Strengthening Activity-oriented Interaction and Growth in the Early Years and in Transitions

Voices on Participation

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

by Klaus Fischer, Irene Kaschefi-Haude & Jutta Schneider

1.1 Abstract

The acronym of SIGNALS is being explained and the main connotations of the concept of participation are defined. The notion has become a major European concern in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). The introduction refers to Harry Shiers (2001) research work on “Pathways to Participation” and defines different steps in realizing participation and interaction as key principles in the various European SIGNALS projects on the educational collaboration between children, parents and professionals.

1.2 Background

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes that it is a fundamental right and obligation for parents to be involved in their children’s development and education. Research also shows that parent engagement is important for enhancing children’s wellbeing and learning. It is also strongly associated with children’s later academic success and high school completion rates (Starting Strong III, 2012). With this in mind, universities and educational authorities in seven European countries – Germany, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Romania, Sweden and Iceland – have decided to form the SIGNALS project. The acronym SIGNALS was chosen as it illustrates the various steps that the participating countries have been undertaking in this collaborative learning journey, namely, to:

- **St**rengthen mutual understanding between children, parents and early education staff
- **Im**prove interaction between these groups for the good of children
- **Ge**nerate through common projects a shared learning experience
- **Nom**inate in the different countries exemplary co-operative Education practice teams
- **Ack**nowledge children as competent agents of their own development and learning, worthy to be involved in the project
- **Li**nk SIGNALS outcomes with further professional development for staff and for the ongoing education of parents
- **Sh**ape a European model based on reciprocal consultation.
In an overall perspective the project enables parents, early education staff and children to build together positive relationships that enhance the development and education of young children; improve the interactive and pedagogical competences of educational staff and parents; initiate and nurture Exemplary Co-operative Educational Practices (ECEPs) among all actors.

1.3 What does participation mean in the context of formal education?

The Latin word *participare* literally means *to take part or to have a part (a share) in something*. In the field of pedagogics, participation stands for the process of jointly determining educational processes and for each individual stakeholder’s opportunity of influencing them (Egilson & Trustadottir, 2009). According to Hansen et al. (2009, 46), participation means “the right to have a say in the way one’s own life and the life of the community develop”. The SIGNALS project focused on the role that interaction plays in the process of participation. Hansen et al. (2009, 47) also emphasize the “construct of activity” within the educational process. They define education as “the active agency of the individual” and argue that children have the right – and the skills – to participate in the decisions that determine their education and their individual development. Overall, the academic discussion about the proper role of children in participation processes reflects the dichotomy in the old debate about the true nature of education: is education primarily a process where the self unfolds and develops (one where the children themselves should take part in any decision that affects this cognitive development of “acquiring the world”) or is education the result of a learning process that is imparted by adults (instruction)?

The discussions of international specialists (Moss, 2007; Hart, 2008; Egilson & Trustadottir, 2009) and the results of a long-term research project conducted in Germany by a group of authors around Hansen, Knauer & Sturzenhecker (2009, 2010, 2011) as well as Bartosch et al. (2015) have established some level of clarity. They define participation as a dialogue-based network of processes between the stakeholders within an educational institution. In this framework, action, co-determination and structural change are key conceptual variables while participation becomes the “condition variable” in the determination of overarching objectives during the process of democratic education (Shier, 2001; Egilson & Trustadottir, 2009; Hansen et al., 2009; Knauer, 2011). Possible instruments in this process are structured activities (play, movement; the “sustained shared thinking” of Siraj-Batchford, 1999) as well as language- or dialogue-based interactive processes (König, 2007): both have proved effective in trials and experiments (Sylva, 2004). This understanding of *participation through interaction* also provides the foundation for the SIGNALS project.

1.4 Stages of the participation process

Even though participatory processes in early childhood education have been recognized as a “key principle” in the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (see Tisdall, 2015), only a few countries have so far gone beyond well-meaning but general and non-binding declarations of intent. It is generally up to the educators to decide what participatory processes they want to implement and how to go about this, and any success or quality of such an enterprise is largely determined in the negotiations between the various stakeholders.

