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Participation related to a child perspective

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Introduction and overall aim

We assume that participation is essential in promoting children's possibilities of experiencing citizenship in pedagogical practice. An overall aim of this paper is to problematise the concept of participation. From our point of view the idea of participation is related to a child perspective, or rather a child's perspective. Therefore we also want to problematise these concepts and argue for an important difference between them. The research question is: how can children's participation be understood in different activities in a pre-school context?

Background

Research and pedagogical work with young children often lays claim to a child perspective. This perspective is neither simple nor easily taken. Different researchers, as well as teachers, approach the perspective in varying ways and give the concept dissimilar meanings. First of all, a 'child perspective' can be understood in at least two ways – as referring to children's perspective, or to an individual child's perspective. A distinction is necessary. According to Halldén (2003) *children's perspective* concerns either children's conditions, interests and work that are best for children or the study of a culture made for children. In this definition information from the children themselves is not necessary. Instead the focus is on the consequences of political decisions or on children's positions in society. On the other hand, a *child's perspective* concerns the importance of the child's own perspective or culture, in which the child itself gives information.

Sommer (2003) does not explicitly make this distinction between the two concepts. Instead he emphasises that a child perspective deals with the thoughts, experiences, feelings and intentions of the child. Moreover the correspondence between the child's and the adult's understandings of their shared situation is necessary, as otherwise it is impossible to come close to a child perspective.

This point of view is also fundamental in Johansson's (2003) reasoning but, in contrast to Sommer, Johansson talks about a child's perspective. She defines this as the child's experiences, intentions and expressions of meanings. Johansson emphasises that adults cannot actually take a child's perspective, but can at best come close to it. Therefore she highlights how researchers or teachers are able to understand what becomes visible to the child and argues that 'the child's experiences of inhabiting the world take shape through their bodies as gestures, facial expressions, deportment, worlds and emotional expressions' (2003, p 118).

One condition for closeness to a child's perspective is the attitudes of the adult. Closeness demands an attitude in which the adult ascribes to the child his or her own

culture and her or his own way of understanding the world. This attitude enables children's participation, in that children experience that their world is being seen and heard. A child's perspective assumes that children in pre-school are able to mediate experiences, thoughts and feelings through many forms of expression, together with adults who try to see, listen and interpret the child (Pramling Samuelsson and Sheridan, 2003). These authors emphasise that the concepts of participation and of a child's perspective are interdependent. If teachers manage to come close to a child's perspective, it will enable children to experience genuine participation.

Currently the concept of participation is often used in curricula as well as in everyday conversation. It is therefore useful to clarify the different meanings of participation. In a school development project, different forms of children's participation were identified (Folkesson, 2004).

One form was described as 'children as active producers of their own texts', which frequently happened when working on projects. Other studies also report this way of working as being common in schools. The focus is on individual performance, in which children experience participation since they make choices of content and of modes of expression.

Another form of participation is seen in dialogical situations in encounters between 'divergent voices' (Dysthe, 1996), where the focus is moved from the individual to the interplay between individuals. Different forms of participation can also be shown in the way of asking questions. Typical for a dialogical attitude is the use of genuine questions.

To analyse different meanings of participation, the concepts of 'free dialogue' and 'directed dialogue' (Anward, 1983) are used. 'Directed dialogue' is typical of the teacher – pupil conversation in a classroom where children are answering an adult's questions. In 'Free dialogue' both children and teachers take initiatives. Such conversations give children a more equal role (Anward, 1983) and are assumed to give the children a stronger feeling of participation. In a free dialogue there is a possibility to experience what Habermas (1995) calls 'communicative acting', while the directed dialogue seems to have a more strategic and instrumental character.

To understand the children's possibilities to participate in different educational situations we use Habermas' (1995) concepts 'strategic' and 'communicative acting'. We also use Bernstein's (1996) concepts 'strong' and 'weak' framing. Because of space limitations, we do not explain the theoretical concepts in this background section, but do so in the analysis of the empirical data. We are aware that there is a problem with dichotomising concepts, and we stress that we use them to clarify what is happening in the two contrasting situations.

Method

The data are video observations of interactions between teachers and toddlers. Two situations are analysed; one is a formal situation introduced by the teacher and has an explicit beginning and end. The other situation is of an informal character, an activity

that occurs when children start to do something together with the teacher and ends when the children leave the room.

