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Case study on teachers' contribution to children's participation in Finnish preschool classrooms during structured learning sessions

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Abstract

The main aim of this study was to identify different teaching practices and explore the types of opportunities that they provide for children's participation in four different Finnish preschool classrooms for 6-year olds during structured learning sessions. Observational data of four preschool teachers were analyzed according to the principles of qualitative content analysis. Three themes of teachers' practices were identified, which described the key practices through which teachers influence children's participation, namely, through discussion and conversations; by referring to shared rules and managing the classroom; and through demonstrating pedagogical sensitivity and understanding towards children's active participation. Further, each teacher was observed implementing these practices in a unique combination in their classrooms, thus, creating different opportunities for participation. The four teachers showed a constructive, enabling, reserved or restrictive/unbalanced stance towards children's participation. The results of this study highlight the importance of teachers' pedagogically sensitive attitude as the key to children's participation. Given that the advantages of participation to learning and development are well established, the results also point to a need to evaluate the prevailing pedagogy and practices more closely from the perspective of participation.

Keywords: Case-study; Participation; Preschool; Teacher-child interactions; Teaching practices.

1. Introduction

Extensive research has suggested that one of the best ways to support learning is through encouraging active participation of children already in early childhood classroom contexts (e.g., Pramling-Samuelsson &



Sheridan, 2003; Hännikäinen & Rasku-Puttonen, 2010). This study was set to explore teachers' contribution to children's participation, i.e., children's right to experience respect and confidence in partnership with adults (Cockburn, 2005; Emilson & Folkesson, 2006) in Finnish preschool classrooms for 6-year old children. According to sociocultural approach interactional processes are the key elements for learning and development (Vygotsky, 1978; Mercer & Littleton, 2007), so participation is also enabled in the interaction between teacher and children. Participation demands that teacher values a child's own ways of experiencing, understanding and exploring the world (Pramling-Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2003), and that he or she is able to consider these practices as an important part of learning. Further, genuine respect shown towards children by teachers has a significant impact on the relationships they build with children in care and educational backgrounds (Laevers, 2005). Thus, participation in educational settings can be seen to be contingent upon teachers' decisions and ideas. Through their professional role, teachers are the central figure in determining the learning opportunities available to children (Hännikäinen, de Jong, & Rubinstein Reich, 1997; Pianta, 1999) and also how those children are encouraged to participate. According to recent studies the essential features that encourage children to participate are when teacher's interest comes close to children's own views (Emilson & Folkesson, 2006), when rules are negotiated and shared (e.g. Bohn, Roehrig, & Pressley, 2004; Hännikäinen, 2005) and when teachers provide children with a feeling of being part of the group and of being listened to (Hännikäinen & Rasku-Puttonen, 2010; Johansson & Sandberg, 2010).

In a previous study by Salminen *et al.* (2013b), the contribution of teachers to the social life within preschool classrooms (i.e. for 6-year-olds) was explored through a 'best-practices' perspective. Some of the practices that enhanced children's participation included supporting children's constructive and respectful friendships, working according to shared social rules in group contexts allowing individual children certain levels of leaderships and inviting children to contribute to simple decision making processes (Salminen *et al.*, 2013b). The inspiration for the current study was to extend these earlier findings, in particular those relating to participation. Thus, I sought to investigate the naturally-occurring variation among a smaller sample of four Finnish preschool teachers by identifying teachers' key-practices and exploring the unique combinations of these practices that can be seen to provide ample support and opportunities for children to participate in different classroom contexts. In the field of participation studies, Emilson and Folkesson (2006) have studied how teachers' control, in terms of classification and framing, affects children's participation. The current study aimed to widen the perspective from teacher control to classroom interaction more broadly, since participation occurs in a socially shared network of interactions between adults and children. Further, aim was to identify the ways in which teachers may affect children's participation — either by enhancing or preventing it — during structured learning sessions. This was necessary, since a majority of the formal learning sessions (i.e., content driven purposeful sessions and about 45 minutes in length) in Finnish preschool classrooms are constructed around teacher-led formats (e.g., Hujala *et al.*, 2012; Salminen *et al.*, 2013b). Two related research questions were addressed.

