

# Children's participation rights in early childhood education and care: the case of early literacy learning and pedagogy

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This position article argues that educators' knowledge of young children's perspectives on aspects of early learning, including literacy learning, and subsequent interpretations of the ways that these perspectives can inform and shape pedagogy are key to promoting children's participation rights in early childhood education and care. Drawing on ideas such as guided participation and Bruner's notion of a pedagogy of mutuality, it is argued that pedagogy, as it is now understood, implies that children's participation is central to the task of teaching. It is also argued that explicit articulation of the concept of joint participation in relation to literacy curricula and pedagogy in early childhood is warranted. The latter part of the article raises the issue of the diversity of children's perspectives of literacy learning and pedagogy. There follows a discussion of some of the issues related to working with young children's perspectives on literacy.

Keywords: children's perspectives; early literacy; multimodal representations; pedagogy; children's participation

## Introduction

In 1996 in the UK, Nutbrown observed that 'remarkably few early childhood educators know of, and fewer still are conversant with, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child' (UNCRC, xiii). While we may now have arrived at a position of general recognition where even the youngest children have rights to fully participate within early childhood care and education settings (e.g. Harcourt, Perry, and Waller 2011), some have observed 'a lack of theorising regarding what it means to give young children rights to participation' (Kjørholt 2011, 39). From a rights-based perspective, there appears an obligation on the part of early childhood educators to help young children to participate in their education setting by enabling them to express their perspectives on issues related to curriculum and pedagogy.

Increasingly attention to the development of literacy-related learning is a focus of early education settings (e.g. Neuman and Dickinson 2011). This is a critical focus since the years from birth to eight are now recognised as the emergent literacy period (Whitehurst and Lonigan 1998). It is a period 'of reading and writing behaviours that

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precede and develop into conventional literacy' (Sulzby and Teale 1991, 728). In terms of characterising early literacy, any characterisation must recognise the multimodal nature of learning during early childhood (e.g. Flewitt 2005; Kress 2010; Pramling Samuelsson 2004). It must encompass the various modes of representation including play and drawing and be characterised as including linguistic and non-linguistic forms of communication (e.g. Kennedy et al. 2012).

### Developments in ideas about learning and pedagogy

Around the time of the UNCRC in 1989, cognitive psychologists were articulating a new way of thinking about how young children achieve intellectual competence. Rogoff (1990) explained the impact of culture and of social interactions on learning and development. From this perspective, children were seen as 'apprentices in thinking, active in their efforts to learn from observation and participation' (Rogoff 1990, 7). Concepts such as guided participation (Rogoff 1990, 2008) where young children collaborate with others in order to make new meaning, and in doing so assume increasingly skilled roles and increasing responsibility, offered new ways for educators to think about and describe children's learning. Guided participation is based on the idea of communication between children and their social partners including their educators. Underlying this concept is the notion of intersubjectivity: a sharing of purpose and focus among individuals (Rogoff 1990). The concept of guided participation also incorporates ideas such as children's agency in their own learning; children's awareness of their own thinking and learning; and children's efforts to appreciate and understand the thinking of others. This theory helped shape new ideas about pedagogy.

Bruner (1999) explains how the notion of pedagogy is characterised by a view that sees children as thinkers who share their ideas through collaboration and discussion. Children express their thoughts (beliefs, views, perceptions, perspectives) and it is through mutual effort that child and teacher coordinate their perspectives and establish a shared understanding. The challenge then for the teacher is how best to work with the child's beliefs in order to ensure that they are turned into 'viable theories about the world and its facts' (Bruner 1999, 15). This pedagogy of mutuality (13) is fully coherent with perspectives on pedagogy as outlined above.

In considering the redefined relationships between child and teacher that recent theories imply, Murphy (2008, 32) notes Van Glasersfeld's argument that 'teachers construct models of children's notions and operations' with a view to understanding the child's understandings. In reviewing current theorising about pedagogy she suggests that this implies changes in the way the teacher-child relationship is viewed and in the status of personal experiences as sources of knowledge. Also from a critical perspective, we need to continue to develop strategies that will enable us to better understand 'what is meaningful and relevant to working-class boys and girls, to ethnic minorities, for all groups who share an identity' (37).

