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Citation for published version:
Blaisdell, C, McNair, LJ, Addison, L & Davis, JM 2021, '‘Why am I in all of these pictures?’ From learning stories to lived stories: The politics of children’s participation rights in documentation practices', *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*. https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2021.2007970

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):
10.1080/1350293X.2021.2007970

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:
European Early Childhood Education Research Journal

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Download date: 22. Dec. 2021

European Early Childhood Education Research Journal

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/recr20

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To cite this article: Caralyn Blaisdell, Lynn J. McNair, Luke Addison & John M. Davis (2021): 'Why am I in all of these pictures?' From Learning Stories to Lived Stories: the politics of children's participation rights in documentation practices, European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, DOI: 10.1080/1350293X.2021.2007970

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2021.2007970

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EUROPEAN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION RESEARCH JOURNAL
https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2021.2007970

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'Why am I in all of these pictures?' From Learning Stories to Lived Stories: the politics of children's participation rights in documentation practices

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ABSTRACT
In this paper, we report on Phase One of a small action research project that examined how Learning Stories were put into practice at one Scottish nursery. Specifically, the paper looks at young children's participation rights and how they were enacted within the authorship of the stories. The project used an action research approach in which qualitative data about participants' current experiences with the stories was used to spark reflection, experimentation and change in documentation practices. Drawing on Phase One data from young children, parents and practitioners at the nursery, our findings illustrate the complex enactment of children's participation rights, including children's right to information, freedom of expression and their right to express their views and have those views taken into account. The paper concludes that more work needs to be done in the field of Learning stories to (a) acknowledge the complex political and material considerations at play in the creation of pedagogical documentation and (b) to accommodate children's own authorship, through flexible, non (or less) written methods.

KEYWORDS
Learning Stories; participation rights; children's rights; early childhood education and care; social justice; pedagogical documentation

Introduction

In this paper, we report on a Phase One of a small action research project that examined how Learning Stories (Carr and Lee 2019) were put into practice at one Scottish nursery. Specifically, the paper looks at young children's participation rights and how they were enacted within the authorship of the stories. Assessment, evaluation and documentation are key areas of tension – and optimism – in early childhood education and care. Practices vary widely. Some approaches are rich, qualitative and process-based, documenting children's evolving theories and learning experiences (Rinaldi 2001; Carr and Lee 2019). Other approaches are standardised, tracking children's development across specific domains (Whitebread et al. 2009), or used as a predictive measure of children's future development (Frans et al. 2017). Early childhood settings are also expected to self-evaluate, including assessments of their physical environments (La Paro et al. 2012) and

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interactions between staff and children (Howard et al. 2018). Depending on the local political context, early childhood settings may also be subject to inspections, self-assessment and improvement procedures from their relevant regulatory bodies. Clearly this is a complex terrain that practitioners, children and families navigate – and a highly political one, cut through with relations of power around practices of normalisation, banal developmentalism, individualisation and regulation of children's bodies (e.g. Burman 2017; Sparrman and Lindgren 2010).

There has been a great deal of interest in the field regarding democratic, participatory approaches to documentation and assessment. These approaches seem to offer a fuller range of participation for children and the potential to disrupt the banal power relations discussed above. However, participatory initiatives more broadly have long been criticised for being 'Pollyanna-ish' and failing to challenge the very relations of power that participation rights nominally seek to disrupt (Cairns 2006; Tisdall 2013; Davis 2011). In this paper, we trouble the discourse around one particular approach to democratic, participatory documentation – Learning Stories. Learning Stories are narrative assessments of children's working theories and learning experiences, often accompanied by photos and other visual materials, and which seek to analyse those moments with a 'view to the learning that was being valued and encouraged' (Carr, May, and Podmore 1998, 21). A Learning Stories approach would certainly seem compatible with a democratic, participatory paradigm of documentation and assessment; for example, children's own views on their learning are often included alongside practitioners and parents (e.g. Carr and Lee 2019).