- (1) What are the key practices by which Finnish preschool teachers enable or disable children's participation in a variety of classroom situations?
- (2) Which combinations of teacher support do these key practices create for children's participation in four different preschool classrooms?

2. Methods

2.1 Data

The data for this study were collected as part of the large-scale 'First Steps' follow-up study (Lerkkanen *et al.*, 2006). Four Finnish preschool teachers were selected as informants from the total of 49 of those participating in the 'First Steps' follow-up study. In a previous study by Salminen *et al.* (2012), the original 49 teachers were divided into four subgroups on the basis of observed classroom quality, as assessed



with the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; Pianta, LaParo, & Hamre, 2008), utilizing the mixture modelling procedure of the Mplus 5.0 statistical package. CLASS is designed to measure the classroom level variables (i.e., observed indicators of classroom quality) in three domains: (1) emotional support, (2) classroom organization, and (3) instructional support, by rating each aspect numerically from 1 to 7. The profiles from which the cases of the current study were selected can be summarised as follows: Profile 1 – highest quality (prevalence 53%); Profile 2 – medium emotional, organizational, and instructional quality (prevalence 29%); Profile 3 – medium to low emotional and instructional quality, medium organizational quality (prevalence 12%); and Profile 4 – lowest quality (prevalence 6%).

Teachers for this study were selected to represent each of the four subgroups in order to investigate the maximum variation in practices among teachers as well as their relative representativeness throughout the whole dataset. Further, a previous study by Salminen *et al.* (2013a) partially utilized the same data of four teachers (with the exception of one teacher) in a case analysis that explored teachers' instructional teaching practices. Results from this work indicated that even the teachers at the higher end of the quality continuum employed only relatively low levels of the practices known to emphasise the role of active participation in children's learning of deeper thinking skills. This was an important justification for further exploring the data for these four teachers: this time, more specifically from the perspective of participation. The qualitative observational data were collected through classroom observations in spring 2007, simultaneous with the live CLASS observations. The observations were conducted on two different days during the morning assembly (i.e., times of more formal educational activities in the morning, before lunch, and nap time) and all of the teachers carried an MP3-player that recorded all teacher-child interactions. The length of each recording was, on average, 53 minutes. All of the recordings were transcribed, resulting 53 pages of transcribed text for the analysis of this study.

2.2 Context and the participants of the study

Before beginning formal schooling at the age of 7 years, Finnish children have a statutory right to receive a preschool education free of charge for 1 year. The core curriculum for preschool education (2000) serves as a binding guideline for preschool education throughout the country. Nearly 100% of Finnish 6-year-old children attend preschool education (Statistics Finland, 2012; Taguma, Litjens, & Makowiecki, 2012) despite its voluntary nature.

All of the four teachers were Finnish-speaking females, working in preschool classrooms with typical equipment and materials under the national guidelines provided by the core curriculum for preschool education (2000). Of the four, Diana and Berta worked in larger groups of 22 and 24 children, respectively, with teacher's aids in their classrooms; whereas Cecilia and Anna both worked in groups of seven children, with no teacher's aids. However, in Finnish preschool classrooms it is typical to divide large groups of children to smaller groups for the more formal learning sessions. Hence, during the observed and recorded sessions, both Diana and Berta were working with smaller group of children (i.e., 8–10 children each).

2.3 Data analysis

Data were analysed according to the principles of qualitative content analysis (Patton, 2002; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The observational data for the four teachers were combined and analysed from the perspective of teachers' practices through which teachers aimed to engage children to daily activities. These practices emerged during interactional episodes of varying lengths, and these episodes (each containing one or several meaningful interactional verbal and non-verbal expressions) were determined as the units of analysis for this study. The analytical process is illustrated in Table 1. The first analytical interest of the study was in identifying certain commonalities in the practices of all four teachers. The episodes (i.e., units of analysis) were first combined into eight categories, which provided overarching concepts through which teachers' practices could be further classified. Each of the categories conceptualized teachers' practices in relation to children's participation without seeking individual patterns between teachers, but



rather, by drawing together the practices in a more general level. Second, the categories were revised and further combined to wider themes (i.e., pedagogical sensitivity and understanding; discussion and conversations; rules and management), which provided common and more generic denominators for the practice categories identified before. Thus, these themes were generated on the basis of the practices that arose from the data of all four teachers, and can be seen to generally represent *the key practices through which teachers either encourage or prevent participation of children* during the structured learning sessions within this sample.