### Recognising the importance of children's perspectives of pedagogy and curriculum

It is over a decade since Lewis and Lindsay (2000) drew attention to the range of dimensions related to children's perspectives research including the legal dimension, the psychological dimension and the sociological dimension. Contemporaneously

with this line of research, a parallel line of work was established along a pedagogical dimension. For instance, issues related to how children's perspectives, viewpoints and understandings shape pedagogy had already been a topic of research for almost three decades in Sweden where early childhood researchers have relentlessly pursued the project of eliciting learners' perspectives and the consequent development of pedagogy (e.g. Pramling 1983, Pramling Samuelsson 2004; Wallerstedt, Pramling and Pramling Samuelsson 2011). However, there is now a very strong case for more widespread and explicit attention to children's perspectives on all aspects of pedagogy and curriculum, including early literacy.

In the UK, James and Pollard (2008) argue that, in relation to school-aged children, barriers to participation and learning stem from teachers' misplaced assumptions about what children can do and about how best to teach them. They suggest that teachers need to question their accepted ways of working. Rather than working on assumptions then educators need to understand the perspectives of the children they are teaching. For instance, Dunphy (2004) explored children's number sense on entry to school and found that children were constructing very individual understandings of the role and purpose of number in everyday life which needed to be taken into account in planning the curriculum and the pedagogy for mathematics in the first year of school. Brooker (2002) in the context of her research on young Bangladeshi children's progress in the early days in school urges teachers to become familiar with children's individual ways of seeing, understanding and representing the world to themselves but also to consider how such perspectives could inform both the pedagogy and curriculum they use to promote learning.

Two decades ago Stremmel (1993) argued that responsive teaching creates a situation whereby child and educator establish a shared understanding or perspective of a situation, thereby enabling children to build bridges between what they already know and are capable of knowing. Pramling Samuelsson (2004, 1) draws our attention to the importance of using what we learn through exploring young children's perspectives in order to direct children towards important values, skills and knowledge which she terms 'the intentions of society as stated in curricula'. Einarsdottir's (2010) study of children's experiences in the first year of primary school identified that, for 6 and 7-year old children in Iceland, learning had a lot to do with literacy. When asked about the curriculum they spoke about learning the letters of the alphabet, learning to read and learning to write. In her research, children's interests and experiences appeared to have no influence on the literacy curriculum they experienced. Geneshi and Dyson (2009, 108) argue that a critical factor for enabling optimal language and literacy learning is observant teachers who can 'attune their teaching to what children are doing' and in that way enable all children to mobilise the literacy resources they bring with them to the education setting. Attuning to children's interests, concerns and experiences implies that the teacher must focus on the nature and contexts of children's experience and how these issues have impacted children's perspectives.

Learning about children's literacy interests and experiences

Acknowledging the centrality of experience and culture

There is now a general recognition of the multiple ways in which young children can engage with learning to be literate (e.g. Olson and Torrance 2009). We know that

there are differences in cultural environments in how parents support children's early learning (e.g. Rogoff 1990). Specifically there are well documented differences in practices related to early literacy in families of different backgrounds (Dickinson and Tabors 2001; Garton and Pratt 2009). For the early childhood educator, knowledge of each child's background is essential in terms of ensuring that early school practices build on what children already know (see Olson and Torrance 2009). As expressed by Geneshi and Dyson (2009, 12), it is critically important that educators engage in 'learning about the child as a person whose social sense and knowledge comes from a diversity of involvements as a friend, a family member, and a participant in community and popular cultures'.

How we go about understanding what children think and know about literacy has to be done in culturally sensitive ways (e.g. Espinosa 2005) and must also take into account issues regarding children's language status; specifically the extent to which they can/do use talk (and/or other means) to communicate their views (see Flewitt 2005). General expectations amongst educationalists about how best to support children's early literacy learning are based, to a large extent, on findings from research with middle-class families (e.g. Neuman and Dickinson 2011). Teachers cannot make assumptions about what individual children may/may not understand, know or think about literacy, they must elicit these perspectives and then work with what is revealed in order to promote learning. Geneshi and Dyson (2009), in discussing the diversity amongst language learners that is increasingly a feature of early education settings, present a number of case studies of young children who convey their perspectives related to language and literacy learning and pedagogy in a variety of ways. The challenge for the educator is to be attentive to the messages that children are conveying, and to the range of modes in which their perspectives may be conveyed (e.g. Flewitt 2005). It is clear then that a curriculum and pedagogy for early literacy cannot be tightly prescribed, nor can it be identical across early education settings. Goals can be agreed but educators must find the appropriate means of engaging all children in learning experiences which work towards these goals while still taking their individual perspectives into account.

