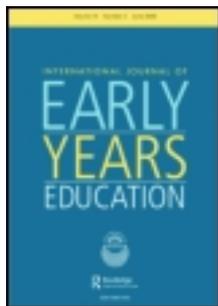


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Children's participation in research

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In (post) modern society children are seen as active subjects and participants who have a legitimate basis in the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child. As a consequence of this, children are able to play an active role in the planning of and participation in both education and research in their own preschool settings. This article offers an argument based on theory and practical examples for the inclusion of children in education and educational research. It also introduces some of the problems which warrant consideration if researchers are to understand and cooperate with children as co-researchers. The author portrays the educational process and the research process as a possible way for the democratisation of children.

Keywords: participatory research; children; preschool; democratisation

Introduction

In general, research in the field of early childhood education and care focuses on children and educational practice. Consequently, there is a tendency to objectify children and educational staff, creating a distance between the researcher and the researched. In order to suspend this separation, there have been many research practices where researchers and preschool teachers unify their different competences in so-called action research projects based on Kurt Lewin's ideas of social change (Kemmis 1988; Lewin 1946). In action research preschool teachers and researchers plan educational changes together, they collect and analyse data, and based on this they plan and carry out the next action step in order to implement and evaluate educational changes. They have a shared activity with common aims and thus suspend the distance between researcher and researched. Nonetheless children continue to be seen as objects. Hence, the need to explore how children can be included in research projects, given a voice and the possibility of actively participating in research.

View of children in the twenty-first century

There is considerable variation in early childhood research. We still see research which objectifies children and does not take their agency into consideration. However, we also see more democratic research approaches. Regardless of the variation in educational methods and principles used in early childhood education and care, the emergence of modernity, postmodern and post-structuralism

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characterised by Giddens (1990) brings new possibilities for realising the ideas of some progressive educators from the nineteenth and twentieth century: namely, seeing children not as objects, and as participants and subjects with their own rights and responsibilities. Societal changes during the last two or three decades have paved the way for the emergence of a new type of childhood, characterised first of all by individualism and the idea of self-formation, often extended to include children's responsibility for their own learning (Bjørger 1991). In Denmark the phrase 'learning has replaced teaching' is often used. This postmodern perspective focuses on children's existing and emerging competencies, rather than on adult-like qualities they still lack. The model is generative rather than deficit-based.

Thus, step by step, as modern societies have changed with respect to their views about the children's place, educators' views about children and childhood have also changed. Both literally and figuratively, children in modern and postmodern societies are now heard and seen. Their rights are to be taken seriously and protected. For example, in Norway, Sweden and Iceland, children have their own official ombudsman, while Denmark has established a similar, but less influential *Børneråd*, or advisory board. These official advocates are charged with ensuring that children's voices are not only heard, but also correctly understood within the larger society.

Most important for the protection and promotion of children was the creation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989). This landmark legislation delineated rights for children and expressed vision and hope for children the world over. Related to the theme of valuing children's perspectives, the Convention specifies four fundamental and universal rights for children: the right to survive; the right to develop to the fullest; the right to protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation; and the right to participate fully in family, cultural and social life. It is the right to develop to the fullest and the right to participate fully that are most closely aligned with postmodern notions of self-formation and of children as subjects, not objects, as well as the theoretical perspective that children are active participants in their own development and constructors or co-constructors of their own knowledge.

General changes in society and strong political support for children's rights have coupled with postmodern views and theories on childhood, establishing a new understanding of what children's lives should be like. These changes can be accumulated and expressed in three dimensions: (1) children are seen as competent and with agency, (2) educators have to take children's perspective into consideration and (3) in educational practice and research educators and researchers must give children influence and see them as active participants.

