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Focusing Children's Participation: Pre-school teachers in Sweden describe their work with children's participation

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This paper is based on my forthcoming doctoral thesis about pre-school teachers work with children's participation. The aim of my thesis is to describe and analyze how teachers, in pre-schools which put focus on children's participation, work with giving children opportunities to influence the pedagogical environment and activities. I also want to discuss what the children express about their possibilities for participation, and the relation between the possibilities for participation for the individual child and for the group of children. (The children in my study are between 1 and 5 years old.)

My tentative research questions are:

- 1) What do the pre-school teachers put into the concept participation?
- 2) How do the pre-school teachers describe their work with children's participation?
- 3) In which situations, and in which ways, do the pre-school teachers create possibilities for children's participation?

In this paper, I describe the theoretical and methodological background of my forthcoming thesis. I also begin to answer the first and the second question from the list above, with empiric data from interviews with the teachers in my study. In doing this, I raise questions that are important for the continuing work on my thesis.

Children's participation in pre-school

A prominent part of the Swedish national pre-school curriculum concerns children's opportunities to participate in democratic decision-making and cooperation. The motive for this is creating an understanding for the principles of democracy. It further says that the environment and activities in pre-school shall be planned with the child's best interest in mind (Ministry of Education and Science, 1998). The commission to raise democratic citizens has been more strongly emphasized in today's curriculum than it has been before. In comparison with the former steering document (National Board of Health and Welfare, 1987:3), participation has also been expanding from concerning only the oldest children in pre-schools to all children. Since the profound democratization process in Sweden in the beginning of the 20th century, schools and pre-schools have been seen as a resource for creating equal opportunities and enhancing democracy in society. This can be compared with childcare and schooling in the 19th century, where the aim, according to historical studies, was to discipline children and keep the society stabilized (Ekstrand, 2000). Today children's rights are not only prominent in childcare and educational institutions, but in the whole of society. Since 1989, children's rights to participation are formulated in the UNCRC, which makes children's participation an issue that no institution concerning children can ignore.

Defining participation can however be problematic. Is it the teachers or the children who should define the concept? The National Agency of Education in Sweden (1998) states that it is often the adults who have the power of interpretation and it therefore becomes difficult for children to have a say about their possibilities of participation. Pramling Samuelsson and Sheridan, who have conducted research on children's participation, strongly emphasize the children's own experience when defining participation (Pramling Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2003). They made a study where children were asked about their participation. The researchers here used the word *decide* in the interviews with children, since it is a concept more familiar to children. The results of their study show that according to the children, they are mostly able to decide about their own activities. The researchers also conclude that knowledge of how children perceive the concept of deciding can help teachers structuring possibilities for participation (Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001).

Another obstacle can be about when children are capable of participation. The dominant image of the child in research and in curriculums today is the one of the competent child. Given that pre-school children are very young, it must be examined what practical meaning *competence* has. Is participation possible for all children? Lansdown (2005) examines the concept of evolving capacities as it is expressed in the UNCRC, in relation to children's right to participation. She states that the concept must be understood as context-dependent. The capacity to participate evolves as a result of experience, culture,

environment, interaction, etc. A child's capacity in one context does not necessarily correspond to its capacity in another context. Other researchers point out that the notion of the competent child must be balanced by the notion of the child in need of protection. The child cannot be given responsibility for its own development. That is always the responsibility of adults (Sommer, 2005, Qvortrup, 1999). Participation is often connected to responsibility, and these issues are important for understanding children's participation in pre-schools.

Participation, influence and democracy

Influence is the concept which is most prominently focused in the national pre-school curriculum. In my translation into English I predominantly use the word *participation*, since in international research it is the most commonly used word for the phenomena I am studying. However, I also use the word *influence*. The two concepts are similar to one another but the way I understand them, participation has a wider meaning, while influence has stronger individual-focused connotations. In my study, the balance between the individual and the group is of interest, and therefore the interpretation and use of different concepts is important for the discussion.

The concept of influence is multifaceted. It can be seen as a means to gain individual opportunities in competition between different interests. It can also be seen as a way to strengthen the children's capacity to influence their situation in a way that benefits everyone's interests. Forsberg (2000) uses a relational definition of influence, which I also have found to be useful in my work. She states that influence is not a quality of an individual child, but something that is expressed in relations. This means that in relations, influence is always present, but whether the influence benefits the child or not can vary.