Table 1

Identifying teachers' key practices: describing the analytical process

<i>Simplified examples of the episodes from the data</i>		<i>Categories</i>		<i>Themes (i.e., the key-practices)</i>
'Shared understanding of the appropriate way of interacting with each other' 'Children feel safe to say what they think or feel'	→	1) Constructive rules and management	→	Rules and management
'Children's disrespectful behaviour' 'Shouting' 'Teacher's reactive style of intervening'	→	2) Lack of managerial practices	→	
'Learning sessions are planned and teacher is working according to the plan' 'Teacher asks, children reply shortly'	→	3) Strict rules management	→	
'Asking children how they feel about things', 'Sharing both social issues and contents of learning' 'To be part of the group' 'Discussions of mathematical concepts or alphabets, phonemes etc.'	→	4) Discussions with a meaningful content-driven focus	→	Discussion and conversations
	→	5) Discussions with a meaningful social focus	→	
	→	6) Discussions with a managerial content	→	
'Advising children to sit quietly' 'Teacher organizes small group work, gives directions'	→			Pedagogical sensitivity and understanding towards children's needs and perspectives
'Respectfully listening to children' 'Checking whether child needs help during whole group work' 'Responding to what she hears or sees'	→	7) Responsiveness to children's needs and perspectives	→	
'Ignoring children's comments' 'Interrupting child's answer' 'Misses a hint of child needing help'	→	8) Neglecting or misinterpreting children's perspectives	→	

As the three themes represented general ways in which to deal with children's participation, the second analytical interest was to further reflect the three themes (i.e., *key practices*) to each of the four individual teachers in order to determine which personal combinations of key practices characterized each of them. At this stage of the analysis I re-examined each teachers daily interaction with the children using the aspects provided by the three themes, and examples of individual ways to support children's participation were gathered (e.g., how does this particular teacher use rules and management, discussions and establishes sensitivity in relation to children's participation). As a result, *each teacher was seen to represent a unique combination of the key practices, which created different opportunities for children's participation*. Each teacher case was assigned with a descriptive name according to teachers' prevailing stance towards children's participation, namely: *Diana – constructive stance towards participation; Cecilia – enabling stance towards participation; Berta – reserved stance towards participation; Anna – restrictive/unbalanced stance towards participation*. These teacher cases and examples of the key practices will be introduced in the following paragraphs in detail.



3. Results

Teachers' key practices were displayed in unique combinations. These combinations created different learning environments and, thus, affected how children were encouraged to actively be part of a group, activities and the social network of their classrooms. The following results individually present the four teachers according to their unique combination of the key practices (i.e., combinations of pedagogical sensitivity and understanding; discussion and conversations; rules and management).

3.1 Diana

Diana's classroom was characterized by a *constructive stance towards the children's participation*. This teacher was warm and respectful towards the children nearly all the time, establishing *high pedagogical sensitivity*. This was apparent as Diana was well aware of the children's needs and abilities, and she aimed to keep them engaged with the particular exercise or activities provided (e.g., by saying, "Sam please tell the others", or, "Jonah, do you think you could tell what the number of the exercise at hands is?", as well as, "Please, Alice, come here and help me to look for the missing syllable"). There were clearly *established shared rules* in the classroom, and as a result, teaching formed a logical and understandable entity that the children could easily follow, enjoy and participate in. The ways in which Diana involved children in daily routines and activities consisted of subtle and delicate reminders of rules such as saying, "Children, please listen, let's listen to Mandy for a moment more", or by whispering softly, "Raise your hand if you want to say something". Diana made an attempt to listen to children's ideas: there *were discussions* on both academic and social issues. During these discussions Diana made it easy for children to find a way to join in. For instance, she asked questions in a very whole-hearted manner, as if not only to hear the children but as if she was honestly pondering the same questions herself. For example, Diana commented, "I really enjoyed the warmth of the sunshine today" and then asked, "but what do you think it has done to the snow outside?" When the teacher positioned herself at the children's level like this it evoked very natural and easy participation from the children, and several such interactions occurred throughout the observed sessions. This type of behaviour, combined with provision of frequent opportunities for children to take turns to answer, for example in a show and tell, or to assist teacher in performing tasks, showed that Diana was highly persistent and able in keeping children engaged in activities. Her attitude towards the children's ideas and comments showed she was aiming to understand what the children thought and were telling her. Despite the fact that participation was occurring in a goal-oriented, teacher-led format all this time, children's *participation was nevertheless constructive* (i.e., children were taken seriously and the classroom agenda was built on their active role).