The formal situation

This pre-school has a weekly thematic project. On one occasion the teachers took a bus ride with the children, after which the teachers organised different activities, which they documented; in this observation the children are documented while drawing a bus. First the teacher, Ellen, asks Harry (2 years old) and Fiona (2 years old) to sit at a table. On the table are two white sheets. Before the teacher arrives the children are sitting close to each other communicating with their bodies, glances and small talk. They seem somewhat insecure, waiting to see what will happen.

The informal situation

The teacher, Betty, is sitting at the kitchen table together with five two-year old boys. They have Play-Doh clay on the table. There is no obvious intention or aim for what is going on around the table. The teacher is sitting down, while the children are moving freely around her. The children and the teacher are handling the clay in different ways. At the same time they are singing and talking. Some children are using music instruments. The children are making choices and taking initiatives. The teacher is all the time focused on the children at the table.

The results of the formal situation

The child tries to understand the task

The acting that appears in the formal situation is, according to our interpretation, of a strategic character. The teacher controls the whole situation, both the content and the material. She instructs the children, who are attentive and trying to do as they are told. There is a restricted possibility for them to make choices, consisting only in choosing between three colours from the pencils. The teacher's attitude is strict and dissociated. She seems to expect something special from the children, and they appear to take a cautious stance. The aim seems to be to find out what is the child's representation of a bus. Hence the task is to show a concrete result, namely a drawing of a bus, which is an aim expressed by the teacher.

Actor	Utterance	Comments
Ellen	I would like... to ask you to do something.	with emphasis and in a formal slightly demanding voice
Ellen	You have had a sheet.	pointing
Harry	Sheet?	inquiring voice
Ellen	Could Harry and Fiona draw a bus?	putting pencils on the table
Harry	Draw	trying to understand

The meaning of strategic actions is an orientation towards success, where fixed aims are a central aspect. Development is understood to take place because of influence and is characterised by effectiveness and a teaching attitude. The relation between the teacher

and the child is then a subject-object relation (Emilson, 2003, s 43). Such actions are often seen in formal situations, where the teacher has direct control of what is to be done or, in other words, a strong framing.

The child tries to satisfy the teacher

One kind of participation can be described as ‘children being active producers of ideas’ (Folkesson, 2003). In this case the focus is on the individual. If such tasks are characterised by strategic acting with a strong framing, the children’s possibilities of participation are restricted to participation in dialogues directed by the teacher (Anward, 1983) and, as in this case, to please the teacher.

Actor	Utterance	Comments
Harry	Watch!	picking a pencil followed by a long silence
Harry	There bus!	happily pointing to a stroke he drew
Ellen	Is that the bus?	neutral voice
Harry	There bus!	putting away the pencil
Ellen	What does the bus look like? How is your bus?	neutral voice
Harry	There bus, watch there the bus.	pointing to his stroke
Ellen	Ye-es.	neutral voice

This example can be described as an individual producing a representation and at the same time the child is seen as an object from the documenting teacher's point of view. The intellectual understanding of the phenomenon is focused by the teacher. Children and teachers are doing different things; that is the correspondence between the perspective of the child and the teacher is missing. The children are performing and the teacher is controlling. The teacher's questions are closed and searching for facts. The situation is that of a traditional classroom conversation, in spite of probability that the objective here is of another kind than to control the children’s work.

The child tries to inform the teacher his perspective

The participation of the children in this formal situation seems to be restricted by the strategic actions of the teacher. When Harry wants to communicate his representation of the bus with a bodily experience, he is not given any response. He becomes silent and takes up the paper-and-pencil-task, but without engagement. The teacher’s strict attitude and her focus on facts and cognition prevent Harry’s possibility to participate on his own terms, relating to his own experiences. He tries to introduce new forms of expressions to make meaning but the teacher redirects him to the given task. It seems as if the teacher too is trying to make meaning but it is a meaning the child cannot share. Harry has not chosen to express his experience of a bus by drawing, and when he chooses another expression he gets no response and surrenders.

Actor	Utterance	Comments
Harry	Round round round...	strong and engaged voice he refers to a song
Ellen	Round round round?	neutral voice
Harry	Yes bus...	raising his arms against the ceiling to drive
Harry	Buss drive.	looking at Ellen but he does not get any response - silently he picks the pencil and starts to draw again

When the actions of a teacher are of a strategic character and a strong framing, the perspective of the adult is in focus (Emilson, 2003). From this it follows that the child cannot be a participant and make meaning in his or her educational setting. The intention may well be to come close to the child's perspective and to visualise the children's thoughts but if the point of departure is not taken from the life world of the child, this is not possible.