- (1) The phrase 'competent children with agency' refers to a new childhood paradigm (James, Jenks, and Prout 1998), which argues for the study of childhood, children's relations, and children's culture in their own right, rather than as a consequence of external social forces and influences. Proponents of this perspective see children as whole and complete persons with their own status, needs and rights, and not as incomplete versions of the adults they will become. Thus they do not see children as incompetent human beings who have to go through a primary socialisation to establish a fundamental trust or secure attachment before they can meet the outer world with new peers and adults. They are competent and ready to participate in

social life, so to say, as new-borns. This point of view matches the realities of modern life in many parts of the world.

Also the shift from developmental psychology to childhood psychology (Sommer 1998) has paved the way for the idea of the competent child. Developmental psychology focuses primarily on change over time in various domains, including intellectual, social, emotional, physical, linguistic and ethical, and thus focuses on 'what is the child becoming' or 'what the child is lacking at this age'. Childhood psychology, on the other hand, focuses on characteristics and attributes of children in all domains from an additive rather than a deficit perspective. In short, childhood psychology does not view new-born children either as isolated from the surrounding world or born relatively unskilled. On the contrary, childhood psychology operates from the perspective that children are born with internal communicative competences and an interdependent mind (i.e. they are aware of being dependent on others and of others' being dependent upon them). Thus, the phrase 'the competent child' has gained wide acceptance and cachet (Melzoff and Moore 1998; Murray and Trevarthen 1985; Stern 1985; Trevarthen 1998).

- (2) The term 'children's perspective' is an umbrella term incorporating a variety of interrelated concepts and philosophical stances (Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson, and Hundeide 2010; Strandell 1997). Researchers often refer to one of two different orientations towards the concept: (1) they may focus their attention on the ways in which adults look at children and reflect on what they, as adults, perceive to be the children's perspectives; or (2) they may focus on how children look at their own world, their conditions and themselves (Qvarsell 2003). Thus, the concept 'children's perspective' encompasses how adults and society try to understand children's lives, as well as how children themselves experience and describe their lives. Children's perspectives are complex and touch on such matters as how parents should raise their children in a postmodern era, which rights children should have, and the extent to which children should approach equality with adults and be emancipated. In general, the idea of children's perspective opens the way for:

taking children's standpoints and listening to children from their position as children, and as an adult, imagining how children think in an effort to reduce the distance between the generations, which can hinder communication. (Strandell 1997, 19) (author's translation)

- (3) The third perspective, 'children as participants' refers to a general view, taking shape in many different disciplines and theories, wherein children are consistently viewed as active members of their own culture and society, with both the right and the capacity to influence their own lives. In short, children are seen as active participants in a democratic society and, therefore, as active 'democrats' (a translation into English of a term frequently used in Denmark). This is expressed in the Danish act:

Preschool must give children possibility for participation in decision making and joint responsibility and understanding for democracy, and to contribute to children's autonomy and abilities to participate in binding social communities. (Socialministeriet 2011) (author's translation)

Children as participants have a legitimate basis in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989) saying that children should have more than an indirect influence on educational planning and practice via the preschool teacher's interpretation of children's interests and current conditions. The Convention emphasises that children have the right to express their own views, to be listened to, and to be actively involved in decisions that affect them. In other words, it is imperative that children have opportunities to practice the principles of democracy throughout their early childhood years. The phrase 'children as active participants' emphasises children as subjects, not objects, and social agents (Jensen and Schnack 1997; Jørgensen and Kampmann 2000).

In early childhood education in the Nordic countries, the focus has shifted from the notion of 'cooperation with the children' – where teachers seek children's cooperation (rather than simply their compliance) in activities and experiences the adults have designed – to a situation where children actually influence and participate in planning the educational process (Pramling Samuelsson and Sheridan 2003). Children are seen as 'human beings' rather than 'human becomings' (Qvortrup et al. 1994). Taken together, this creates potential and pathways for children to participate in society with a status that is roughly equivalent to the status of adults.

Early childhood education and care in the twenty-first century

The aforementioned three understandings – the competent child, children's perspective and children as participants – have been incorporated to a large extent into early childhood education and care. Children have achieved a new status, voice and role, and are seen as equal members of society – they are seen as human beings, as democrats.