3.2 Cecilia

Cecilia's classroom was characterized by an *enabling stance towards children's participation*. Cecilia repeatedly made children feel like she was listening to them and understood them (e.g., "I know you like these types of exercises, although they are a bit difficult"), indicating teacher's *pedagogical sensitivity*. As she sensitively listened to the children, she was also able to monitor their needs and progress most of the time. However, every now and then she missed children's hints. There were also *clearly-established and shared rules* in the classroom, which neither Cecilia nor children had to be reminded of, and which made participation easier and also contributed to the coherence of the group. Cecilia *discussed* subjects openly with the children throughout the observed sessions. She was, for instance, using children's daily lives and own experiences efficiently as a tool to engage children in discussions. Cecilia's *enabling stance towards participation* was apparent when she used inviting questions during the learning sessions (e.g., "If you need to know what's happening around the world, what types of sources of information can you think of?", or, "Today we are discussing of newspapers, do your mom or dad read the newspaper?") as well as comments aimed at participation of individual children (e.g., "Would you like to try to read this aloud Andy?"). Both Diana and Cecilia shared similar practices and personal warmth towards the children. However, throughout the observed sessions Cecilia's practices concerning children's participation were slightly inconsistent; of the



two teachers, Cecilia's attitude was less effective for truly understanding the children's point of view. This was apparent as although Cecilia provided children with opportunities to participate, she did not use children's activity to construct the ideas to aid further learning as Diana did and, thus, *Cecilia's stance towards participation was enabling* rather than constructive.

3.3 Berta

Berta's classroom was characterized by a *reserved stance towards children's participation*. Berta showed signs of ambivalent pedagogical sensitivity, since she seemed to be *highly responsive towards children's needs* and aimed to achieve participation of the whole group, especially so during exercises and tasks (e.g., "Roger's answer was 'a hat'. Do you [saying to other children] think that Roger's answer was correct?"), but at other times she was less concerned about the children's perspectives or about truly finding out their thoughts and ideas. The use of *rules and management* was structured, as Berta was very efficient in teaching and managing the classroom. Her teaching was logical and it was easy for children to comprehend. For instance, Berta said, "You may come here and choose the word that corresponds with the picture, please use the pin and place the word beside the picture". Berta was talking to the children nearly all the time, however, she was restricting children's participation to *discussions* by giving children rather short turns, and as a result the children usually only gave answers to the teacher's questions or produced a few words or short sentences (e.g., "With which letter does the word peruna [potato] begin?", or, "You are right, this is the face of the person, but could you be a bit more specific? Which part of the face is the correct answer?"). As a consequence, Berta's *reserved stance towards participation* was most clearly apparent in the use of highly structured tasks that allowed only very few chances for children's ideas or discussions to be used as a valuable way for children to learn and interact.

3.4 Anna

Anna's classroom was characterized by *restrictive/unbalanced stance towards children's participation*. Anna had occasional difficulties in monitoring the behaviour, needs and academic performance of the children. She was probably more aware of the children's academic skills and needs (e.g., inviting children to goal-oriented tasks by using hints, or providing individual additional tasks) rather than their emotional needs (e.g., being unable to soothe restless children and assist them to participate in on-going activities), thus, establishing *lower and unbalanced pedagogical sensitivity towards children's emotional needs*. The classroom in general was somewhat disorganized since Anna's practices were *inefficient in managing her classroom*. Anna *discussed topics* with children, but due to their misbehaviour it was difficult to create an equal and content-driven discussion, when a majority of her time was used to discuss managerial issues. She was, in a sense, forced to cut down children's turns at the expense of organization to be able to continue working. For instance, Anna said, "It is not your turn to speak now", or, "You are not allowed to speak until you sit quietly and still", as well as, "You need to step outside unless you can't be quiet". As a consequence, autonomous opportunities were not provided to children and children's participation was *discontinuous or even restricted*.

