

Children's right to participation in early childhood education¹

INA LEKKAI

Abstract: Since the adoption by the UN in 1989 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), children's participation has been one of the most highly debated and examined aspects of it. While there is no consensus on a general definition of children's participation, it is clear that as a concept it relates to many dimensions and processes. The aim of this paper is not to provide an exhaustive presentation of relevant research on children's right to participation in early childhood education sector; its intention is to provide an overview of some up to date researches, to explore how the international guidelines as formulated in the UN documents mentioned, are relevant to early childhood education and attempt to raise some questions and stimulate further reflections. This paper's conclusion is that implementing children's participation in practice is far from imposing of a predefined, fully conceptualized framework on children, or about empowering them and facilitating their agency, but firstly about acknowledging that children *are* indeed actively participating every day through their own cultural practices and their remaking of themselves and their environments.

Key Words: *children's rights, participation, early childhood education, UNCRC, international guidelines*

I. INTRODUCTION

The concepts of children's *participation* and children's *agency* are seen as originating from sociology of childhood (Sen, 1999, in Baraldi & Iervese, 2014, p. 1) and seem to be closely intertwined as often are discussed in relation to one another (James & James 2008; James 2009; Hungerland, 2015). While James & James define agency as "the capacity of individuals to act independently" (James & James, 2008, p. 9), Sen considers participation fundamental in human development processes and refers to it as a possibility for free individual decision-making. Involvement in decision-making is envisaged as the process of realisation of participation from an abstract concept into real action (Baraldi & Iervese, 2014, p. 2) through the four levels of involvement in the decision-making process as detected by Alderson & Montgomery (1996) that is: to be informed; to express an informed view; to have that view taken into account; to be the main or joint decision maker (in Lansdown, 2010, p. 13). So, involvement *and* decision-making can be viewed as two aspects of children's participation in democratic procedures (Turnšek, 2009, p. 21).

However, the concept of agency implies not only the capability of an individual, but also the transformation of the structure of her/his social interactions (James, 2009). In other words, it refers to the capacity to execute the choices following from decisions strategically made in a direct dialogue with the present (as a "practical-evaluative" capacity to contextualize past habit and future projects within the contingencies of the moment) while linked to the past (in its "iterational" or habitual aspect) and directed toward the future (as a "projective" capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) (Curtis, 2008, p. 78). Thus, agency and children's participation cannot be understood in isolation from the two key concepts of capability for shaping one's experiences and the social, cultural, political context in which they are situated. Not only can "agency be defined as a specific form of active participation" (Baraldi & Iervese, 2014, p. 2-3) but also participation can regard "formal decision-making, of course; but it can also be about ways of being and relating, deciding and acting, which characterise the practice of everyday life. For that reason, we think there is value in understanding participation more broadly as a manifestation of individual agency within a social context" (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010, p. 357).

So, it can be argued that the different ways in which childhood and children's ability to exercise agency are conceptualised, have implications for understandings of children's right to participation. The beforehand prejudice for example that children are incapable or do not have the capacities to meaningfully contribute to decision making processes indicates a lack of recognition of children's right to be heard and fails to appreciate their valuable views.

¹This paper was originally written in the frame of the M.A. Childhood Studies and Children's Rights (MACR), Freie Universität Berlin, and published with the generous support of the Ernst Reuter-Gesellschaft der Freunde, Förderer und Ehemaligen der Freien Universität Berlin e.V.

II. WHAT ARE RIGHTS?

When it comes to crystallising what constitutes children's rights, Alexander's metaphoric title "plaiting with fog and knitting with treacle" is highly illustrative of the many variations in understandings (Alexander, 1995). The idea of children having rights tends to be interpreted as taking away rights from adults, for example parents' rights (Te One, 2011, p. 42), or as a sharing of power and control between adults and children (Smith, 2007, p.1). The more tolerant the adults, the more the power balance shifts on children's side.

However, one way to see them is as "just claims or entitlements that derive from moral and/or legal rules" (Freeman, 2002, p. 6) whose importance is punctuated by the fact that "if we have rights we are entitled to respect and dignity" (Freeman, 1992, p. 29, in Te One, 2011, p. 41). According to the overall findings of their cross-cultural research project, Mason & Bolzan identified three different interpretations of the idea of child participation: as a right, for children to have their views heard; as 'taking part in', i.e. participating as individuals or with others as a group in adult-organised activities; and as involvement in decision making, which presupposes a conveyance of power from adults to children that can alter the adult-child relations (Mason & Urquhart, 2001, in Mason & Bolzan, 2010, p. 127-129).