The democratic person is a political subject with knowledge and skills and with a desire to make use of these in transformative practice. This is a person who has knowledge, skills and will to realise these in action. This can be summarised with the concept of 'action competence' (Schnack 2003). Such an aim is defined as *Bildung* ideal in which the critical dimension is expressed: the individual uses his knowledge in order to 'participate in decision making and joint responsibility' as it is framed in the Danish act (Socialministeriet 2011) (author's translation).

A democratic education and education to democracy are among others reflected by the German *Bildung* theory and expressed by the German scholar Klafki's (1996, 1995) approach: Critical-Constructive Didaktik. This approach 'is oriented to the goal of guiding all children and adolescents to greater capacity for self-determination, co-determination and solidarity' (Klafki 1995, 191). Klafki aims towards children's *Bildung* but he also demands a *Bildung* process, which can be defined through following three criteria concordant with the tradition of early childhood education and care: (1) Children's own activity, and dialogue with other, (2) a feeling of obligation and commitment and (3) participation, action and democracy (Broström 2006).

Today education cannot only be seen as a qualification- and socialisation process but also as a subjectification process (Biesta 2009). Subjectification is a process, which goes beyond qualification and socialisation in order to educate children to be autonomous and independent in thinking and action.

In Nordic early childhood education and care a democratic practice also draws on so-called postmodern preschool education as expressed by Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (2007) and Jensen (2012). This approach is willing to consider practice and

children without having an educational plan in advance. The educator believes in the strength of critical thinking, dialogue and experimentation, and is strongly inspired by postmodern psychologists like Barad (2007), Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and expressed by Taguchi (2010). Taguchi argues for a process oriented practice instead of a linear practice, in which the preschool teacher has prescribed educational goals, objectives and content formulated in advance. She wants an immanent co-operative, intra-active and rhizomatic practice, where the child has power and agency. The terms 'immanent' and 'rhizomatic' indicate that practice does not start with the end (predefined learning outcome). Taguchi (2010), with reference to Deleuze and Guattari (1987), states that the practice can start anywhere, and often in the middle. Thus a rhizomatic process is not unified but moves in many directions. During the process children experience new dimensions, which they will follow. That means, via social interaction or co-operative activities children create the process, they find out what to do and how to do it. They themselves formulate the question of interest and they set free all possible actions.

Children as subjects in research

When undertaking research in early childhood institutions where children are seen as competent and active participants, and where preschool teachers understand and treat them as active democrats, it is a paradox to include only the preschool teachers in the action research process. Children also have to be included. Researchers have to consider thoroughly in what ways they can give the children a voice and the possibility of participating as active subjects in research.

For decades, children have been involved in research as active informants. For example, phenomenological/ethnographical approaches emphasising qualitative research methods have resulted in a dramatic increase in the use of children as informants. A characteristic of the ethnographic work is that it recognises informants, in this case children, as experts on the subject of their own lives. The American ethnographer Jim Thomas defines the researcher's task as one of raising their 'voice to speak to an audience on behalf of their subjects as a means of empowering them by given more authority to the subject's voice' (Thomas 1993, 4). This trend brought with it many new possibilities and many new challenges in childhood research and its applications including participant observations and child interviews.

Most research in early childhood settings relies on observation, with varying degrees of researcher participation, as the primary data-gathering strategy. Often researchers practice open and active participant observations (Junker 1960; LeCompte and Preissle 1993). As they collect data, researchers also become actively engaged in supporting children in their daily activities. Thus, the role of the participant-observer as a researcher and the purpose of the study must be well known to the children, the parents and the teachers. Researchers who adopt an active membership role do more than participate in social activities as group members; they take part in the core activities of the group. In so doing, they generally assume functional, not solely research or social, roles in their settings (Adler and Adler 1987). Child interviews give the children a voice. Numerous researchers have described different forms of interviews including structured, semi-structured, unstructured and open-ended. Many investigators, including, for example, Pellegrini (1996), Pramling Samuelsson and Sheridan (2003), Doverborg-Österberg and

Pramling (1988) and Enggaard (1984), view the open-ended interview as the most helpful for generating data on the children's perspective.