4. Discussion

In relation to the first research question, analysis of the four teacher cases indicated key practices in the four classrooms (i.e., pedagogical sensitivity and understanding; discussion and conversations; rules and management), that were related to children's participation in preschool classrooms. In addition, the teacher cases showed four different combinations of teacher support, which created unique opportunities for children to participate in both the on-going activities and the social network of their classrooms. These can be discussed further as a response to the second research question. Diana and Cecilia had established a



combination of (1) teacher's pedagogical sensitivity and understanding towards children's needs, (2) utilizing constructive and shared rules, and (3) involving children to conversations, whereas Berta and Anna provided fewer opportunities for children to participate. It was noted that both Berta and Anna had managerial practices that restricted active participation, but for very different reasons. The reason why children's participation was infrequent in Anna's classroom was that management took too much time because the rules were not clear or shared, whereas in Berta's classroom, which was highly structured, participation did not occur on children's terms and was thus reserved in nature. These observations indicate the importance of constructive classroom management and organization for children's participation (see also Emilson & Folkesson, 2006): neither the lack of behavioural control nor too highly structured management are good ways of enhancing children's participation.

Berta and Diana shared similar well-managed rules in their classrooms, but the warmth and pedagogical sensitivity was different for these two teachers. Diana was perceptive, and identified children's needs, whereas Berta was more concerned with working according to the plans she had made. In a previous study, Sandberg and Eriksson (2010) highlighted the importance of the intensive respectful discussions between teacher and children in encouraging children's participation. In addition, constructive and coherent rules and management provide support for working as a group (Bohn, Roehrig, & Pressley, 2004; Hännikäinen, 2005). In light of the results of the present study, it seems that neither the intensive respectful discussions between teacher and children nor coherent rules and management alone can create practices that enhance children's participation within these preschool classrooms. In order to be meaningful, participation requires a teacher's pedagogical awareness and respectful attitude (Pramling-Samuelson & Sheridan, 2003). This attitude enables teachers to see children's participation as an important and usable way of learning in preschool. This is of great significance, since being a part of the group is one of the most meaningful things from children's perspective too (e.g., Einarsdottir, 2010).





My study indicates that teachers enhance children's participation through the simple daily routines and pedagogical choices that they make, an idea that is by Hännikäinen & Rasku-Puttonen (2010). However, the findings of this study also showed aspects that may hinder participation in classrooms and unfortunately, such aspects included typical ways of working in preschool classrooms during formal content-driven and teacher-led learning sessions. Such practices included working in a predominantly teacher-led format with relatively little control offered to children in deciding or determining what to do, or providing classroom management and rules that are too strict to allow frequent participation. Within the classrooms studied, it was teachers' determination and open-minded stance towards participation that seemed to make a positive difference.

Further studies are needed to widen the perspective from teachers' practices to include child interviews or child observations, since in its current form this study cannot suggest how children experienced or perceived the different classroom environments and practices. Moreover, it is noteworthy that participation takes different forms depending on the age of the children in the group as well as the cultural expectations (e.g., national curriculums, legislations) addressed within an educational setting. Hence, it is necessary to raise a scientific discussion of the importance of children's participation, and conduct studies in a variety of countries and contexts to gain deeper knowledge and understanding of how participation is experienced and what enhances it in different educational settings.

The findings introduce exemplary practices for preschool education and for the discussion about the importance of teachers' role in enhancing the active role of children in preschool classrooms. The results may provide both practical and educational implications for teachers in their daily work with children by promoting awareness of preschool teachers to the role of teaching practices and teacher-student interactions for children's participation. Since not all teachers were able to fully support children's participation, this issue should be addressed more carefully in future research and teacher training, and also from the children's perspective.



Keypoints

-  Observational data of four Finnish preschool teachers were analysed according to the principles of qualitative content analysis.
-  Three themes indicated teachers' key practices which were related to children's participation: namely, discussion and conversation; rules and management; pedagogical sensitivity and understanding.
-  Combinations of key practices created ample opportunities for children to participate in each classroom.
-  Teachers showed a constructive, enabling, reserved or restricted/unbalanced stance towards children's participation.

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