III. WHAT IS PARTICIPATION?

When it comes to children's participation there is no consensus on a general definition (Malone & Hartung, 2010, p. 27) while often children's rights are perceived as participation rights (civil and political rights) (Lansdown, 2010, p.11; Smith, 2007, p. 1). Reynaert et al. analysis resulting from a review of children's rights literature since the adoption of the UNCRC reveals a broad scholarly activity on participation "arising under the banner of children's rights" (Reynaert, Vandeveld, & Bouverne-de-Bie, 2009, p. 521). Also, understandings of the term 'child participation' often vary even among group of researchers committed to the concept of 'children participation' so it appears to be used in literature "as a shorthand term to describe the pertinent UNCRC principles" (Mason & Bolzan, 2010, p. 126-127). However, there are various definitions in the literature to refer to. Hart uses the term 'participation' meaning:

"...the process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives. It is the means by which a democracy is built and it is a standard against which democracies should be measured. Participation is the fundamental right of citizenship" (Hart, 1992, p. 5).

Lansdown formulates a need for a clear definition of the term 'participation' in the context of children's rights. As he comments, in the English-speaking world, participation is equivalent to "forms of social engagement" within a family or community (Lansdown, 2010, p.11) which can be seen as a problematic starting point since there are many "societal, temporal, local and age related aspects" that render it more complex (Bae, 2010, p. 206). But his further arguing that children's participation is "part of belonging within a family or community" (p. 11) since they participate in all kinds of family activities, is in line with the view of the socially competent child as "active member of families, communities and societies" enshrined in UN documents (CRC/C/GC/7/Rev.1, p.3). Lund's reference to participation challenges the rationale of empowerment as one-sided implying various implications and functions:

"Participation relates to many dimensions and processes. It may be an end and a means, it may be passive or active, inclusive or exclusive, forced or voluntary; it may be an enabling and liberating force and thus empower, or it may be a restrictive force and disempower" (Lund, 2007, p. 145, in Pettersson, 2015, p. 232).

IV. FOCUS ON FORMULATIONS OF UNCRC ARTICLES

Since the adoption by the UN in 1989 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) children's participation has been one of the most highly debated and examined aspects of it (Lansdown, 2010, p.11). It prompted questions about what child's participation means in theory and practice. Many researches engage in interpreting and implementing UNCRC participatory principles at different levels (international, national, and local) and different structural and cultural contexts (educational institutions, youth organisation, community etc.). The rights enumerated in the UNCRC are categorised as either protection rights, provision rights or participation rights—often abbreviated as the '3 Ps'—and are expressed either in terms of rights or are conceptualized as duties upon states. Te One (2011, p. 44-45) discusses three different interpretations of children's rights and corresponds them to each of the aforementioned categories. *The 'interest' thesis* views the child as a rights holder, and the adult as the responsible executor of these rights, based on what is in the child's best interests which she argues can be interpreted as a protection right. *The 'caretaker' thesis* is more concerned with children's capacity, or incapacity, to decide for themselves. In this case, the child is viewed as not yet a competent executor of her/his rights so the caretaker is responsible for protecting them which Te One views as a provision rights thesis. *The*

'choice' thesis, in line with children's participation rights, relies on adults' capacity to recognise children's choices as rights and understand their emerging capabilities as exercise of their right to choose.

Bae claims that when it comes to realizing children's right to participation into an ECE context, it should be regarded in connection to play/playful (inter)actions as a communicational mode children often use to express themselves freely (Bae, 2006). Arguing that play "provides ample opportunities for active agency and self-expressing" he strongly suggests that Article 13 of the UNCRC:

1. The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.

and Article 31 of the UNCRC interpreted as the right to play:

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

should be taken into account and meaningfully "translated" in relation to young children's many 'languages' of expression (Bae, 2010, p. 210-211).

The UN Committee in comment No. 34 stresses the valuable, widely recognized, role of individual or collective play in early childhood and links the implementation of participation rights stated in Article 12 to rights to play in Article 31. "Planning for towns, and leisure and play facilities should take account of children's right to express their views (art. 12), through appropriate consultations. In all these respects, States parties are encouraged to pay greater attention and allocate adequate resources (human and financial) to the implementation of the right to rest, leisure and play" (CRC/C/GC/7/Rev.1, p. 15). Article 12 at the core of UNCRC, the so-called participation article to which is credited the success of the Convention (Lücker-Babel, 1995, in Reynaert et al., 2009, p. 522) addresses the 'visibility' of children; insists on child's right to express a view and have it heard according to their evolving capacities, and directs adults to consider them with respect:

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

Advocating for a competent child able to shape his own development, Woodhead links Article 12 also to Articles 14, 15 and 16 on freedom of expression, thought, conscience and religion and the right to privacy and freedom of association (Woodhead, 2005, p. 13).