Both observation and interview include children and give them a voice as informants (Jørgensen and Kampmann 2000). However, children are often still objects for researcher's activity, and this is not quite in accordance with the notion of the participating and competent child. Thus one might ask: is it possible to include children in research and to give them a more active role?

Children taking a research role

Children can be included in research with a more active role than just as informants. However, this may not be as real co-researchers. We see a growing trend in early childhood research towards engaging children as active participants in their own education. Engaging children in research on childhood is not only on the horizon but is a real thing.

For decades I have carried out research in preschool with close relation to and involvement of children. Through the use of active participant observations, everyday life conversations and open-ended interviews, children feel themselves comfortable and invited. As an example an extract from my observations protocol:

- (1) At my first observation day in preschool I sat rather close to a group of four and five year old boys playing with Beyblades (tops).
- (2) After a while a five year old boy asks me: 'What are you doing?'
- (3) 'I am writing about what happens in preschool, and what children are doing?'
- (4) He looked directly at me and spontaneously he exclaimed: 'I can write too'.
- (5) I responded and invited him: 'Well, here you are'. I handed over my protocol and my pen. He placed himself besides me and started to write. He used child squiggle writing, and for a while he was eagerly engaged in writing. Then he stopped and looked at me.
- (6) I asked him what he had written.
- (7) With his eyes in the protocol, he read with a clear voice: 'My Beyblade, the blue one, is the toughest of all. It hits the other and is the last... Well not every time... but I draw [the release mechanism] in my own way... that is why. We play every day. Sometimes we fight over who is the best. Louise (the preschool teacher) says we have to keep the Beyblades at home. Anyway we bring them to preschool'.
- (8) Simultaneously I wrote down his reading, and with that I got interesting data collected by a child.
- (9) In the meantime some more boys gather in order to see what was happening. Another boy explained: 'This is not true, we all win. We all win, we win by turns. It is just... sometimes you are lucky with...'

Because the child took the initiative to express his own thoughts and interpretation of what happens in the group of children quite new information was brought to the surface. First of all the child informed about the preschool teachers' attitude to fights between the boys; no doubt the child had understood the fact, that she does not like it when they argue and fight; she wants them to act harmoniously. This information opened my mind to explore gender specific dimensions in education.

If the researcher shows an open attitude to children they often understand this as an invitation to participate. In the aforementioned example, the participation was restricted to children's spontaneous verbal information. However, in other cases the children showed interest and were willing to take responsibility for a more goal-directed data collection.

Children doing interviews

Several studies have shown that children are able to act in research-like roles. A Danish researcher Hviid (1999) investigated six to nine-years old children's views about how they spent their leisure-time in their after-school programmes. In this study, the children served as researchers (Hviid 2000). They conducted interviews with friends about life in the after-school programme. They created the interview questions themselves, generating quite a different list of questions than Hviid herself had envisioned. The children decided whom to interview and handled the tape recorder and other logistics. The children generated quite different data than would have been collected had an adult constructed the interview and, therefore, produced new knowledge from the children's perspective. Among the findings of the study was that children characterised a good life in leisure-time as being engaged in interesting activities, as well as having the opportunity for social interactions. The worst thing at the leisure-time centre was to be excluded, to be outside the social life. As a nine years old girl said, 'You are standing here and feel lonely'.

The study showed that children can take a role as a researcher in the collection of data. The children in this study were about eight years, and the question is 'Can preschool children take such a role?' The example below seems to help answer this question.

Children using digital cameras

Related to a research project Description of the Danish preschool (Broström 2004), at lunch time I sat together with the group of the eldest children, four boys and three girls. We spoke about activities in preschool they liked and disliked. They were eager to list a numbers of activities, and their examples also showed some typical variations between girls' and boys' favourites. Based on this I asked them: 'Will you help me? I would be happy if you would take photos of your favourite place and situations in preschool: things which you like very much'. Gladly the children accepted the invitation, and each of them was equipped with a digital camera. During the afternoon and next morning they took lots of photos, all of which were printed. Each child made a photo collage, which they verbally presented for each other and me. The children's presentations were recorded on tape, transcribed and analysed together with the rest of data.