In this paper, we examine how a Learning Stories approach was put into practice at one Scottish nursery, reporting the findings of a small action research project. However, even the naming of the approach reveals tensions, some of which pre-existed the project. At the research nursery – here called Lilybank – practitioners preferred the term 'Lived Stories' instead of Learning Stories. This terminology, practitioners felt, pushed their documentation practices beyond the status quo of adult-centric identification of children's supposed learning, focused attention instead on the dynamic, complex and unique ways of living and learning at Lilybank, including practitioners learning from children and their families (McNair 2019). Despite the democratic intentions of the Lived Stories, the research project brought to light further tensions regarding the political nature of children's authorship – or lack thereof – of Lived Stories written about them.

Background

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework underpinning this study brought together two key areas (1) children's participation rights as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and (2) the theory and practice of Learning Stories as a form of participatory, democratic pedagogical documentation (Carr and Lee 2019). First, the paper draws on a framework of children's rights, particularly focusing on participation rights. Children's right to be express their views and have those views taken seriously (Article 12) is a 'fundamental value' of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and is one of the general principles of the Convention, alongside the right to non-

discrimination (Article 2), the right to life and development (Article 6), and the primary consideration of the child's best interests (Article 3) (Committee on the Rights of the Child 2009, 3). Article 12 is oft grouped alongside other civil and political rights such as Article 13 (freedom of expression), Article 14 (freedom of thought, conscience and religion), Article 15 (freedom of association) and Article 17 (right to information). Young children are entitled to all of the rights enshrined in the UNCRC, including participation rights.

Although the term 'participation' is not actually used in the UNCRC, a wide range of research, policy, legislation and practice initiatives have developed relating to children's Article 12 rights. The Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009, 3) have defined participation broadly as

> ongoing processes, which include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes.

Crucially, the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2009) is clear that the other articles of the Convention cannot be fully implemented without respect for the child as a subject in their own right. However, decades of children's rights scholarship has grappled with issues of implementation and the complexities of translating international legal standards into local practices (e.g. Hanson and Nieuwenhuys 2012). One reason for this difficulty is that children's participation is challenging to dominant views of children as developing, vulnerable, and dependent – not yet adults, and therefore not full members of society (Tisdall 2015). If this is true for children and young people's participation generally, it is particularly so for young children, who may be viewed as 'pre-social ' (Alderson et al. 2005, 33) and 'too innocent and/or immature to participate meaningfully' (MacNaughton, Hughes, and Smith 2008, 164). In contrast, theorists working in early childhood studies have produced a wealth of research on the theory and practice of 'listening to young children', which emphasises the richness of young children while moving away from rights-based discourses that are tied too tightly to notions of autonomy and individualism (Moss, Clark, and Kjorholt 2005). The relationality of listening practices is crucial but so too is the 'hard political edge' of children's rights. Moosa-Mitha (2005, 381) brings these together in her relational definition of children's participation rights:

> By presence, I mean the degree to which the voice, contribution and agency of the child is acknowledged in their many relationships.

Moosa-Mitha's (2005) definition acknowledges the interdependence of human life as a prerequisite rather than a deficiency in human subjects. Her definition is openly political, being concerned with oppression of children based on their diverse social identities and positions, and the denial of their rights to equality and freedom.

The paper brings a children's rights framework into dialogue with the theory and practice of Learning Stories. Learning Stories have been defined as a form of narrative assessment, based on the principles of noticing, recognising and responding to children's learning Learning Stories take many forms, but generally contain the observation, an analysis of the child's learning, e.g. strengths, and a 'what next' section (Carr and Lee 2012). Carr and Lee (2012) argue that Learning Stories enable professionals to go beyond the superficial, engaging in practitioner research alongside assessment about

children's strengths, agency, learning identity and life experiences. In terms of children's participation rights, many examples of Learning Stories involve direct quotes from children during the experience being observed (Carr and Lee 2019). Some have a separate space for the child's voice, where the children can respond to the Learning Story itself – but, often, the child's contribution occurs after the story has been written (Carr and Lee 2012, 31). The asynchronous nature of children's contributions suggests that there is a need to explore young children's living participation rights, in terms of the process by and through which Learning Stories are authored and created. Indeed, Hill and others (2004) question the who, why, what, where, when and how of tools for elucidating information from children and Davis and Smith (2012) question the processes through which 'outcomes' are generated. In particular questions arise regarding power over what is recorded and how, and who interprets/represents what children are thinking and experiencing.