V. THE RELEVANCE OF THE CONVENTION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Children's right to participation in early childhood education stems from articles in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which are aligned to a view of children as agentic social actors with rights, to be listened to and capable and competent in expressing opinions that influence their lives inside early childhood education services as well as local community.

The relevance of the UNCRC and its Articles to very young children and early childhood education has been highlighted by many researches in the field (Alexander, 1995; Bae, 2010; Bae, 2009; Lekkai, 2016; Markström & Halldén, 2009; Smith, 2007). Other initiatives of innovative practices in the field have integrated principles of participation into practice (Hart, 1992; Clark and Moss, 2001, in Clark, 2005). Theobald et al. (2011) find relevant studies to be rather scarce and propose further research on how children's right to participation is enacted in early childhood activities (Pettersson, 2015, p. 233).

However, it is not clear for practitioners in the field how participatory rights on children's own terms should be understood and realized in everyday practice within ECE. Kjörholt reports that interpretations and practices of children's right to participation within early childhood services in Nordic countries are associated with *autonomy*, *self-determination* and *individual rights to freedom and choice* (Kjörholt, 2010, p. 39). Bae draws attention to several points such as: openness to children's initiatives, closeness and being responsive to children,

acknowledge playfulness, and readiness for change of perspective from that of an adult to a child's point of view (Bae, 2009, p. 400-403).

Ethnographic studies in early childhood education and care institutions in different social cultural context give insight on how children as active, creative and collective agents, come to build their own peer-social worlds and cultures through meaning-making processes and interpretive reproduction of adult culture (Gulløv, 2003; Lekka, 2016; Markström & Halldén, 2009). By developing their own peer-cultures, children exercise agency and participate in two cultures—with other peers and with adults—in numerous ways (Corsaro, 2005, in James, 2009, p. 41). Engaging in playful activities with adults or other peers, children come to learn themselves, the people around them and explore their environment. Moreover, learning through play in early childhood education is closely connected to the notion of freedom of choice and is widely accepted among researchers and professionals in the field, to enhance the multi-faceted psychosocial and cognitive development of children. Arguably, this connects to right formulated in Article 29 of the UNCRC: "(a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential" (UNCRC, p. 9).

Example of studies and researches that reflect on discourses on children as autonomous and competent claimers of their rights are relevant in Nordic² countries (Bae, 2009; Gulløv, 2003; Pettersson, 2015; Venninen et al., 2014) where children's participation is experienced "with adults in a secure environment" (Venninen & Leinonen, 2013, in Venninen, et al., 2014, p. 212), "in the most convenient time and place" (Cornwall, 2002, in Lund, 2007, p. 133). There is example of scholars condemning researches which study children "in strange situations and with unfamiliar people" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, in Lansdown, 2010, p. 15) especially when they are used to draw conclusions that link children's age with the acquisition of their competencies.

VI. THE TWO GENERAL COMMENTS

Two more documents from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child are important resources for translating children's rights into practice in early childhood education sector.

1. General Comment no. 7 from 2006: *Implementing child rights in early childhood*(CRC/C/GC/7/rev1).
2. General Comment no. 12 from 2009: *The right of the child to be heard*(CRC/C/GC/12).

In both documents the Committee refers to the promotion of a positive agenda for implementing rights in early childhood sector building on:

"A shift away from traditional beliefs that regard early childhood mainly as a period for the socialization of the immature human being towards mature adult status [...]. The Convention requires that children, including the very youngest children, be respected as persons in their own right. Young children should be recognized as active members of families, communities and societies, with their own concerns, interests and points of view" (CRC/C/GC/7/Rev.1, p. 2-3).

But also with regard to several issues:

"107. In all educational environments, including educational programmes in the early years, the active role of children in a participatory learning environment should be promoted. Teaching and learning must take into account life conditions and prospects of the children. For this reason, education authorities have to include children's and their parents' views in the planning of curricula and school programmes" (CRC/C/GC/12, p. 21).