In another Danish study (Rasmussen and Smidt 2003), researchers asked young children aged 10–12 years to take photographs of places in the neighbourhood that they found interesting. Through reflection on the photos as well as the children's stories and arguments for taking these particular pictures, the researchers constructed a universe of meaning. For example, the children took photos of the dens and lairs they built in the loft of a home and outside in a tree. They also took photos of a shack they had constructed. Researchers interpreted the photos and children's comments

about them as illustrating children's need to create their own world separated from the adults.

The study explored the idea that children should be heard in the planning of their neighbourhood, as Christensen and O'Brien (2003) argued: 'An understanding of how children experience and construct a sense of place is a foundation for engaging children in changing such places' (1). These researchers interpreted children's data collection and presentation as representing their need to create their own world separated from the adults. As they published the results of their study, the researchers acknowledged their hope that their findings would enable children to have more freedom and opportunities for self-organisation in their preschools and schools (Christensen and O'Brien 2003).

The two studies described earlier highlight the possibility that action research is possible, not only with the educators but, with children and youth. This is also illustrated in the example below showing how a local community planned to build a children's culture house (Broström 2010).

Children as agents for change

For some years a number of preschools in a community in Copenhagen have used facilities in a kind of local culture house, where they have been involved in cultural activities like drawings, music, stories etc. The adult users and organisers of the house saw great potential in children's creative and active participation and expression, and decided to work politically for the establishment of a real and permanent children's culture house. From the outset, the children were included. Thus children and adults from the connected preschools were actively involved and engaged in the project. The Future Children's Culture House at Amager – When Children Get a Voice.¹

In order to let the children's ideas and wishes inform the project from the beginning, the architect invited children from the preschools to participate in four workshops (in all 20 hours) to give ideas to both content and fitting out the house. The children expressed their creative ideas, created models and explained all the details for the architect, who listened and asked questions. This generated a fruitful meeting about what characterises a child's culture.

In this project children were seen as participants in their own lives. The project groups and the architect not only involved the preschool teachers from the surrounding preschools, but the users themselves, the children. The project might be seen as a research project, where the children had a voice in the planning of their own future cultural activities.

Ethical reflections

Although at first it may seem meaningful and democratic to involve children in a role as co-researchers, this new practice also raises ethical questions. For example, children may not fully realise how much will be required of them in participating in a study when they first agree to take the role of co-researcher (e.g. Putnam, Liss, and Landsverk 1996). Of course children are informed of their rights to withdraw from the research. However, when nice preschool teachers and researchers ask for their participation, it is impossible almost for them to resist. This problem also occurs

when children interview their friends. If children find it more difficult to refuse to answer questions from a peer than from an unfamiliar adult researcher, they may feel pressured into participating. Research also shows that children are more likely to give private information to another child than to an adult researcher (Hviid 2000). Thus involving children in action research as co-researchers can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand in education and research it gives children a voice and, according to Biesta's (2009) word, opens a subjectification process which supports children to be autonomous and independent in thinking and action. On the other hand it affords researchers and preschool teachers the power to use children and the information they give to their own ends. This contradiction is not possible to solve. It calls for sensitivity on the part of preschool teachers and researchers' and reminds them that they must faithfully interpret children's thinking and emotions. Moreover, adults should use their creativity in order to construct research tools and practices which appeal to children.

Can children be co-researchers?

I have argued for children's participation in their own life, in education and research (Broström 2006, 2010). This standpoint is a logical consequence of a democratic view of children. Preschool teachers and researchers have to struggle with how they can extend their inclusion. However, they must also consider the ethical implications.

