The 5th Intercultural Arts Education Conference: Design Learning

Designing learning experiences together with children

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Abstract

Children's participation in the early childhood education context has attracted considerable attention in recent years. Participation means involving and enabling children to take part in decision-making processes in their everyday lives. Educators are supporters and enablers of participatory practices. The process of planning activities is an important part of an educator's profession in early childhood education and it can be viewed as designing a learning process. Not only should educators design children's learning and participation, but children should also take part in designing their own learning. In this paper, we focus on children's opportunities to participate in the design learning process in Finnish day care groups. The research data were collected from teams of educators working in day care groups via survey. The results indicate that children's participation in the design learning process is average: They can participate more in the evaluating activities than in planning or implementing them.

1. Introduction

Children's participation in the early childhood education context has attracted considerable attention in recent years. In participation, an educator is in direct individual or collective involvement with children in daily participation processes, and children cannot choose to have an impact on or be listened to if educators do not design opportunities for this (Emilson & Johansson, 2009). The process of planning activities is an important part of an educator's profession in early childhood education (Ojala, 2010; Härkönen, 2002) and can be viewed as designing a learning process. Not only should educators design children's learning and facilitate their participation, but children should also take part in designing their own learning.

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This paper is based on a survey of early childhood education educators' conceptions and views of children's participation in Finnish day care groups. In this study, we explore issues connected with design processes and children's opportunities to be listened to and to participate in daily early childhood education planning. The research problem is:

- What kinds of design learning processes exist are available for children to participate in?

2. Background

2.1. Participation in early childhood education

More than anything else, participation in early childhood is a personal experience of being listened to and involved (Venninen, Leinonen & Ojala, 2010). Participation can be understood in different ways. Giving a voice to a child includes aspects such as expressing opinions and having the opportunity to share one's own experiences through both verbal and non-verbal communication (Clark, 2005). On a more general level, participation means involving and enabling children to participate in decision-making processes in their everyday lives. It is important to respect and recognise children´s voice and empower their ideas so as to have some impact on their own lives. (Hill, Davis, Prout & Tisdall, 2004; Sinclair, 2004.) Regarding participation, the participatory skills, such as negotiation, waiting one's own turn, and sharing both toys and ideas, are necessary to develop through practice and repetition (Göncu, Main & Abel, 2009).

Participation entails within interaction between children and an educator in a learning environment (Sheridan & Pramling-Samuelson, 2001; Woodhead, 2006). In institutional early childhood education, many children suffer from a lack of daily interactive moments, because their daily routines follow tightly scheduled timetables created by educators that offer children little opportunity to practice expressing their views. (Nyland, 2009; Smith, 2002.) In the children´s participation process, the educator plays a meaningful role as the observer and supporter of the development of competence (Berthelsen, 2009). Trust between the children and educators forms a basis for participation issues. Children communicate better with adults they trust and with whom they enjoy a good relationship (Thomas, 2002). Children's right to express themselves (UNCRoC, Article 12) and have their views taken into account (Article 13) varies. How educators respect the children and believe in their capability in everyday practice affects children's rights to participate (Smith, 2002). Even young children are capable of participating in participatory practices if only their teacher's would give them the chance (Nyland, 2009). Emilson & Johansson (2009) state that children cannot choose participation if educators fail to enhance the opportunities for them to participate. Pramling-Samuelsson and Sheridan (2001) point out that accession for educators near the world of children also helps children to participate.

2.2. Designing Learning in early childhood education

The process of planning activities is an important part of an educator's profession in early childhood education (Ojala, 2010; Härkönen, 2002) and can be viewed as designing a learning process. In Finnish early childhood education and care (ECEC), the national curriculum creates a basis for goal-oriented interaction and collaboration which systematically supports children's development and learning. The main resource for ECEC is competent staff with strong professional awareness. (National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2005.) Designing learning is viewed as thinking educational practices beforehand (Härkönen, 2002).

Play is often viewed as a children's best opportunity to express themselves and to make decisions in ECEC. Children feel that they have more choices during free-play than in other activities. They make the

initiative, influence themes in play and choose on their own actions. (Sheridan & Pramling-Samuelson, 2001 and 2005.) The ideology of democracy exists in play, when children negotiate, have an impact and became interested in participating (Bae, 2009; Göncu et al., 2009).