Based on humanistic principles these two documents put forward a view of children "not as objects to be formed" but as human beings with concern and intentions, interests, own opinions and points of view, particular needs and capacities, and suggest they be treated with "respect and dignity on their own premises, regardless of age, race, gender or ability" (Bae, 2010, p. 205-206).

"Consequently, full implementation of article 12 requires recognition of, and respect for, non-verbal forms of communication including play, body language, facial expressions, and drawing and painting, through which very young children demonstrate understanding, choices and preferences" (CRC/C/GC/12, p. 7).

²Discourses on children's right to participation have recently influenced Norwegian children's policy related to school reforms and informed changes in legal documents regarding early childhood institutions; children's right to participation is included in the National Kindergarten Act (2006) as well as in the national curriculum, Framework Plan for the Content and Tasks of Kindergartens (2006) (Kjørholt, 2010, p. 40; Bae, 2009, pp. 392-394; Bae, 2010, pp. 205-206).

The capacity for understanding and making choices, as well as the diversity of avenues young children follow for thinking, communicating and symbolically expressing their thoughts and feelings is welcomed and emphasized.

“They make choices and communicate their feelings, ideas and wishes in numerous ways, long before they are able to communicate through the conventions of spoken or written language” (CRC/C/GC/7/Rev.1, p. 7).

VII. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE FOR CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN ECE?

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in the introduction part in the General Comment from 2006 underlines the concept that “young children are holders of all rights enshrined in the Convention” and clearly pinpoints early childhood as “a critical period for the realization of these rights” (CRC/C/GC/7/Rev.1, p. 1). Two decades ago Alexander emphasised the growing consensus about the importance of early years' education in the development of ‘good citizens’ and called for a redirection of the early years' agenda towards the concept of young children as citizens with entitlements and rights to, among others, participate in meaningful decision-making (Alexander, 1995, p. 144-145). A recent growing body of research focused on children as active citizens (‘beings’) rather than potential citizens (‘becomings’) (Austin, 2010; Theis, 2010; Turnšek, 2009) has pinpointed the role of children's participation rights as a core of active citizenship in early years. Also, highlighted in UN Committee documents which recommend the states to:

“...encourage recognition of young children as social actors from the beginning of life, with particular interests, capacities and vulnerabilities, and of requirements for protection, guidance and support in the exercise of their rights” (CRC/C/GC/7/Rev.1, p. 2).

As Turnšek views it children's participation in democratic decision-making in early years is a necessary condition for democratic and active citizenship by which arguably a democratic ethos can be cultivated from an early age. This can be seen as an important competence for exercising later adult citizenship role. However, as she masterfully puts it, since children are already active citizens of their societies in the ‘here and now’, this can be seen “merely as a ‘positive side effect’, not as a primary goal” (Turnšek, 2009, p. 20).

Researches claim that children's participation has also other long-term benefits for children. Malone & Hartung list among others: building child's self-esteem, stimulating self and collective efficacy, promoting self-regulation, learning empathy etc. (Malone & Hartung, 2010, p. 33). Active citizenship can be essential to early learning in the sense that it empowers children to shape their own learning experiences through participatory learning strategies. The idea that children learn through *active* involvement in interactions with others and by being in active relation to their environmental surrounding, highlights the foundational role of “emergent interactive agency” to learning and development. Supporting this, research on brain development indicate agentic actions as foundational in shaping neurological functioning (Diamond, 1988; Kolb & Whishaw, 1998, in Bandura, 2001, p. 4). When and if this exercise of agency is listened to, taken into account and shown respect, children's participation and “the sense of self-worth, citizenship and well-being” are promoted (Berthelsen & Brownlee, 2005, in Mashford-Scott & Church, 2011, p. 18), let alone the stimulation of self-efficacy³ which according to Bandura is arguably the most central mechanism of personal agency (Bandura, 2001, p. 10).

Children's personal agency can be viewed as exercised through play; play is a natural, spontaneous behaviour of children and is internally motivated. Observing children's play in free-time situation one realizes that play is ‘what children and young people do, when they follow their own views-ideas, in their own way, on their own terms, and for their own reasons’. It is understood as “children's work” (Te One, 2011, p. 49) and one can argue it is one of the many ways children choose to participate in the world, by exercising their individual freedom, of speech and of thought. Free play is also a central principle guiding most early childhood education programmes in many countries. Seeing from this perspective, play is perhaps the most authentic child-led activity, away from adult-control, instrumented and conducted entirely by the child her/himself. Interpreted in terms of this framework, it can be presumed that participation is firstly important to children themselves and in my view, it is an excellent starting point to listen to children.