In addition, educators and researchers also need to reflect on the statement: 'Giving the child a voice in education and research is only a legitimising process caused by our own sense of guilt'. In our heart of hearts we realise the purpose of education, namely qualification and socialisation processes are dominant in education, whereas research processes in preschool, subjectification processes, are minor. Doing research together with children, and withdrawing children to be co-researchers, appeals to our conscience.

Finally, we also have to address a question: 'Is it an exaggeration to use the phrase 'children as co-researchers?' To what extent can children be involved in research? As described, we can arrange situations where they inform us about their thoughts, they can collect data via digital photos and when they interview each other. However, when doing this, they are not co-researchers. They have not been involved in the formulation of research goals or the planning of the research process. They do not design methods themselves; we ask them to use research methods constructed by the researchers. Although we ask them question about how to interpret photos and other results, they are really not a part of the process of analysis.

Nevertheless, they are not only objects. They are invited into the research process. We listen to them. We take them seriously. They act as subjects. They are conscious of our research goals and they agree to help us. I guess this is what is possible (at this historical moment). So they are not really co-researchers, but active and (more than less) conscious research supporters.

As researchers we need to be grateful for their help and support. They add authentic data which gives us the opportunity to work with valid data. In return, we need to construct methods they are confident with and which give them good experiences.

The participating child

To involve children actively in research and change processes is seen as a logical consequence of the educational view of the child as an active participant in a democratic society, an active democrat, and an understanding of research and education processes as subjectification processes. Thus the everyday educational practice and the research approach have to balance and to be in accordance with this view.

When parents, preschool teachers, researchers and citizen in society as a whole learn to take a child's perspective and view children as competent and contributing members of a democratic society, one might believe this is a possible pathway towards a more developed democracy. When children are accustomed to having a say and to being involved in cultural changes, it will be 'natural' for them to act in ways we refer to as political. Thus when terms like subjectification, children's perspective, participation and active influence on the surroundings become fundamental words in education for teachers, and also are integrated into new pedagogical theories, one might believe it possible to integrate a radical democratic perspective in society. Such a perspective is oriented towards the future and has a global reach. It views the democratic person as a political subject with knowledge and skills and, moreover, with a desire to make use of this to transform practice, in other words with action competence.

Conclusion

In this article I outlined my ideas and aspirations for the future of early childhood education and research. I argued for a consistent democratic view on children and educational practice. More specifically, educators and researchers should consider children as competent people with agency and the potential to act as active democratic participants and challenge themselves to take a child perspective. Researchers and educators are under an obligation to change the status quo. On the one hand children have the same rights as adults: Among other things, adults must invite them to express their opinions, to listen to them, to respect them as serious individuals who can to influence their own lives. Such dimensions are expressed in legislation and political documents on early childhood education and care. Such values are also visible in a number of early childhood research approaches.

However, behind the nice words and educational-political principal speech a miserable educational everyday life appears. I observe some problematic tendencies in early childhood education and research. In an international perspective we see a movement of early childhood education and care which offers a barren adjustment to school has narrow goals and objectives, pre-programmed methods and uses a technocratic 'skills-and-testing framework' (Broström In press; Jensen, Broström, and Hansen 2010, 252). In international research a similar technocratic research paradigm appears. There is a political demand for evidence in research, which in a subtle way steers the allocation of research funds. The consequence is striking, namely a streamlined research practice characterised and dominated by randomised controlled trial. Consequently early childhood research is restricted and narrowed down and with less space for qualitative research approaches and children's involvement in the research processes. Both dimensions discourage children's participation and reduce their influence contributing to a reduction of democracy.

A consequence of such efficiency is a limitation of children's influence, which Biesta (2007) calls a democratic deficit.

Children's involvement and participation in research is not just a question of the development of interesting and efficient research methods and techniques. It is a much more fundamental question. From a very young age children have to understand, that their voices and actions are important. They must get a feeling that it is 'normal' to participate in and to influence their work. Thus it is a question of democracy. The big question is how best to raise future democratic human beings.

Note

1. See <http://www.kulturhus.kk.dk/bornekulturhus-amar>

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