Even the National Curriculum on ECEC in Finland (2005) states that children's learning should occur during playful activities; too often the activity-designing process is often conducted only by adults. Planning is considered an important part of an educator's duties, even it has been pointed out that in day care centres taking care of small children especially limits the time available for staff's professional meetings and planning (Rodd, 2004).

Not only should educators design children's learning, but they should also considering facilitating children's participation and children should also let take part in designing their own learning.

3. Methods

The data were collected from early childhood education professionals in working teams from the Helsinki Metropolitan area using a survey implemented in the VKK-Metro project 2010. Their open-ended answers about children's participation in everyday practices were analysed to form a model for facilitating children's participation in early childhood education. The quantitative variables of avLikert scale were analysed statistically and compared with each other.

Research data were collected from teams, because teams are the basic functional and pedagogical units of the day care centres that plan and carry out daily practices there. The team members have different educational background (e.g. child-minders from college, socio-pedagogues from universities of applied science and university graduates with a Bachelor's or a Master's of Education degree). This type of natural study design (i.e. the group's size and the number of staff varied) is common when a researcher works in realistic settings such as ordinary day care environments and not in a laboratory with carefully controlled experiments. Thus, the research design can be considered ecologically valid and can be considered a trade-off between the rigor of design and ecological validity, where no perfect solution exists.

3.1. Participants

The questionnaire was sent to over 2000 working teams; the respond rate was 56%. In this paper, we focus at on teams working with three- to seven-year-olds children. Toddler's groups (children less than 3 years old of age) and siblings groups (children from 1 to 7) were excluded from this study. The resultant sample comprised 676 teams in which 2218 educators worked (mean 3.3 per team; from 1 to 5 educators per team). They took care of 13 481 children (mean 19.87 per group; from 7 to 31 children per group): 473 groups were play-age groups (children from 3 to 6 years old), 178 of them were preschool groups (children were 6 to 7 years old), and 132 were mixed groups (the ages of the children ranged from 3 to 7).

3.2. Measures/Assessment Instrument

We began by exploring how practitioners in the field of early childhood care and education perceived children's participation. Results on early childhood practitioners' views of participation were collected with a self-reporting questionnaire targeted to the teams of 21 pilot day care centres (N 82) in the Helsinki metropolitan area. With 12 qualitative questions, we asked them to describe the kinds of issues they associate with the expression "children's participation". With the aid of these mentions and through the various theories of participation, we began to design our survey for all of the teams in the Metropolitan area of Helsinki.

The survey for all of the teams was conducted with a self-reported questionnaire consisting of 99 Likert-type variables and 9 open-ended questions about participatory issues in day care groups. In this paper, we focus on answers about designing and planning the activities in day care groups through three open-ended questions answered by the participant teams:

- Describe an actual moment in which a child of your class has experienced participation.
- What kind of initiatives do children suggest in your class?
- Describe a long-lasting action that children have invented and carried out in your class.

We also used six quantitative variables for practices and professional actions in everyday issues in the groups. These variables formed part of the survey and explore both children's opportunities to influence or participate in designing activities. Variables included statements such as "Children can use equipment to explore their physical environment". The teams were asked to rate, on a five-point Likert scale, how often the statement described in the variable actually occurred in their group. The response options were 5 ("always"), 4 ("often"), 3 ("sometimes"), 2 ("rarely") and 1 ("never").

4. Findings

Participation in the design learning process can be viewed through three stages: the planning phase, the implementation phase and the evaluation phase. Children's opportunities to participate in the design learning process were evaluated using three variables about these phases (Table 1). The means of all three variables were around 3.0, which mean that children can only sometimes participate in a designing the learning process. Their opportunities of take part in the evaluation process were considered more important than their opportunities to participate in planning with educators in all groups.

Pre-school-aged children more often participated in both evaluation (mean 3.31) and planning (mean 3.18) than did younger children or children in the mixed age group. When the children in the group were older they received more opportunities to participate in the designing learning process. The older children also had more opportunities to design and implement their own activities for their peers than did the younger ones.

