photos.

All photos were put on a poster in the categories of like, dislikes and other. The photos were placed at the eye level of the children, and at places where children would meet and start dialogues. The staff is also urged to start dialogues with children, in order to elaborate more on the photos, and to encourage children's dialogues and democratic practice. Also parents are invited to dialogue with the children about it.

Some children were interviewed by their teachers (pedagogues) and asked to expand their stories behind the photo, a process that needed respect for children's statements and intimacy with the child during the interview process in order to create an equal partnership during the project. The challenge was also to be able to go beyond the statement and the photo, without violating the statement. An example was a boy who had taken a photo of a fish. This photo was taken in the category of dislikes. He was asked why he

didn't like the fish, he said it was boring. During the elaborating process, the boy extended his response and story, and what he didn't like, was to look at the fish. Every day he was seated at the same place at the table, looking into the wall with a poster with 'the fish'. So the fish was more a symbol of his inferiority, he was not asked where he wanted to be seated or more important, who to be seated next to. This elaborative and interviewing process showed a need to go deeper into interviewing and narrative methods working with children and how professionals can support children's elaborative process.

Using the data we collected through these first three weeks, we, as step 3, held a workshop with the children, where they collectively elaborated on the photos and created new scenarios of lunchtime in smaller groups. The elements of the workshop were inspired by 'The Future Workshop' developed by Jungk (1998), but it had to be framed and unfolded in an alternative way according to the age and experience of the children. In the workshop children and researchers worked in small groups. In the beginning we held a workshop with a larger group of children, but the diversity in the group showed us, that smaller groups are better to accommodate the different needs and participatory repertoires. We have since developed a model where we recommend 3-4 children per adult. This group size leaves space for diverse participation, and at the same time, the group is still able to cooperate during the workshop.

Finally, after the workshop, all data were analyzed in a collaborating process (the reflective workshop) with the pedagogical staff, followed by experiments and changes for lunchtime. During this process, the professionals experienced what they called an 'eye opener'. This knowledge that was extracted from the children's photos and stories created a specific curiosity, an optic of curiosity. It changed the optic of the professionals, because they became aware of the creation of meaning, they became engaged of what the children were engaged with.

Children's voices and the findings



The voice and wishes of the children



Likes and wishes/ideas

- To have fun and be happy with ones friends
- To talk with our friends
- To participate in the preparation of the lunch
- To help each other
- To manage and take actions - to butter the bread myself and decide what to put on
- To be supported and taken care of by adults

Dislikes

- Always to be seated on the same spot
- Not to be able to decide what to eat, how to eat and in what order to eat
- Not to be able to have fun during lunch, or talk to friends
- Not to participate and do things one selves
- Food you don't like

The above shows a conglomerate of a large pile of statements. Children have a desire to be more active, allowed more space for exploring and very important part, having fun and being with ones friends.

This knowledge and desires often becomes in opposition to the teachers intentions and actions during lunchtime. As we saw in the beginning of the project, teachers were occupied with regulations, rules and good manners during lunchtime. In this way, staff became more occupied regulating and disciplining, a way of acting and being with the children, which often prevented curiosity, closeness and engagement with the children. The optic was preventing unrest and interruptions, which also blinded the optic of children's engagement and preoccupation.

Challenging the voicing process

One of the challenges in this process was to go from the involvement of children, to changing lunchtime. Children's voices are voices of both contradictions but also voices of repression. Realizing this, forces the staff to look inside and behind the logics of practice and actions. Pedagogical practice is often dominated by hidden agendas and institutional logics, logics that also work behind the back of the teachers. To go beyond the voices forces analyze of daily practice and actions, and the drive to understand the multi voices becomes what we have called 'the second degree of curiosity'. As stated earlier, the professionals had to take the 'optic of curiosity' in order to understand the children's curiosity, engagement and participation during lunchtime.

So the changes of lunchtime became more a different view, and thereby also the opening of a much more participatory agenda for the children. In this case lunch became a high quality learning environment, in the understanding of quality as the opening of participatory pathways and possibilities for mutual engagement and fun.

Concluding remarks

The investigation of the current way of having lunch in the daycare setting and the following invention of an alternative way of having lunch could not have been carried out without involving the children. The empirical study of involving children makes it very clear that including children's voices in research and development processes allows for new insights and knowledge – in this case, not just knowledge on organizing lunch in a different way, but also fundamental knowledge on how meaning, participation and learning derives from daily life processes.

One specifically interesting analytical finding from this particular case study was that children at this age are not familiar with participating in processes of giving critique. Critique here refers to the ability and democratic right to question the existing doxa in (preschool) daily-life and practice. They showed difficulties in elaborating on their critique, though observation studies carried out before involving the children showed that the present way of having lunch precluded the children's participation rather than opening up to interaction and participation. At the same time, the children seemed more comfortable explaining what they liked when questioned about that.

A part of the research is to develop a 'frame of methods' that will allow for more democratic and involving processes in daily life in preschools. The frame of methods should be like a toolbox and is envisaged as a way to secure children's rights to be listened to and be given a voice.

Note

In this paper we have not elaborated on the ethical considerations of involving children, since the ECER network already had had these discussions. This was noted in the review process of our abstract.