The long-term effects of establishing a culture of participation in ECE context cannot easily be seen, but they do exist nonetheless. In defending a new order of children and young people's participation as a “dialogical and spatial practice to improve intergenerational spaces”, Mannion reasons on the necessity for greater children and young people's participation based on: their status as right-holders citizens, on general legal requirements, on

³ Perceived Self-Efficacy: An individual's belief in her/his capabilities to exercise some measure of control over their own functioning and over environmental events in order produce some effects (Bandura, 2001, p. 10).

provision for better services to children, on its being more democratic leading to better outcomes, safety and protection from abuse, skill building such as self-esteem and self-efficacy (Sinclair 2000; Mannion 2007, in Mannion, 2010, p. 330). Lastly, as Mayall (2000) very aptly targets, associating play only with children or childhood reinforces their separation as a group from adults (in Te One, 2011, p. 49). In line with this, a general interesting point to be explored is: *What would be the benefits for the adults from establishing a culture of participation in ECE context?* In particular: *What could adults profit from reciprocating in playful modes to children?* (Bae, 2009, p. 402).

VIII. CONCLUSION

There is an extreme need for building skills in children's participation both among adults and children. One starting point comes by working with adults on their sensitization towards children's participation rights and the positive impact of their realisation. As it is the case with human rights education in general, also education on the right to participation within early childhood education:

"...can shape the motivations and behaviours [...] only when [...] practised in the institutions in which the child learns, plays and lives together with other children and adults" (CRC/C/GC/12 p. 21).

Pivotal role in this process though hold raising awareness among children about the value of their voice and perspectives, as well as their meaningful status as right-holders. Most importantly, what is crucial in my opinion, is building children's perceptions of their own self-efficacy, the belief in their sufficient competencies to influence matters that directly concern them, by exercising autonomous choices. Again, education on the right to participation within early childhood education:

"...should be participatory and empowering to children, providing them with practical opportunities to exercise their rights and responsibilities in ways adapted to their interests, concerns and evolving capacities [...] should be anchored in everyday issues at home, in childcare centres, in early education programmes and other community settings with which young children can identify" (CRC/C/GC/7/Rev.1, p. 15).

Acknowledging that "young children are acutely sensitive to their surroundings and very rapidly acquire understanding of the people, places and routines in their lives, along with awareness of their own unique identity" (ibid., p. 7) participation should start being implemented not away from children's day-to-day lives and on matters that are meaningful to them; as a process of getting involved in taking initiatives, interpreting the world with their 'important' others who respect and listen to them, and take their competencies, views and needs into account with great consideration.

An interesting point following this line of thought is made by Bae (2004) in his research in two preschools in Oslo (Norway), where he focuses on experiential qualities of everyday interactions between children and their teachers that create the ground for recognising children's right to participate. He uses Schibbye's (1993, 2002) concept of "mutual recognition" and repositions children and adults as "partners in interaction, of equal worth, that create mutual conditions for each other's actions in relational processes". As he explains this alternative approach, centred on the principle of self-reflection, describes teacher-child relationships in a two-sided way, does not objectify children, gives credit to children's perspective as well (Bae, 2009, p. 397).

However, Bae seems to be not the only one concerned with this 'on equal terms' relational framing of participation. Percy-Smith (2006, p. 154, in Mannion, 2010, p. 331-332) sceptically remarks how we fail to notice adult's views in the process; how little their role is accounted along with perspective sharing through power negotiations. He introduces a vision of "collaborative intergenerational space" where children and young people are included rather than excluded by participating *alongside* adults rather than as a group apart from them; most importantly participation of this kind has *outcomes* for adults as well as children. This model of participation could be resistant to critiques usually raised concerning tokenism, unresolved power issues, allow children to decide only on "children's" matters while having no meaningful impact on overall organisational policies, and the lack of balance between inclusion of some children and the exclusion of others (Reynaert et al., 2009, p. 522). Therefore, the aspiration of reaching absolute autonomous activity on the part of the children in an early childhood education context, as exercise of their right to participation, must be properly situated in time *if* it is to become a (realistic) goal. It is a long-term process and requires systematic commitment and continued involvement on the part of supporting adults in social-meaning processes. Stimulation of their meaningful role as indispensable facilitators in empowering children to advocate for themselves in claiming their right to participate, is just as important as recognising and respecting their real capacities (Lansdown, 2010, p. 16).