Table 1. Children's opportunities to participate in planning, implementing and evaluating pedagogical activities (Scale from 1="never" to 5 ="always")

Age Group		1. Children can participate in planning activities with educators	2. Children can design and implement activities by themselves	3. Children can participate in evaluating activities with educators
Play-age group	Mean	2.76	2.70	2.92
	S.D.	*0.824*	*0.887*	*0.852*
Preschool group	Mean	3.18	3.13	3.31
	S.D.	*0.776*	*0.884*	*0.879*
Mixed groups	Mean	2.92	2.99	3.16
	S.D.	*0.825*	*0.828*	*0.792*
Total	Mean	2.90	2.86	3.06
	S.D.	*0.831*	*0.895*	*0.864*

The following quotes illustrate the phases of the process of design learning as actual practices from day care groups. Many of these quotes describe the pattern of the design learning process as a whole even though they focused on only one variable.

In the first two planning quotes, the participants illustrated the important role of interaction between children and educators. By interviewing children, educators can better understand children's perspectives, which are important to enhancing participation (see Emilsson & Folkeson, 2006).

"At the start of the season, we interviewed all the children and hear their wishes and goals for the year. The design of the year is based partially on this information. During the ordinary day, children have opportunities to influence the course of the day for the free-play time, where they get to decide what to do. In morning-circle they have the opportunity to share their feelings and wishes." Preschool group (*variable 1*)

"Adults and children together plan activities, such as a physical education lesson, what to do in crafts, or what to do on excursions. Children also planned a spring festival performance." Play-age group (*variable 1*)

The phase of implementation (variable 2) appeared in many answers that highlighted the motivation and excitement of the children. Also, the educator's role as a supporter was evident.

"A child gets an idea and begins to implement it. He knows what equipment and materials he will need and gets them. An educator is an enabler who offers the child any materials that are unavailable, but necessary. Such an idea often sparks other new ideas, and the original idea develops during the process. The participation is seen from the child, who is excited and involved. The activity draws attention from other children, who begin to implement their ideas too." Mixed group (*variable 2*)

"When planning festivals (e.g. for Christmas or spring), children may create their own performances. The children imitated an idea, and together we began to design and implement it. The excitement and the joy of creating are evident in the children when they are allowed to implement their own ideas." Preschool group (*variable 2*)

"The mouth-gym: One child in time implements mouth-gym exercises for the group, and other children follow his/her orders." Play-age group (variable 2)

The phase of evaluation (variable 3) appeared in only a few answers. The first one here describes the importance of interaction in the process between an educator and a child. In these quotes, the evaluation with children also had an impact on the future activities of the group.

"The portfolio for following children's development: An educator works together with one child. The child evaluates his/her development and working, and chooses his/her own achievements for the portfolio. Preschool age children participate in designing and evaluating the curriculum for the group." Mixed group (variable 3)

"We often ask the children which activities have been fun and which ones less fun. On the basis of the children's wishes, we implemented a weekly music lesson and organised new forest excursions. Participating in planning group activities is exiting and motivating for the children." Preschool group (variable 3)

The design learning process variables presented above are linked each other, as the correlation in Table 2 shows. The highest correlation exists between planning (variable 1) and evaluating (variable 3) activities, but implementing activities (variable 2) is strongly connected to planning and rather strongly to evaluating. Thus educators see both planning and evaluation as important parts of the design learning process, not only educators, but also all participants evaluate afterwards. The connection between planning and implementation is strong, because by taking part in planning, children's competency and self-reliance skill grows and implementation becomes possible. However, evaluation would also be an

important part of a process in which children implement activities, and a stronger connection between all phases of the design learning process would support comprehensive learning.

Table 2 shows other variables that describe educators' role in the design learning process. Day care groups take into account children's ideas and interests rather well, and pre-school groups and groups with play-age children show no significant differences. Educators in the participant groups most often ensure that every child has an opportunity to express his or hers opinion. The teams assign this variable a mean value of 4.33, meaning that children's opinions (variable 4) are request often. However, those opinions seldom influence on the educators' planning process (variable 5). In addition, an educator would rarely change her plans even if the children's expressed their interests elsewhere.