Scottish policy on early learning and childcare: tracking and assessment

The Scottish context mirrors international debates on learning, tracking and assessment. The Scottish Government aims to nearly double children's entitlement to early learning and childcare (ELC) by the year 2020[1] (Scottish Government 2017b). This increase in the funded hours is aimed at tackling education inequalities in Scotland (Scottish Government 2016). In order to close the equality gap, the Scottish Government introduced the 'Scottish Attainment Challenge' – the fundamental purpose being to raise the educational attainment of children (and young people) living in areas described as 'deprived' (Education Scotland 2020).

The Attainment Challenge has become a key driver of standardised assessments in early childhood settings. For example, in order to report progress on the Attainment Challenge, some Scottish local authorities have devised their own charts for tracking and assessing young children's developmental milestones. Practitioners are encouraged to track children's growth by shading in a box on the chart, which indicates the child's successful achievement in each particular milestone. When Scottish children move on to school they are subjected to new national standardised assessments, which have been implemented in schools to provide diagnostic information to practitioners on children's progress in aspects of literacy and numeracy (Scottish Government 2017a). Moss (2019) argues that this type of standard-based education is about predetermined, measurable outcomes, in which children are viewed as empty vessels waiting to be filled. Similarly, Bradbury (2019) highlights how downward pressure on ELC settings causes them to adopt school-like practices and values – which is happening in some Scottish settings. There is no space for children's own perspectives in these standardised assessments.

At the same time, there has been strong push back from the teacher's union and lobby groups regarding the trend toward standardised assessment (Educational Institute of Scotland 2020; Upstart Scotland n.d.). The discourse on standardisation sits alongside an emerging emphasis on free-flowing, play-based pedagogy in Scottish early years, including in early primary school (Casey and Scott-McKie 2017). Therefore, Scottish practitioners, children and families are navigating a contentious terrain when it comes to authorship and authority over assessment in early years, in which settings are encouraged to develop child-led, creative pedagogies, while simultaneously experiencing a great

deal of pressure to produce authoritative accounts of children's development by assessing them against narrow standardised criteria.

Research methodology and methods

This paper is drawn from a wider empirical project called Telling Life Stories, funded by the Froebel Trust and undertaken at Lilybank nursery in Scotland from 2017 to 2019. The project was a small piece of action research intended to explore current practices and experiment with new ways of documenting children's lived experiences, in keeping with Froebelian principles. However, the specific Froebelian aspects of the research are not the focus of this paper.

Research setting

The fieldwork setting for this research project was Lilybank Nursery. The nursery, located in Scotland, served children from birth to five years old, mainly from families who did not experience poverty. The project was designed and the funding applied for in dialogue with Lilybank practitioners. Lilybank was already using a version of Learning Stories, although, as discussed previously, practitioners there preferred the term 'Lived Stories'. Lilybank had adopted Lived Stories one year before the research project began, as a documentation method in resistance to pressure from the local council to implement some form of 'tracking' of children – with standardised, tick-box assessments as the suggested method. The Lived Stories were written in narrative form, addressed directly to the child, and uploaded to an online Learning Journal platform where families could log in to read them. After a year of using digital Lived Stories, practitioners and the leadership team at the nursery were keen to explore how the stories – the narrative format as well as the digital platform – were working for children, practitioners and families.

Action research paradigm

Given the focus on understanding and changing real-life practices, the Telling Life Stories project took an action research approach. In particular, the project focused on practice-based learning through action and reflection (McNiff and Whitehead 2011), with Lilybank practitioners being supported by two university researchers. The project was specifically guided by the approach of MacNaughton and Hughes (2008), who recommend four steps in the action research cycle: choosing to change, planning for a change, creating change, and sharing the lessons of your change. The phases of the project are visualised in Figure 1. This paper focuses exclusively on the findings of Phase One.