If child-led initiatives are to be supported and understood as one of the most appropriate ways to implement the participatory principles of the UN documents, then we should start paying attention there where

unwrought participation is manifested, i.e. in children's strategies for negotiating and asserting autonomy, how they strive to make sense of the world and create their own meanings, how they challenge social norms and adult definition of power by adopting playful modes of interactions; most essentially we should be receptive of the "change and unpredictability in their interactions" (Baraldi & Iervese, 2014, p. 2) even though not expressed in ways which would be used by adults. Giving credit to that important *something* that children tell us within early childhood settings or any other context without imposing adult intervention, may prove to be a meaningful resource for assessing and changing the decisions made on their behalf that affect them as individuals and/or as groups.

"Child participation must be authentic and meaningful. It must start with children and young people themselves, on their own terms, within their own realities and in pursuit of their own visions, dreams, hopes and concerns. [...] Most of all, authentic and meaningful child participation requires a radical shift in adult thinking and behaviour – from an exclusionary to an inclusionary approach to children and their capabilities [...]" (UNICEF, 2003, p. 5).

The image of the competent child that Article 12 envisions is perhaps one of the greatest challenges for early childhood education reforms. The evident emergent need for challenging cultural shifts however hard and discomfort, should not be ignored. (Malone & Hartung, 2010, p. 34). After all, "participation is a human fundamental right in itself" and should not be understood in isolation from various other aspects, such as the need to "balance it with the right to protection" as it is also "a means to through which to realise other rights" (Lansdown, 2010, p. 13-18).

It is clear that there is a lack of opportunities being created for children's meaningful participation in early childhood education. However, the creation of these spaces for participation are often dependent on the goodwill or the self-critical involvement of the adults in their life, which is clearly not sufficient. Taking as an argument the low-level awareness of Article 12 and the UNCRC in general amongst teachers and parents (Te One, 2009, in Te One, 2011, p. 50) and reflecting on my empirical knowledge as a professional in the field, I can argue that children's right to participation is perhaps the most often violated right in everyday activities. But by being dialogically responsive towards children's daily 'agenda', a space can be created where children can express their "voices" a child's point of view perspective is given ground (Bae, 2009, p. 399). We need to take some steps backwards to contest and revise our inner presumptions of what children are capable of and what their needs are, to truly accept that when it comes to matters that affect them, they are the first 'experts' to be consulted; their unique experiences of their world should influence all those responsible for education.

Mannion is sceptic about the idea of children and young people's 'own spaces' and focuses on the relations through which these spaces are created. He suggests a co-constructive reciprocity notion of child-adult relations and practices; through these intergenerational relations he argues 'children's own spaces' can be better understood (Mannion, 2010, p. 332-333). In line with his scepticism, implementing children's participation is not about imposing of a predefined, fully conceptualized framework on children, or about empowering them and facilitating their agency, but firstly about acknowledging that children *are* indeed actively participating every day through their own cultural practices and their remaking of themselves and their environments; by negotiating their position within social order and contesting traditional power relations in their interactions. They are *already* active agents because they exercise every instance their right to free choice and "exercising choice is in fact a participation right" (Te One, 2011, p. 52). Recent researches indicate that when limitations on children's intentions to exercise their free choice are imposed, they tend to resist and challenge these limitations by employing strategies they consider most suitable to influence issues that matter to them, and thus negotiate the social order to finally success in creating time and space on their own terms (Lekkai, 2016; Markström & Halldén, 2009). We need to be cautious though to not "reduce participation to formal routines emphasising individual choice" (Bae, 2009, p. 402) rather than perceive it as "ways of being and relating, deciding and acting, which characterise the practice of everyday life" (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2010, p. 357).

As emphasised in international guidelines, it is imperative to secure meaningful, genuine freedom of expression in practice within ECE sector. However, some might argue that all freedoms come with responsibilities and the question to be answered is: *Should rights also?* If yes, how should it be translated in practice with regard to implementing children's rights to participation in early childhood education?