#### Paying close attention to children's predispositions

A recent Finnish study illustrated the kinds of information that can be elicited from children concerning the process of learning to read (Kiiveri and Määttä 2011). For instance, six-year-old children, who were just starting school, reported that they felt that learning to read was a surprising but exciting experience, but they also considered it a demanding task. The children interviewed showed strong belief and trust in their abilities to read but were careful and realistic in evaluating them. For some children school (and not home) was clearly the place where reading was learned; whereas others were unsure about the purpose of school since, as they reported, they could already read. Expressing their views on what reading entails, a number focused 'on the factors of reading that can be perceived concretely' (12). Thus they spoke about reading as a visual action that requires adequate light, that it could be done aloud or silently, that it is about observing, recognising and understanding words. This study shows predispositions may affect early school literacy learning (Garton and Pratt 2009), and child perspectives which may have enormous potential value to educators.

Children from low-income families who are deemed by their teachers to be less interested in literacy are also more likely to be perceived as displaying more problem behaviour in the education setting (Baroody and Dobbs-Oates 2011). This suggests that in early education settings which place a high level of emphasis on literacy an important task for the teacher interested in children's participation rights is to design learning experiences likely to engage all children in literacy activities. These should take into account what children themselves indicate/tell us about their interest in literacy (e.g. Brooker 2002).

As teachers we also need to note what children tell us about their levels of comfort with literacy activities through their actions or inactions. I recall my concerns, as a young teacher, about one boy of about four years of age who on starting school refused to hold a crayon or any other mark making implement in his hand. I now realise that perhaps he, like many children I have met over the years, did not understand school as a place for learning skills such as writing but rather as a place for displaying these skills.

### Working with young children's perspectives on literacy

Acknowledging the tension in balancing children's perspectives with guidance on literacy goals and pedagogy

Snow (2004) draws attention to varying views of literacy that have dominated the discussion of the 'what' and 'how' of literacy instruction over a number of years. She concludes that both holistic (literacy is seen as something that is mainly social) and componential (literacy is an instructed skill) views have important insights to offer into worthwhile literacy practices with young children. Bodrova and Leong (2006) explain why, from a Vygotskian perspective, we cannot expect young children to learn to read and write in the spontaneous way in which they learned to talk. According to them the development of critical higher mental functions; for example the ability to memorise, to pay attention, to reason, to think, to imagine, are all critical functions engaged in early childhood. These functions are considered essential for enabling learners to take control of the processes and outcomes of their learning. They can also be considered essential for learning to read and write since they enable the young child 'to engage in purposeful and deliberate mental behaviours' (246). It is through their interactions with educators and peers that young children develop and refine these higher mental functions. Certain literacy-related practices (e.g. playing, drawing), are especially effective in terms of the development of the higher level functions by children. This suggests a reciprocal relationship between literacy practices in early education settings and the development of young children's higher mental functions. Indeed, Bodrova and Leong (2006) argue that 'early literacy instruction cannot be disentangled from the development of children's mental processes' (254).

Research also indicates that at some point all young children need to learn very specific early literacy skills, for example knowledge of the alphabet and phonological awareness (e.g. Garton and Pratt 2009). Indeed, Pianta et al. (2009, 76) describe high quality literacy instruction as featuring 'explicit and direct instruction that systematically teaches children about the code-based characteristics of written language...'. Educators need then to ensure a balanced early literacy curriculum. We know that key pedagogical practices for the development of early

literacy include supporting children in their make-believe play; engaging young children in story-book reading and discussion; promoting young children's vocabulary development and their use of academic language forms; assisting children in developing written language (e.g. Kennedy et al. 2012).

Geneshi and Dyson (2009, 82) suggest that in supporting the learning and development of all children what is required are tasks 'that allow children to participate in different ways with different resources'. Einarsdottir (2010, 176) draws our attention to what she observed in her study as a 'dearth of relationships of dialogue and creativity' between children and teacher. Such relationships are the context within which intersubjectivity is established. Relationships, communication and joint participation in learning experiences all need to be developed in literacy-related contexts in order to promote the kind of exchanges that will elicit children's perspectives. The teacher is then alerted to issues for consideration. Discussed below are some of the issues involved in joint participation by educators and children in just two of these contexts.

### Engaging young children in story book reading and discussion

Enabling children's participation rights presents challenges for teachers in bringing together intentions for children's learning and children's own preferences for how learning takes place. For example, take the practice of reading stories to young children. It is generally regarded that book-reading with young children is one of the most challenging tasks for teachers especially if the group size is large and/or the group of children is particularly diverse perhaps in terms of language (e.g. Tabors 2008). Good pedagogical strategies are essential for ensuring that the book-reading experience is a worthwhile one for all of the children in the group. Time for discussion is essential for both language and literacy development, and for addressing issues such as the exploration of vocabulary and language use. It is also crucial for the exploration of children's views, experiences and concerns about issues related to the story and a window into children's thinking in literacy contexts and about literacy contexts.