Qualitative, multi-modal approach:

Within the action research paradigm, the project used a qualitative, multi-modal approach. The qualitative methodology supported engagement with the depth, nuance, and complexity of nursery practices (e.g. Mason 2017). Within the qualitative methodology, a multi-modal approach was taken. This approach was designed so that

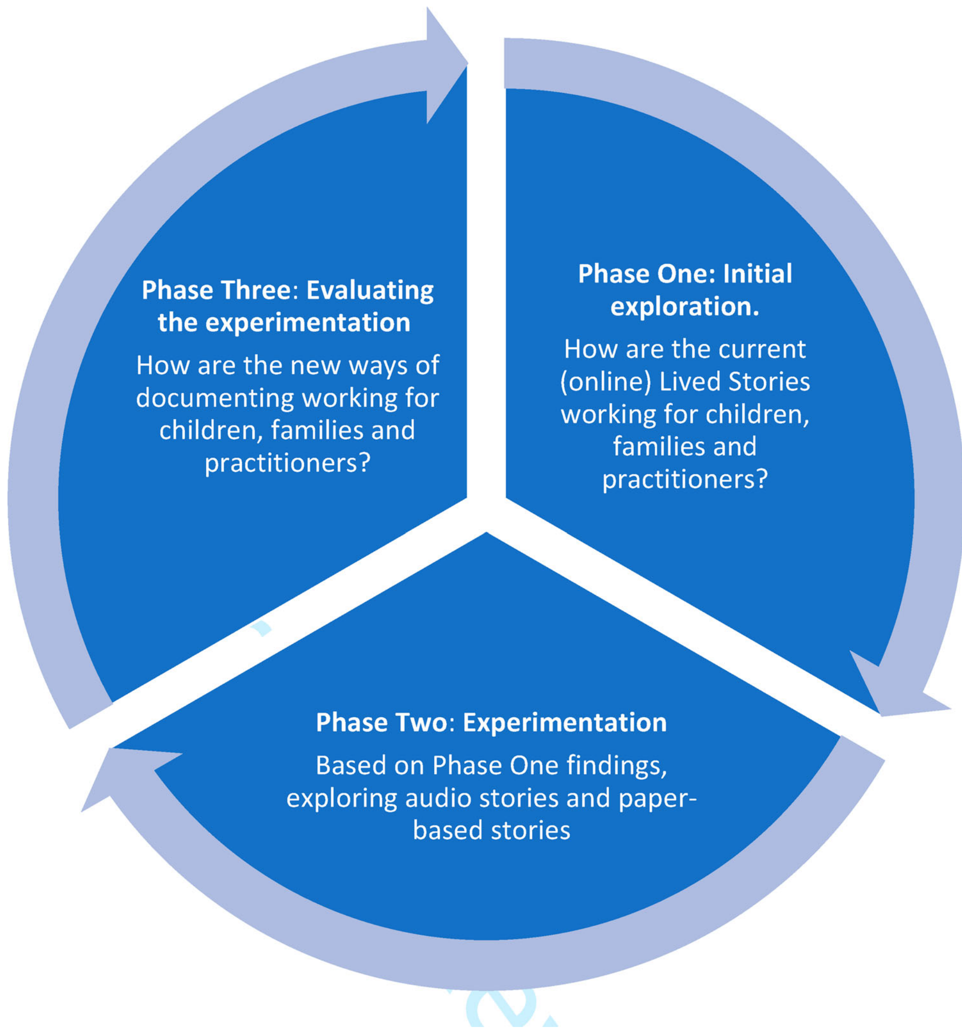

Figure 1. Phases of the Lived Stories action research project.

participants could take part in flexible ways that suited them. The methods used in Phase One of the project were:

- Qualitative questionnaires (practitioners, families) with 6 open-ended questions about their views on the current Lived Stories system
- Focus groups (practitioners, families, facilitated by university researchers). Took place after the questionnaires were received. Semi-structured, with questions soliciting more depth about participants' experiences of the current Lived Stories system
- Observations of children engaging with Lived Stories (by practitioners)
- Interviews with children (by practitioners)

Two families and two practitioners also decided to informally email their thoughts to researchers.

Participants

Phase One of the Lived Stories project elicited the voices of children, practitioners and families about the digital stories, as demonstrated in Table 1. All children in the 4- to 5-year-old age group (appx 30) were invited to take part in interviews, conducted by a practitioner they knew well. Information about the project, and invitations to take part, were sent to all families in the nursery and included in the monthly newsletter. However, the response rate from families was lower than hoped, with 17 families taking part in the questionnaire and 2 in the focus group.