REFERENCES

- [1] Alexander, G. (1995). Children's rights in their early years: From plaiting fog to knitting treacle. In B. Franklin (Hrsg.), *The handbook of children's rights. Comparative Policy and Practice* (S. 131-146). London: Routledge.
- [2] Austin, S. (2010). Children's participation in citizenship and governance. In B. Percy-Smith, & N. Thomas

- (Hrsg.), *A handbook of children and young people's participation* (1. Ausg., S. 245-253). London and New York: Routledge. Von http://nmd.bg/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Routledge-A_Handbook_for_Children_and_Young_Peoples_Participation.pdf abgerufen
- [3] Bae, B. (23. September 2009). Children's right to participate - challenges in everyday interactions. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 17(3), S. 391-406. doi:10.1080/13502930903101594
- [4] Bae, B. (9. Oktober 2010). Realizing children's right to participation in early childhood settings: some critical issues in a Norwegian context. *Early Years*, 30(3), S. 205-218. doi:10.1080/09575146.2010.506598
- [5] Bandura, A. (2001). Social Cognitive Theory: An Agentic Perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52(1), S. 1-26. doi:10.1146/annurev.psych.52.1.1
- [6] Baraldi, C., & Iervese, V. (26. June 2014). Observing Children's Capabilities as Agency. In D. Stoecklin, & J.-M. Bonvin (Hrsg.), *Children's Rights and the Capability Approach. Challenges and Prospects* (S. 43-65). Springer Netherlands. doi:10.1007/978-94-017-9091-8_3
- [7] Clark, A. (2005). Ways of seeing: using the Mosaic approach to listen to young children's perspectives. In A. Clark, A. Kjørholt, & P. Moss (Hrsg.), *Beyond Listening. Children's perspectives on early childhood services* (S. 29-49). Bristol: Policy Press. Von http://www.sagepub.in/upm-data/43997_9781446207529.pdf abgerufen
- [8] Curtis, J. (2008, August). Perceptions of agency: Beliefs of four adolescent girls in high school as revealed through literature discussions... PhD Dissertation. Texas, Denton: UNT Digital Library. Von <http://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc9111/> abgerufen.
- [9] Gulløv, E. (2003). Creating a natural place for children. An ethnographic study of Danish kindergartens. In K. Fog Olwig, & E. Gulløv (Hrsg.), *Children's places. Cross-cultural perspectives*. (S. 23-38). London: Routledge.
- [10] Hart, R. A. (1992). *Children's Participation: From tokenism to citizenship*. (No. 4). Florence: UNICEF.
- [11] Hungerland, B. (2015). Children as actors in Muchow's life space study and its implication for "new" Childhood Studies. In G. Mey, & H. Günther (Hrsg.), *The Life Space of the Urban Child: Perspective on Martha Muchow's Classic Study* (S. 249-264). New Brunswick, London: Transaction Publishers.
- [12] James, A. (2009). Agency. In J. Qvortrup, W. Corsaro, & M.-S. Honig (Hrsg.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies* (S. 35-45). Basingstoke Hampshire: UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- [13] James, A., & James, A. (2008). *Key Concepts in Childhood Studies*. Sage.
- [14] Kjørholt, A. (Oktober, 2010). Rethinking young children's rights for participation in diverse cultural contexts. In M. Kernan, & E. Singer (Hrsg.), *Peer Relationships in Early Childhood Education and Care* (S. 38-48). Routledge.
- [15] Lansdown, G. (2010). The realisation of children's participation rights Critical reflections. In B. Percy-Smith, & N. Thomas (Hrsg.), *A handbook of children and young people's participation* (1. Ausg., S. 11-23). London and New York: Routledge. Von http://nmd.bg/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Routledge-A_Handbook_for_Children_and_Young_Peoples_Participation.pdf abgerufen
- [16] Lekka, I. (14. Dezember 2016). Asserting Agency: Children's Tactics to Navigate in Early Childhood Education. *International Journal of Early Childhood Education Research*, 5(11), S. 33-71. Von [http://www.ijecer.net/pfi-depo/issues/IJECER%20DECEMBER%202016%20V5%20I11_z%20\(1\)%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.ijecer.net/pfi-depo/issues/IJECER%20DECEMBER%202016%20V5%20I11_z%20(1)%20(1).pdf) abgerufen
- [17] Lund, R. (kein Datum). At the Interface of Development Studies and Child Research: Rethinking the Participating Child. *Children's Geographies*, 5(1-2), S. 131-148. doi:10.1080/14733280601108247
- [18] Malone, K., & Hartung, C. (2010). Challenges of participatory practice with children. In B. Percy-Smith, & N. Thomas (Hrsg.), *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation. Perspectives from theory and practice* (1. Ausg., S. 24-38). London and New York: Routledge. Von http://nmd.bg/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Routledge-A_Handbook_for_Children_and_Young_Peoples_Participation.pdf abgerufen
- [19] Mannion, G. (2010). After participation. The socio-spatial performance of intergenerational becoming. In B. Percy-Smith, & N. Thomas (Hrsg.), *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation* (1. Ausg., S. 330-342). London and New York: Routledge. Von http://nmd.bg/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Routledge-A_Handbook_for_Children_and_Young_Peoples_Participation.pdf abgerufen
- [20] Markström, A.-M., & Halldén, G. (2009). Children's Strategies for Agency in Preschool. *Children and Society*, 23, S. 112-122. doi:10.1111/j.1099-0860.2008.00161.x
- [21] Mashford-Scott, A., & Church, A. (2011). Promoting children's agency in early childhood education. *Novitas-ROYAL (Research on Youth and Language)*, 5(1), S. 15-38.
- [22] Mason, J., & Bolzan, N. (2010). Questioning understandings of children's participation: applying a cross-