Even though the educators in the group were interested in the children's perspectives and focused on taking the children's interests into account, the link to the actual design learning process, in which both children and educators participate, was weak. The correlations between the first three variables of the design learning process were all lower, though significant because of the large body of the data.

Table 2. Correlations between variables

		1. Children can participate in planning activities with educators	2. Children can design and implement activities by themselves	3. Children can participate in evaluating activities with educators
1. Children can participate in planning activities with educators	Pearson Correlation	1		
Mean 2.90 (S.D 0.831)	Sig. (2-tailed)			
2. Children can design and implement activities by themselves	Pearson Correlation	**.478(**)**	1	
Mean 2.86 (S.D 0.895)	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		
3. Children can participate in evaluating activities with educators	Pearson Correlation	**.508(**)**	**.379(**)**	1
Mean 3.06 (S.D 0.864)	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
4. Educator ensures that every child has an opportunity to express his/hers opinions	Pearson Correlation	.110(**)	.176(**)	.137(**)
Mean 4.33 (S.D 0.593)	Sig. (2-tailed)	.005	.000	.000
5. Educator plans activities based on children's interests	Pearson Correlation	.321(**)	.241(**)	.226(**)
Mean 3.83 (S.D 0.661)	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000
6. Educator changes planned activities when children's interests sifts elsewhere	Pearson Correlation	.363(**)	.324(**)	.318(**)
Mean 3.61 (S.D 0.641)	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Children's capacity to participate in a design learning process is important to take into account. Below are a few quotes about how design learning processes are carried out in groups.

"We have a children's moot where children and adults meet to discuss common matters. Everybody can make initiatives, which leads to shared decisions." (Preschool group)

"Children have learned to plan their play together. They ask others to join, negotiate about the room for play." (Mixed group)

"We discuss with the children daily; they can express their opinions and choose their activities – children's skills to express oneself and the courage to make choices have evolved throughout the year." (Play-age group)

In these examples, the idea of educators implementing design learning activities results in the enhancement of children's skills in participating in shared planning and decision making. Through these participatory practices of interaction, discussion and negotiations, children's competence to participate in shared decision making becomes stronger.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, we focused on children's participation in design learning processes in every-day activities in early childhood education. As a result, we found that children only sometimes participated in the process. The process was investigated in three phases: the planning phase, the implementation phase and the evaluation phase. One interesting finding was that participation in the evaluation phase was more common in groups than in the other two phases. Evaluation is considered a more important part of being a young learner in a day care group by educators who often plan and implement the pedagogical activities which children are later asked to evaluate. Even among educators who plan activities based on children's interests and often change plans when children's interests shifts elsewhere, the evaluation phase itself is insufficient when children are asked to participate in designing their own learning. Planning can be considered a part of educators' daily routines. Those routines, however, can be seen as a barrier to children's participation (Nyland, 2009). When the design learning process is understood only as a part of educator's professional duties, as previous studies have shown (Rodd, 2004; Härkönen, 2002), the children's perspective and, finally, their participation, which educators should also design and support (Emilsson & Johansson, 2009), can be forgotten.

The practices of designing learning in early childhood education should be developed to facilitate children's participation. The designing process can be considered as an important activity where educators and children share experiences in interaction. Participation also includes the participatory skills, such as negotiation and sharing (Göncu & al. 2009), which, according to the educator descriptions, aim to develop children's participatory skills and result in common decision making and shared planning together with educators and children. When design learning involves planning of educational practices beforehand (Härkönen, 2002), it could also involve planning of design learning practices beforehand. The design learning process can be effective and supportive of both children's participation and their learning when planned pedagogically and implemented through all three phases.

Children's ages impact on the participatory practices available to them. The older the children in group are, the more opportunities educators give them to participate in the design learning process in all three phases. The children's abilities to participate and be active members of the group are skills that require practice. The participation of children is not always considered as an important issue in early childhood education, and educators are accustomed to viewing smaller children as helpless and incompetent. Taking into account the children's perspective and focusing on the children's world are important steps in supporting children's participation (Emilsson & Johansson, 2006; Sheridan & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2001). It is also essential in the design learning process to incorporate the perspective of children into planning, implementing and evaluating not only *for* children, but *with* children.

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