Current literature on reading aloud in the classroom strongly advocates a dialogic approach. As described by Cunningham and Zibulsky (2011, 398) dialogic reading is a specific kind of shared reading experience in which 'the adult reader encourages the child to participate actively in the reading experience by eliciting comments, providing feedback, and adapting to the child's developing linguistic skills'. Obviously small groups are the appropriate context for this type of activity. The construction of meaning in engagement with texts is one of the main areas that need to be developed with young children. Cunningham and Zibulsky (2011) also report that this dialogic style of shared reading activity is the type of activity 'that can promote the development of other critical emergent and conventional literacy skills' (398). For instance, within the dialogic story reading session, characterised by playfulness and by conversational exchanges, the educator can address the issues of vocabulary development and the development of complex language (i.e. language which conveys explanations, definitions and descriptions) and academic language (i.e. the type of language used in schools, in writing and in public settings). The general advice is that children, through engagement in the types of learning experiences described above, are supported towards a gradual development of their interaction and discourse skills; in essence, they become competent in using

language, for example to tell a story, to explain, to speculate, to reason and justify (e.g. Dickinson and Tabors 2001).

However, what if a young child prefers an uninterrupted experience of a story, one where the teacher asks no questions and makes no comments? Where there is no stopping for talk and discussion? As one child of about five years of age once requested of me as I tried to engage the group of children in discussion in the classroom 'Just get on with the story'. I understood his perspective since maybe a year previously, my own son, then about four years of age, on hearing that I was to be his bedtime reader that night said 'Ok then, but no questions'. Children's participation in expressing their views about such issues enable the teacher to take into account the fact that each child will respond differently to pedagogical efforts to promote literacy development. It is also a reminder that, in terms of pedagogy, what is advantageous for one child may not automatically benefit another and that as educators we have to provide different types of experiences to children following their lead as to which is appropriate on any particular occasion.

#### Assisting children in developing written language

While the relationship between drawing and young children's writing is generally well articulated in the literature (e.g. Dyson 1993), further exploration of the meaning-making potential of drawing has received less attention from researchers. From a multimodal stance, young children's drawings can inform educators about children's perspectives on literacy in their lives both in and out of school (e.g. Kendrick and McKay 2009). It is proposed that 'drawing provides a non-writing child with a temporary means to record his or her own stories and messages' (Bodrova and Leong 2006, 251). Vygotsky refers to the significance for symbolic development of children 'naming a drawing' (1978, 113). Drawing, as described by Hall (2009), is a more flexible form of communication than either speaking or writing. A number of researchers emphasise that drawing provides a way for children to discuss and communicate meaning (e.g. Kress 2010; Ring 2010) and to explore and play with issues such as identity (e.g. Edmiston 2008; Hall 2010). Children's drawings can provide the educator with insights about perspectives and knowledge of literacy that they bring with them to school. As a result drawings are now often described as expressions of meaning and understanding (Einarsdottir, Dockett, and Perry 2009).

In terms of pedagogy then, taking the time to talk with children about their drawings is now seen as central in understanding children's perspectives. According to Hall (2009), 182) 'children's drawings cannot be read or translated in the same way as a piece of writing. Nor can they be easily understood out of context or judged using the same criteria that may be applied to adults' drawings'. Kendrick and McKay (2009) share Hall's concerns that sufficient attention be given to the analysis of children's drawings. They suggest three equally important sites that the educator must pay attention to. Firstly at the point at which the child draws, the educator must strive to understand the child's intention; secondly the image itself needs to be studied from the perspective of what is evident in the drawing but also from the perspective of what is not included; thirdly the educator needs to be aware of the interpretative lenses she/he uses in making sense of the drawing.

## Conclusion

If children's participation rights in early education and care are to be fully realised in terms of pedagogy and curriculum then this involves educators developing what Alderson and Morrow (2011, 21) refer to as 'new attitudes towards their own knowledge and status'. Research suggests (James and Pollard 2008) that this may present difficulties for some educators since it demands a certain flexibility of approach to both curriculum and pedagogy.

The recent articulation of concepts such as joint participation and intersubjectivity are extremely helpful in showing how children's perspectives are central in terms of ensuring that curriculum and pedagogy in literacy and in all aspects of education and care provision are meaningful, engaging and challenging for all children.

Children's experiences, views, concerns and interests determine how and to what extent individual children engage with the literacy curriculum and pedagogy on offer and these can be elicited in key early literacy contexts such as dialogic story-book reading and discussion with children about their drawings. Educators must work with goals for early literacy learning but they can and should do so in ways that ensure that children's perspectives are taken into account.

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