- cultural lens. In B. Percy-Smith, & N. Thomas (Hrsg.), *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation. Perspectives from theory and practice* (1. Ausg., S. 125-132). London and New York. Von http://nmd.bg/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Routledge-A_Handbook_for_Children_and_Young_Peoples_Participation.pdf abgerufen
- [23] Percy-Smith, B., & Thomas, N. (Hrsg.). (2010). *A Handbook of Children and Young People's Participation. Perspective from Theory and Practice*. London-New York: Routledge. Von http://nmd.bg/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Routledge-A_Handbook_for_Children_and_Young_Peoples_Participation.pdf abgerufen
- [24] Pettersson, K. (2015). Children's participation in preschool documentation practices. *Childhood*, 22(2), S. 231–247. doi:10.1177/0907568213513480
- [25] Reynaert, D., Vandeveld, S., & Bouverne-de-Bie, M. (November 2009). A review of children's rights literature since the adoption of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child. *Childhood*, 16(4), S. 518-534. doi:10.1177/0907568209344270
- [26] Smith, A. (September 2007). Children's rights and early childhood education. Links to theory and advocacy. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 32(2), S. 1-7. Von file:///D:/Articles/Children%20right%20to%20Participation/Smith%202007%20Children's%20rights%20and%20early%20childhood%20education_Links%20to%20theory%20and%20advocacy.pdf abgerufen
- [27] Te One, S. (March 2011). Defining rights: Children's rights in theory and in practice. *He Kupu*, 2(4), S. 41-57. Von <http://www.hekupu.ac.nz/Journal%20files/Issue1%20March%202011/Sarah%20Te%20One.pdf> abgerufen
- [28] Theis, J. (2010). Children as active citizens. An agenda for children's civil rights and civic engagement. In B. Percy-Smith, & N. Thomas (Hrsg.), *A handbook of children and young people's participation* (1. Ausg., S. 343-355). London and New York: Routledge. Von http://nmd.bg/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Routledge-A_Handbook_for_Children_and_Young_Peoples_Participation.pdf abgerufen
- [29] Turnšek, N. (2009). Children as citizens "here and now" - democratic participation as a core citizenship education in early years. *International Magazine for Educational Sciences and Practice*, S. 18-27. doi:file:///D:/Articles/Children%20right%20to%20Participation/Children%20as%20Citizens%20here%20And%20Now.pdf
- [30] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. (May-June 2009). *The right of the child to be heard*. General Comment No. 12 (CRC/C/GC/12), Geneva. Von <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/AdvanceVersions/CRC-C-GC-12.pdf> abgerufen
- [31] UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. (September 2005). *Implementing child rights in early childhood*. General Comment no. 7 (CRC/C/GC/7/rev1, 2006), Geneva. Von <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/AdvanceVersions/GeneralComment7Rev1.pdf> abgerufen
- [32] UNICEF. (2003). *The state of the world's children 2003*. Geneva: UNICEF. Von http://www.unicef.org/publications/files/pub_sowc03_en.pdf abgerufen
- [33] United Nations. (November 1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Von <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx> abgerufen
- [34] Venninen, T., Leinonen, J., Lipponen, L., & Ojala, M. (2014). Supporting Children's Participation in Finnish Child Care Centers. *Early Childhood Education*, 42, S. 211–218. doi:10.1007/s10643-013-0590-9
- [35] Woodhead, M. (2005). Early childhood development: a question of rights. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 37(3), S. 79–98. Von <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1007/BF03168347> abgerufen