References

- Almqvist, Anna-Lena and Lena Almqvist (2014): Making oneself heard – children's experiences of empowerment in Swedish preschools. *Early Child Development and Care*, Routledge. Published online: July 24, 2014.
- Blumer, H. (1986): *Symbolic Interactionism*. University of California Press.
- Børnerådet (2011). *Regler og medbestemmelse i børnehaven*. Minibørnpanelet.
- Brembeck, H. et al. (2010). *Barn som medforskere av matlandskap*. Del 1. Göteborg: Centrum for konsumtionsvetenskap.
- Bruner, J. (1985): "Vygotsky, A Historical and Conceptual Perspective". In Wertsch (Ed). *Culture, Communication and Cognition, Vygotskian perspectives*. Cambridge University Press. Bruner, J. (1998): *Uddannelseskulturen*. Socialpædagogisk bibliotek, Munksgaard
- Clark, Alison (2005). Listening to and involving young children: a review of research and practice. *Early Childhood Development and Care*, 175:6, pp. 489-505. Routledge.
- Clark, Alison (2011). Ways of seeing: Using the Mosaic approach to listen to young children's perspectives. www.sagepub.com.
- Convention on the Rights of the Child. UNICEF
- Dagtilbudsloven, LBK nr 1240 af 29/10/2013 – **Act of Daycare Danish Act on Daycare**. ACT no. 501 of June 6, 2007

Eide B.J. & N. Winger (2005,71-89.). From the Children's point of view: Methodological and Ethical Challenges. I; : A. Clark, A.T. Kjørholt & P. Moss. Beyond Listening. *Children's perspectives on Early Childhood Services*. The Policy Press. University of Bristol, 2005,

Emilsson, Anette & Eva Johansson (2013). Participation and gender in circle-time situations in preschool. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 21:1, pp. 56-69. Routledge.

Garbarino, James et al. (1992). *Children in Danger. Coping with the consequences of community violence*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Goffman, E. (1967/2001): *Anstalt og menneske – den totale institution socialt set*. Saxo.

Grindland B. (2011). *Uenighet som demokratisk praksis i måltidsfellesskapet på småbarnsavdeling*. Nordisk Barnhageforskning. Vol. 4. Nr.2. 75 – 90.

Gulbrandsen, Liv Mette (ed.) (2014). *Børns deltakelse i hverdagsliv og professionelle praksis- en utforskende tilnærming*. Universitetsforlaget AS. Oslo.

Harcourt . D. & J. Einarsdottir (2011). *Editorial to Introducing Children's Perspectives and Participation in Research*. European Early Childhood Educational Research Journal. Vol. 19. No. 3, Sept. 2011, 301 – 307.

Harcourt D. & S. Hägglund (2013). *Turning the UNCRC Upside Down*. International Journal of early Years Education. 2013, 286 – 299.

Hart, R. A. (1992). *Children's Participation, From Tokenism to Citizenship*. Unicef.

Johansson, Barbro & MariAnne Karlsson (red). (2013). *Att involvere barn i forskning och utveckling*. Studentlitteratur. Lund.

Johansson, Eva (2003). "Att närma sig barns perspektiv- forskares och pedagogers möten med barns perspektiv". *Pedagogisk Forskning i Sverige* 2003, årgang 8 nr. 1-2, pp. 42-57.

Jungk, Robert (1998) *Håndbog i fremtidsværksteder*. Politisk Revy.

K. Nielsen (2015). Læring: Ikke daginstitutionens eller skolens patent.; J. Klitmøller og D. Sommer (red). *Læring, dannelse og udvikling*. Hans Reitzels Forlag. "(2005, 293 – 312).

Kornerup, Ida & Mimi Petersen (2014). Børns rettigheder og medborgerskabs- dannelse. In Kornerup, I. & Næsby, T. (eds.): *Pædagogens grundfaglighed. Grundbog til pædagoguddannelsen*. Frederikshavn: Dafolo Forlag.

Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (2004): *Situeret læring og andre tekster*. Hans Reitzels forlag.

Levin I. & J.Trost (2005). *Hverdagsliv og samhandling*. Fagbokforlaget Vigmostad & Bjørke AS, Bergen.

Moss, P, A. Clark & A.T. Kjørholt (2005). Introduction. I: A. Clark, A.T. Kjørholt & P. Moss. Beyond Listening. *Children's perspectives on Early Childhood Services*. The Policy Press. University of Bristol.

Petersen, *Sikkerhed i centrum - Undersøgelse af Roskilde Kommunes arbejde med sikkerhedsplaner som foranstaltning for udsatte børn og familier i 2011-2014*.

Powell, Mary Ann & Anne B. Smith (2009). *Children's Participation Right in Research*. Sage.
<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Samuelsson, Pramling I, D. Sommer & K. Hundeide (2011). *Barnperspektiv och barnets perspektiv i teori og praktik*. Liber.

Udenrigsministeriet (1992): *Bekendtgørelse af FN-konvention af 20. november 1989 om Barnets Rettigheder. (FN's Børnekonvention)*. BKl nr. 5 af den 16. januar 1992. Udenrigsministeriet.

Veale A. (2005, 253 - 272). Creative methodologies in participatory research with children. I: Green S. & D. Hogan (2005). *Researching Children's Experience*. Sage Publications. London.

Warming, H. (2011): *Børneperspektiver. Børn som ligeværdige medspillere i socialt og pædagogisk arbejde*. København: Akademisk Forlag.

The research project * Learning for All* <https://ucc.dk/forskning/forskningsprogrammer/didaktik-og-laeringsrum/aktuelle-projekter/laering-alle>