The project of Hansen et al. (2009) concludes that “participation begins in the heads of the
adults”. Changes can (and will) only occur if those who are responsible for the results of the educational process are ready and willing to take the children seriously and to actively involve them in the decision-making process: this is a necessary but not a sufficient condition, because methodological skills are equally required. Discussions of the children’s wishes and concerns – in children’s parliaments or children’s councils, for example – must be structured and moderated. The capabilities of children and adults to conduct a dialogue, to assert one’s own position in negotiations and to manage as well as to resolve conflicts must be established, put to the test and reflected upon. Such an operation can only be successful if the entire team from the children’s day care centre is actively involved.

The SIGNALS project is based on a multi-stage model of the participation process, which means that any development and success will undergo qualitative changes (the “ladder of participation”: Shier, 2001, 109; Regner & Schubert-Suffrian, 2013, 13 ff). According to this model, it is important:

- to share information and to listen to each other’s concerns;
- to encourage children to express their wishes and ideas;
- to take all opinions seriously;
- to actively involve children in the decision-making processes and to search for ways of meeting their concerns (co-determination);
- to bear in mind that participation can only take place in the “rectangle of responsibilities” of children, educators, parents and trustees;
- to understand participation as a negotiated process where the strategies must be transparently supported by the adults;
- to realize that participation is aimed at power structures (self-determination) and represents the foundation of an active and true democracy.

SIGNALS uses national projects to gather data about different types of participation-based and interaction-based partnerships:

- between children, to encourage social learning through cooperation, common playtime and other activities as well as (multi-language) verbal communication;
- between children and professional educators: co-constructive participation processes are designed to enable participatory decision-making;
- between parents and professional educators, focusing on sharpening the awareness of the parents and the creation of a positive nursery school and elementary school culture;
- between children, parents and professional educators: this “triangle of participation” represents the key to a democratic education (see Fig. 1).
All national projects pursue the following objectives:

1. to encourage all stakeholders to learn from one another through interaction, cooperation and an openness to dialogue;
2. to provide insights into the educational systems and processes of the countries that are involved;
3. to experience participation as a key concept for the development of tolerance, communality and inclusion;
4. to accept individuality and diversity;
5. to integrate the experiences and insights sustainably into the educational systems on both the national and the European level.

1.5 The content of the compendium as a whole

Chapter 1: Introduction by Klaus Fischer, Irene Kaschefi-Haude & Jutta Schneider

The acronym of SIGNALS is being explained and the main connotations of the concept of participation are defined. The notion has become a major European concern in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). The introduction refers to Harry Shiers (2001) research work on “Pathways to Participation” and defines different steps in realizing participation and interaction as key principles in the various European SIGNALS projects on the educational collaboration between children, parents and professionals.
Chapter 2: Various perspectives of participation: Denmark, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Romania, Sweden by Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson & Stefan Cojocaru

At the beginning of the project the research group decided to make an evaluation of how people involved in the SIGNALS project in the various countries, were talking about participation in the context of ECE. We then agreed on making interviews or questionnaires based on two questions related to views of children and parents’ participation. The result is being presented as descriptions of different qualitative ways of talking about participation, as taken for a granted right or as something that could work within certain pedagogical situations or institutions. Our focus was more towards a general educational perspective by some countries, while by other countries it was experienced that “children may have the right to participate” inspecific tasks. Children never gave expression of participation as a right, just inspecific situations.

Chapter 3: A joint effort for more scope of action: Play area design – the gateway of the development of a culture of participation in “Kindertagesstätten” by Jutta Schneider & Klaus Fischer

The article describes the project as action research, accompanying and evaluating the process of planning and reconstructing the indoor and outdoor premises of a kindergarten as a model of participation and interaction with all stakeholders (staff, parents, children, trustees, academics and architects). In the given project the experiences of all participants are assessed and used to develop teaching modules to serve as a model for a) active and movement orientated learning in the kindergarten setting and b) experiencing steps of participation.