Analysis

The data from Phase One was analysed thematically. This involved a close reading of the data, identifying patterns, categories and outliers (Mason 2017). As Braun and Clarke (Braun and Clarke 2021) argue, thematic analysis produces rigorous and transparent research findings. However, it is not a mechanistic process. Rather it involves a constant 'bending back on yourself', questioning the assumptions being made and the interpretations being created (Braun and Clarke 2019). In the case of the Lived Stories project, a particular consideration was that some participants – practitioners in particular – took part in more than one method (i.e. practitioners doing an anonymous questionnaire and also attending the focus group). Similarly, although most practitioners took part in the project, a smaller proportion of children and families out of the total nursery population chose to take part. We were therefore cautious in our analysis that the findings were partial, tentative and to be used to suggest rather than dictate changes to practices in Phases Two and Three.

Ethical considerations

The Telling Life Stories project went through ethical review by the Froebel Trust as part of the funding application process, as well as going through institutional ethical review at the University of Strathclyde (approval granted in March 2017). The project was

Table 1. Participants and methods used in Phase One of the Lived Stories project.

Phase One Initial exploration
Children (total of 86 children enrolled, aged 0–5 years) Interviews: n = 15 with children aged 4–5 years old Observation of children engaging with their online Lived Stories: n = 6
Nursery practitioners (total of 16 working at the nursery) Qualitative questionnaire: n = 12 Focus group: n = 11 Emails to researchers: n = 2
Families (total of 26 families enrolled) Qualitative questionnaires: n = 17 Focus group: n = 2 Emails to researchers: n = 2

designed to meet EECERA Ethical Principles (EECERA Working Group 2015). Of particular note were considerations around:

Informed consent: Ensuring that participants (children, families, and practitioners), at each stage of the project, were given appropriate information about the project and that they were able to withdraw consent, without impacting on service provision or employment.

Anonymity: Some data were collected anonymously, with no link to participant identity. The project uses pseudonyms in any research output as well as the more general masking of specific identities through description.

Confidentiality: This project used multiple research methods to provide different entry points for participants. For example, qualitative questionnaires were filled in anonymously at the point of collection so participants could give their views confidentially.

Findings: children's participation rights as authors of Lived Stories

Despite widespread enthusiasm for the Lived Stories, the longstanding commitment of Lilybank practitioners to children's participation rights, and the participatory ethos of Learning Stories more generally, it became clear during Phase One of the project that children's own involvement with the journals was uneven. We identified intertwined difficulties in enacting children's participation rights in terms of the inclusion of their views (Article 12), constraints on freedom of expression because of the written form of the stories (Article 13) and ambiguity around access to information about the existence of their online Lived Stories (Article 17). For example, 11 out of 15 children interviewed about their online stories said they had not seen the journals before, with three saying they had looked at them with their parents, and one child unsure. Theo's[2] response to his online journal during the interview highlights a lack of information about the existence of his Lived Stories:

> Practitioner: Have you seen the pictures before?
>
> Theo: No. What's a Learning Journal? Can I see more? Look at this one, this one looks cool. I'm wearing bare feet […] Am I in this one? Yes I am. **Why am I in all of these pictures?** (emphasis added)

Similarly, Anya had a lot to say about the stories in her online journal during the interview, but said she had not seen them before:

> Anya (looking through her journal): I think I'm 3 there. Maybe 2? I was looking at bugs. In the museum. That's me shopping. Look, this is us doing gymnastics.
>
> Practitioner: Have you seen the pictures before?
>
> Anya: No.

As Theo and Anya's interviews reflect, some children were not aware that the online stories existed. However, in the larger body of data, there was more ambiguity, as practitioners and families described many examples of sharing the online stories with children. Children's access depended on adults logging in and showing them the online stories. Looking holistically at the data about children's access to, and information

about, the Lived Stories, it did seem that a body of work was being built up about children that they did not have consistent information about.