The result of the informal situation

The children and the teacher participate in a free dialogue

The teacher, Betty, has not decided in advance what to do or in which order. Instead there is room for the children's ideas. In other words the teacher is adapting to the children's initiatives. Peter contributes with the association to the song, a contribution that the teacher takes up and which gives new life to the communication. The teacher is deeply committed in the situation and she shows participation when she is completely present and uses a playful voice. Therefore the children's interests are maintained and can also be developed further.

Actor	Utterance	Comments
Peter	Watch out	using a song about a snail
Betty	Watch out, yes	supportive voice
Betty	Here comes the little snail	playful voice - Eskil and Peter are watching and laughing.

Communicative acting means an orientation towards understanding, in which teachers and children together create meanings in a shared reality (Habermas, 1995). Then the relation rests on a symmetrical ground and becomes a subject – subject relationship. Communicative acting makes children's participation possible - children experience that their world is seen and heard (Pramling Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2003). An informal situation supports a free dialogue communication (Anward, 1983), in which all participants contribute to develop the conversation. In this case the relationship between the teacher and the child is characterised by weak framing.

The teacher supports the children

In contrast to the formal situation, the informal has no definitive aim controlled by the teacher. The children will not produce something that the teacher has planned: instead teamwork is in focus and there seems to be a shared reality between the adult and the children. The situation is characterised by weak framing (Bernstein, 1996). The

encounter between the adult and the children in the informal situation is of an intersubjective character. Betty continually responds to the children's initiatives. The children's actions are not controlled by the teacher, rather it is the children who are deciding what to do and how. Eskil knows precisely that he wants a snail and that it should be big. Here the teacher doesn't take a controlling role in the children's activities. Instead she helps them to develop their own ideas and provides for their interests by doing the things that they can't manage to.

Actor	Utterance	Comments
Peter	(S)nail	looking closer at a snail making
Betty	A little snail, yes	confirming voice
Eskil	I want a BIG snail.	firm, demanding voice
Betty	Mm, yes.	supportive voice - Peter and Eskil are watching

Intersubjective encounters between child and adult mean that the teacher tries to come close to the child through dialogue, reciprocity and agreement (Habermas, 1995). The intersubjective encounter is built on a communicative process of creating meaning in a social situation. In such a dialogical situation, in which divergent voices meet, participation is about listening and understanding each other in a respectful way.

The teacher and the children participate in jointly constructing of meaning

When the children want to communicate their representation of the snail with their bodily experiences, they get an immediate response. Several children are taking a mutual interest in their associations of the snail. The teacher encourages the children to express themselves through songs and gestures and by her own initiatives she participates on equal terms.

Actor	Utterance	Comments
Martin	Watch out	talking rhythmically
Betty	Watch out	
Peter	Watch out	
Martin	...I take you	putting the snail on Betty's leg with a playful voice
Betty	Aou	playful voice

This final example shows how one condition for children's participation is that adults try to see, understand and interpret young children's experiences, thoughts and feelings through many forms of expression (Pramling Samuelsson and Sheridan, 2003)

Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to highlight how children's participation can be understood from a formal and an informal situation in pre-school. What we can see in the formal situation is that Harry has almost no space to participate. The adult does not express any intention to come close to the child's perspective: both a more relational point of view and correspondence seem to be missing. The communication is limited to instructions and a directed dialogue. In the informal situation, an adult with a more relational behaviour appears and there also seems to be correspondence between the adult and the

children. Betty has accomplished this through communicative acting in which she continuously gives the children responses to their initiatives.

One important conclusion from our examples is that strategic individual acting, characterised by strong framing, limits children's participation, while communicative acting characterised by weak framing gives children possibilities to participate on their own terms. The interesting thing is that formal situations in which the content is controlled by the teacher are often more highly valued than informal encounters between the teacher and the child. Moreover these formal situations seem to be more and more common in educational practice, even with the youngest children. We want to emphasise the importance of giving value to situations with weak framing and to make them visible: these constitute possibilities for adults to come close to the child's perspective, which is one condition for children's participation.

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