Chapter 4: The didactical basis of health education by Anders Skriver Jensen, Stig Broström & Ole Hendrik Hansen

The study of values in education has remained rather underdeveloped in Denmark. In this context, values are principles that guide human action and judgements of whether actions are good or undesirable. Values are also connected to the choice of educational content. Besides content formulated in the Danish national curriculum (language, social competences, aesthetics knowledge and skills, physical and motor skills plus knowledge on nature and science) a number of educational themes are also expressed in interaction between children and preschool teachers, such as health and a healthy living, peace and freedom, ecological and sustainability development, which Klafki (2001) names epoch typical themes. In the SIGNALS projective we have focused on health values communicated by the preschool teachers during the everyday life. Both health values are related to what we eat and how children protect themselves from illness. The study has a didactical dimension, which means that the four values (democratic caring, disciplinary and health values) are considered to belong in the teaching curricula. The project ends up with ideas which can be helpful for preschool teachers to define, argue for and formulate value education aims and objectives, and conduct, document and evaluate the pedagogical efforts in this domain.
Chapter 5: "Participation" as a collaborative learning process in the first and second grade. A time-consuming process counteracting the time achievement of cognitive learning by Kalliope Vrinioti & Eleni Griva

The Greek SIGNALS project aimed at developing children’s active participation in primary school and family environment and strengthening adults’ (teachers’ and parents’) skills and strategies of cooperating with children and co-constructing knowledge. It was designed based on the Hart’s (1995) model, the Shier’s (2001) model of participation, and Willis’ (1996) task based model. The data revealed the realization of the false types of participation, on the part of all participants, as being the greatest benefit. In other words, they understood what it is not participation (Manipulation, Decoration, Tokenism) according to Hart’s model.

Chapter 6: "Settling-in children at ECEC centre" as a potential for participation and cooperation between parents, children and staff by Marta Korintus

In accordance with the aims of the SIGNALS project, the Hungarian study set out to look at social competences and skills of staff, parents and children in situations of settling-in children to ECEC centre, with the objectives to assess existing practice and to find ways to enable parents and staff to improve the quality of pedagogical exchanges to better accommodate children’s needs and to ensure their better participation. The research applied an analytical framework created by the legislation, the National Guidance, the local pedagogical curriculum of the ECEC centre, the curriculum content related to principles of participation and involvement, the notion of children’s perspectives, and Shier’s model. The results indicate that social and communication competences and skills of staff and parents alike need to be improved. Existing communication channels and contents should be improved and research to show ways of achieving the participation of children under the age of three should be carried out in order to ensure better pedagogical exchanges, and better accommodate children’s needs.

Chapter 7: Improving parent competences in promoting literacy development by Agnes Nyitrai & Judit Podráczky

In this chapter we present some results of the Hungarian kindergarten study within the framework of the SIGNALS project. The research of the University of Kaposvár deals with the issue of emerging literacy of young children, focusing on the involvement of parents, children and pedagogues. The present chapter looks at the issue mainly through the eyes of kindergarten pedagogues.

Chapter 8: Improving parent and children participation in Romanian Preschools by Stefan Cojucaru, Alexandra Galbin & Delia Rusu

The aim of Romanian chapter is to present the approach used in 13 rural schools with the highest dropout rate and with a predominantly Roma school population within the framework of the SIGNALS project. The approach has an empirical base and is a combined research and development project. The project started with a rigorous literature review, continued with the pre-intervention phase, followed by phases of the project implementation,
and finished with the methodology research. How this approach contributes to develop parent and children participation in Romanian preschools, from the perspectives of children, parents and teachers is discussed.

Chapter 9: Diversity in initial encounters between children, parents and educators in early childhood education by Anna Kultti & Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson

In this chapter we present the approach used in the Swedish study within the framework of the SIGNALS project. The approach has an empirical base and is a combined research and development project. The project is built upon consecutive emerging parts: The project started with a questionnaire to educators, continued with a study including observation and talks in two preschool settings, and finished with developmental work. How this approach contributes to developing the practice for understanding democratic participation from the perspectives of children, parents and teachers is discussed.