The written expression in the Lived Stories was another area of contention and mixed responses. Some parents found the stories too wordy or awkward:

> 'A lovely idea but in practice sometimes a bit long winded' (Parent questionnaire)

> 'I find [narrative format] a slightly awkward shift in feel of communications' (Parent questionnaire)

In contrast, other parents were fond of the written format and felt it fostered emotional connections:

> I like the way the narrative stories invite a lot of detail – more perhaps than a format where the pictures are just labelled with who/what/where. It makes me feel like the staff really know my child (which I know they do, but it's striking to hear the attention to detail). (Parent questionnaire)

> It's lovely to read the narrative which includes not just info about the activities our child participated in but also their reaction to it and others around them. (Parent questionnaire)

> I love this [the narrative format]. The form of a letter to the children is a great idea and it communicates the story of what happened so well. (Parent questionnaire)

> Using the first person and addressing directly to my own child or children[…] really helps to understand the observation in the context of children's curiosities and learning experience (Parent questionnaire)

Although most of the families and practitioners liked the narrative, written format, one practitioner raised the question of 'who we're writing [the stories] for' pointing out that younger babies and toddlers were interested in photographs but were not reading the stories yet. The practitioner's response returns us to a consideration of children's own participation rights in this matter, in terms of their freedom of expression; if the stories mainly feature the written word, many young children would be excluded from this means of expression.

Turning to the inclusion of children's views (Article 12), a consistent finding was that children were rarely involved with actually authoring the Lived Stories. In terms of children's own authorship of the stories, practitioners acknowledged that it was rare to write a story directly with children. They identified significant barriers to children's participation as authors, including: the difficulty of typing on nursery-issued tablet computers (meaning that many of them wrote the Lived Stories on home laptops), the time and concentration required to write a Lived Story, being pulled in different directions while working on the floor, and not wanting to impose their own agenda on children's time. Time had been provided off the floor to work on stories, but some practitioners described still working overtime, especially if they were less confident about their writing. The limitations of technology at Lilybank – 'rubbish' WiFi in particular – meant that some practitioners worked on the stories at home in their own time. As these examples suggest, children were not being purposefully excluded from authorship of the Lived Stories. Instead, the realisation (or lack thereof) of children's Article 12 participation rights as authors was deeply entangled with the power dynamics of working life and the material elements of the online system.

Although there were significant barriers to children's participation in authorship of the written stories, it was not a total exclusion. Alexander and two of his close friends found a way to have a more explicit role in authoring their Lived Stories:

> During an outing to the [museum], David, Thomas and Alexander asked me to take a photo of them beside a giant spider crab 'for their learning journals' so that their 'Mum and Dad could see it.' The three of them have, on several occasions, asked me specifically to record moments to put into their learning journals.
>
> (Practitioner email)

Alexander's mother echoed this, noting that he had always enjoyed looking at the photos in the online journals, but recently had been actively contributing to the journal:

> […] often he is keen to point out and name his friends (not all of whom are otherwise familiar to me, if they do shorter days); to amplify the story or add his perspective to an event or a creation.
>
> (Parent email)

Video was another way that children could bypass the written word and be directly involved in documentation practices. For example:

> I have had a child ask me to write down her story so Mummy could read it, for example. She was recalling a recent family holiday. Her monologue was so dense and I could tell that it changed from being just a memory to being an imaginative and creative story, her words and ideas appearing also to be inspired by what she could see around the room. At one point I asked her if I could make a video because I did not want to miss anything out, plus I had run out of space for writing on my paper! She seemed pleased about this telling me that she would look at it with 'Mummy, Daddy and my boys' on a tablet at home. I believe it went well. She was aware I was filming her. She said she would teach me a song in Gaelic. It was wonderful to observe how confident, imaginative and creative she is. (Practitioner Questionnaire)

These findings illustrate the potential of non (or less) written, more fluid approaches to authoring Lived Stories to fulfil children's Article 12 participation rights. These examples also illustrate the intertwined nature of children's rights. Because the children in these examples had access to information about their online stories and were afforded freedom of expression in terms of how they contributed, their expression of views about their learning stories became deeper and more meaningful.

Discussion

In this final section of the paper, we return to our theoretical framework in order to discuss two key analytical points about the politics of children's participation rights, in the context of documentation practices.