The meaning of participation is to some extent depending on how we understand the concept of *democracy*. Two dimensions for interpreting the concept are central to my understanding of participation. The first is the dimension between an individual-centred and a society-centred interpretation of democracy. In society, there has been a dislocation towards individualism. This is sometimes said to have caused a former society-centred democracy to become more individual-centred. Research has shown that this is not necessarily the truth. In Sweden both models of democracy seem to be prominent (Jacobsson, 1999). But it makes it clear how differently the pedagogical work can be structured, depending on how the concepts are defined. The second dimension is the one between a functionalist and a normative view of democracy. In the functionalist view, democracy is strictly an effective way of decision-making. In the normative view, moral values are an important part of the democratic system. Democracy is then a way of life, not only a way of deciding (Isling, 1988). When democracy is seen as a way of life, citizenship is central. Democratic citizenship implies the right to participate in exercising power. Then all citizens must have the same opportunities to this kind of participation. In a publication from the Swedish government, it is expressed that in real life people do not have equal opportunities. Opportunities for participation are sometimes limited by age, ethnicity, disabilities, etc. Then an increased individualism must be compensated with an increased solidarity (a will to support people who live under difficult conditions), to prevent egoism from spreading in society (SOU 2000:1).

In my study, I do not see one way of interpreting democracy or participation as excluding another. On the contrary, all dimensions should be considered to create a better understanding of the complexity of participation.

Critical didactics

My work is inspired by critical didactics and critical theory. Critical theory is based on a dialectical view of society, and its aim is creating knowledge which can lead to emancipation for those who are oppressed (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 1994). According to Klafki (2005), who has developed critical didactics, all education should strive for enhancing children's abilities to self-determination, participation in decision-making and solidarity. Children's participation and influence in pre-school is (by e.g. national agencies) generally assumed to result in strengthening these abilities. Children's participation is also seen as a way to create an understanding for differences. An enhanced democracy, where everybody's rights are respected, is assumed to be of special importance in a complex, multicultural society where children constantly are exposed to people with backgrounds different from their own (National Agency for Education, 2000).

But the focus on participation has sometimes been criticized for celebrating a western middle-class way of assessing childhood, both in pre-schools and in the UNCRC (Brooker, 2005; Qvortrup, 1999). Participation is also related to power. Sometimes this is studied as power relations between adults and children, like in a study by Gannerud and Rönnerman (2006). They found that even though teachers spoke about their work in terms of children's participation and freedom of choice, in reality the adults were closely controlling the children's activities. Other researchers, like Johansson (2003), show that there are sometimes unequal power relations between children, and the teachers have a responsibility to address these issues in their pedagogical work.

Forsberg (2000) claims that in most Swedish educational research about children's participation, the concept of influence is seen as unproblematic and as being of an unambiguously positive character. That motivates a critical study of teacher's work with children's participation. What notions of participation are expressed in the teachers' work, and are all children benefitted by the way participation is practiced in pre-schools?

The empiric data

I am conducting a multiple case study with two pre-school departments, in different pre-schools. The reason for choosing a case study is that I want to be able to create a picture that reflects some of the real-life complexity. The case study is useful in this aspect (Stake, 2005). The cases are instrumental. They are used to illuminate how teachers work with children's participation. The pre-schools in this study were selected because they have been describing themselves as focusing on children's participation. According to Stake, the most important criteria when selecting cases is the possibility to learn something from them. Considering my research questions, I find it most likely to get a rich empiric material from pre-schools who focus on participation. I chose the pre-school department as the case since I regard the department as a fundamental entity of the pre-school. The teachers, children and physical environment are closely connected and affecting each other, so that the pedagogical work is constructed in these relationships. Multiple cases are sometimes used for comparison. That is not my main reason for conducting a multiple case study. I wish, however, to enrich the description of the pedagogical work by including departments with different compositions. In one of them, A, there are children in the range from 1 to 5 years old. In the other, B, there are children between 4 and 5 years old.

The case study implies an inductive approach, and the researcher wants to make a rich description of the phenomena (Merriam, 1994). Because of this, I have chosen to use a variation of methods. At this moment, I am doing participant observations, using video camera and field notes. I have previously interviewed the pre-school teachers. I am open to adapting my methods and adding other ones, in order to answer my research questions as well as possible. The empiric material for this paper consists of semi-structured interviews with six female pre-school teachers, three from each pre-school department. The teachers were interviewed separately. They were asked to describe their work with children's participation, but there were also certain themes that I introduced if the teachers did not bring them up themselves.

Pre-school teachers' views on participation

Since a large part of this paper has been devoted to an account for the central concepts in my study, I will conclude by presenting some results that are related to this. This is part of question no. 1 and 2 in the introduction of this paper. In the interviews, the pre-school teachers were asked to describe their work with children's participation. Their answers reveal some interesting issues in how they experience the meaning of the concept. The results presented here will have a considerable impact on the continuation of my research.

For both pre-school departments, it can be said that the teachers define their work with children's participation consisting of different aspects. 1) Observing children and planning activities with children's interests in mind, 2) having an open dialogue where children are able to express opinions, and 3) structuring the activities in pre-school so that children are able to decide and make choices, are three aspects that the teachers express when being interviewed. But in the two departments, focus is generally placed on different aspects of participation. In A, more focus is on teachers trying to find what the

children are interested in and then planning activities with this in mind. In B, more focus is on decision-making and choosing. This could possibly be related to the different ages the children are in. Two teachers in department A, for example, mention that the older children often decide together, or choose what to do, after lunch during the younger children's nap time. The age issue is also present when one teacher from A says that since children cannot always tell what they want, teachers have to be sensitive and try to "read between the lines". All of the three aspects I have mentioned are found in both pre-schools, but in varying degrees. This shows that what the teachers relate to as participation is very varied and complex, and their work must be studied with this in mind. This could be related to Lansdowns (2005) discussion of the evolving capacities of the child, which she describes as context-dependent. I would even like to describe the definition of participation itself as context-dependent, in relation to the activities and to the child's evolving capacities. Then working with children's participation is not a matter of increasing their participation in one aspect but rather expanding its content to include a larger number of aspects.

Four of the six pre-school teachers, two from each pre-school, believe that adults perceive children's possibilities for participation as bigger than children do. They believe that the children think that the teachers, or the school leader, decide in their pre-school. When the teachers speak about the children's perception of their participation, they use the concept deciding. As a teacher from the second pre-school describes it: "Since we listen a lot to the children, their influence is bigger than they feel themselves.....When they can decide which games we're going to play, that's when they feel that they are deciding." This shows that there is a discrepancy between what the teachers consider participation to be, and what they believe the children consider it to be. The teachers express that in children's view, deciding is what counts as influence. The fact that their influence has to do with adults listening to them seems less visible for the children, according to the teachers. Sheridan and Pramling Samuelsson (2001) claimed that teachers must take children's perceptions of decision-making in account when structuring the pedagogical activities in pre-school. I claim that teachers (and researchers) must also be aware of how we, as adults, present the concept of participation to children. If we want to know how children experience their own participation, we must be aware of what we ask them. My results show that there is a difference between the teachers' perceptions of participation, and how they think children experience it. This discrepancy could maybe be reduced by an increased awareness of the different aspects that are put into the concept.

The teacher's descriptions of their pedagogical work also raise questions about the relationship between possibilities for participation for the individual child and a group of children. In both pre-school departments, there are many examples of individual children expressing opinions or initiatives, which the teachers describe how they use in planning and carrying out activities. There are much fewer examples of children's collective participation. Sometimes voting is mentioned as a way to make decisions when there are different opinions. But still, there is a tendency towards an individual-centred focus when it comes to participation. How important does it become then, that the child itself is able to stand up for what he or she wants?

What I have presented here concerns the teachers' interpretations of participation and how that is related to their pedagogical work. But there is another dilemma present in the teacher's descriptions of their work with children's participation. All of them stress that there are other things that are important besides participation. Freedom of choice is not the same as children being able to do exactly what they want to. Their activities have to be "meaningful", as a teacher from pre-school department B puts it. The teachers all describe that they try to encourage children's initiatives and let their interests influence the planning of activities, but they also want to add content which the teachers themselves consider important for the children. This is an interesting consideration in the teachers' work, especially since researchers like Sommer (2005) and Qvortrup (1999) have expressed concerns about putting too much responsibility on children, when it comes to their own development.

A final conclusion; in this paper I have outlined some considerations for the future work in my research. As a researcher, I need to be aware of the different aspects the teachers put into the concept participation, in order to understand and analyze their pedagogical work. It seems that the meaning of the concept could be context-dependent. The teachers sometimes refer to one thing when talking about the older children and another when it comes to the youngest ones. The teachers' descriptions also reveal some interesting dilemmas in their pedagogical work. One is the relation between the individual's and the group's participation. The other one presented here is the one between children's participation and influence on one hand, and what the teachers want to teach the children on the other hand. In my thesis, I hope to be able to discuss these dilemmas in more detail.

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