First, the findings highlight not only the relational but also the political nature of children's participation rights. Children have pluralistic, differential experiences of participation rights, shaped by interdependent social relationships (Moosa-Mitha 2005). However, acknowledging this should not mean that we unthinkingly paint a cosy or complacent picture of that pluralism. The stories at Lilybank were deeply entangled with the conditions of participants' lives, the patterning of social relationships, and working

conditions. This is particularly clear in the case of children's participation – or lack thereof – as authors. In our project it became clear that children's authorship was constrained by material relations – the 'rubbish WiFi', and characteristics of the tablet computers, for example – rather than practitioners acting purposefully as 'oppressors' of children (e.g. Mannion 2007). As this example illustrates, rights are enacted not only through human relationships but also 'more-than-human' relations with artefacts, spaces, policies and technologies (Aitken 2018a, 2018b; Oswell 2013). However, as Aitken (2018a, 707) argues, there is a danger that more-than-human analysis loses an 'important political edge' of children's rights. During our knowledge exchange events for this project, and through anecdotal knowledge from our teaching with early years practitioners, we heard from practitioners in Scotland whose settings do not even have WiFi yet, and who would not use online documentation even if they did have WiFi because the children and families they work with are locked out of access because they experience poverty. These exclusions are relevant internationally as the widescale use of e-portfolios continues to grow (Gallagher 2017).

Second, our findings identify concerns about who the stakeholders of assessment and documentation are, even in democratic approaches such as Learning/Lived Stories. Children's participation rights become more possible in children's services that are underpinned by the idea that children are agents, have opinions and can take control of their lives (Davis 2011). Whilst there have been considerable discussions concerning the theory/concepts of participation in academic arenas, these have not always been recognised in professional settings (Hill et al. 2004; Davis 2011). Even in a setting like Lilybank, where considerable work had been done to develop an explicitly rights-based, participatory pedagogy, children were largely excluded from 'official' written authorship of the Lived Stories. The methods by which children seemed to have more control seemed promising, but as discussed above, were specific to the material resources available to Lilybank practitioners and families. For example, the non (or less) written ways of children directly participating in authoring Lived Stories – including Alexander's tactics, and the use of video/audio more generally – rely on access to adequate internet connectivity and expensive internet-enabled devices, both at the nursery and at home. Despite the richness of the written Lived Stories, there was a danger that children's 'official' presence still positioned them as subjects, or perhaps commentators, but not stakeholders, authors (or authorities) of their own stories and experiences. Following Konstantoni (2013), practices that are proactive, interventionist and anti-discriminatory may have more impact on persistent exclusions than those – like Learning Stories – which feel more safe and accepted in early childhood discourses.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the findings of Phase One of a larger project examining children's participation rights in the authorship of Lived/Learning stories. We have particularly highlighted the intertwined nature of children's right to information, freedom of expression and their right to express their views and have those views taken into account. The paper concludes that more work needs to be done in the field of Lived/Learning stories to (a) acknowledge the complex political and material considerations at play in the creation of pedagogical documentation and (b) to accommodate children's

own authorship, through flexible, non (or less) written methods. These conclusions are in keeping with a wealth of research demonstrating that pedagogical documentation is not a technical or neutral process. However, acknowledging the complexity of documentation should not become an excuse to disregard social injustices within documentation practices. As we found in the Telling Life Stories project, even the more democratic approaches to documentation can reproduce exclusions, such as the exclusion of children's voices as official authors of their own stories, or of children and families who are excluded from technological access. As e-portfolios become even more prominent (particularly in marketised early childhood systems), they must not be taken for granted as unproblematic platforms. Similarly, Learning/Lived stories have the potential for explicit challenge to the normalisation and erasing of difference found in mainstream early childhood discourses, but do not automatically do so. Based on our findings, we call for radical, anti-discriminatory and transformative pedagogies and documentation practices that openly challenge – rather than reproduce – the status quo of power political relations in early childhood settings.

Notes

1. Due to the pandemic (Covid-19) this has been postponed.
2. All names in this paper are pseudonyms.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The research was funded by The Froebel Trust: Registered Charity No. 1145128 Company Limited by Guarantee Registered in London No. 7862112.

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