Chapter 10: Involving the voices of children and parents in the transition from preschool to primary school: A case study in an Icelandic preschool by Arna H. Jónsdóttir, Lena Valgardsdóttir & Johanna Einarsdóttir

In the Icelandic project, an action research was carried out in one preschool, in cooperation with the compulsory schools in the neighborhood. The timeframe for the project was September 2014 to August 2015. The focus was on transition between the school levels and cooperation of staff, children and parents. The aim of the project was to make the transition phase in children’s lives as positive and educating as possible and create continuity between the two school levels. The emphasis was on well-being, participation and learning. The number of children that took part was 15, their parents and two educators. The children went to five visits to three schools and one leisure center, they prepared questions for the visits and their experience was put on paper by mind-mapping in the wake of the visits. In discussing the mind-mapping, parents, children and educators focused on ways to connect the school levels based on the children’s perspectives and what the children found important. In the beginning and the end of the project focus group interviews were carried out with all participants. In the end they all said that they had learned a lot, the parents were more decisive about the process and what it should include, the educators thought that this group of children was better prepared the other groups, and the children were more confident and knew what to expect in the compulsory school. The cooperation of the schools will be developed next school year.

Chapter 11: Reflections on the projects in seven countries by Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson, Anne Kultti & Michel Vandenbroeck

In this last chapter of the compendium we try to summarize some main points of the very extended seven different country projects. It then became obvious how timely participation projects are in a European context where it is stated in various documents that parents should be more involved in their children’s every-day life in ECE. There are clear distinctions about the
topic of participation in the different countries, but all have worked hard to influence teachers and parents for giving children a chance to be a subject in and become participants in the pedagogical setting. And we as researchers have learnt a lot from being involved in a two-year dialogue, where we over and over again had to argue and reflect about our own practice.
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

References


Capmann, 20-45.


CHAPTER II

Diverse perspectives of participation
Denmark, Greece, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Romania, Sweden

by Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson & Stefan Cojocaru

2.1 Abstract

At the beginning of the project the research group decided to make an evaluation of how people involved in the SIGNALS project in the various countries, were talking about participation in the context of ECE. We then agreed on making interviews or questionnaires based on two questions related to views of children and parents' participation. The result is being presented as descriptions of different qualitative ways of talking about participation, as taken for a granted right or as something that could work within certain pedagogical situations or institutions. Our focus was more towards a general educational perspective by some countries, while by other countries it was experienced that "children may have the right to participate" in specific tasks. Children never gave expression of participation as a right, just in specific situations.

2.2 Introduction

The concept of participation in English is related to the Latin word "participitus" in the sense, share, take part in (Egilson & Trustadottir, 2009). It is difficult to find a general definition of the term, but Bae (2006) defines participation as synonymous with assisting, contribute, participate, help, influence and to play a role. It can also be linked to children's agency (Ärelmalm-Hagser, 2013). The Irish researcher Harry Shier has developed a model for guidance in how various activities can achieve the Convention's requirements for children's right to be heard (Shier, 2001). The model describes five, qualitative steps to involve children:

1) to listen to children,

2) to create opportunities for children to express themselves

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3) to be influenced by children’s statements,
4) to let children participate in decisions,
5) children and adults take joint decisions.

Shiers’ steps should be seen as a way to encourage children’s participation in decisions that are in line with Article 12 of the CRC. It involves different degrees of opportunities for children and adults’ responsibility. Listening and responding to children is a prerequisite for getting children involved and the commitment to make it possible lies with the adults. Opportunities related to resources, human as well as the external environment. Responsibility lies with the adults to build participation and influence in the business (Eide, Os & Pramling Samuelsson, 2012).

2.3 Theoretical background

2.3.1 Early education and participation

Developed by Friedrich Froebel in Germany in the 1830s and 1840s, kindergarten is the first level for early childhood education. In kindergarten children learn the foundational skills for future school success (Ray & Smith, 2010). The main purpose of kindergarten is to provide a favorable environment in which children could play and explore (Leseman et al., 2001). “The route to academic success includes the acquisition and displays of appropriate social skills” (Aljadeff-Abergel, Ayvazo, & Eldar, 2012). Kindergarten experience enables children to develop cognitive and non-cognitive skills, necessarily for social development. A repeated practice through play in kindergarten provides a positive start for childhood education. It is clear that play contributes at the children’s learning and well-being (Piaget, 1969; Vygotsky, 1978; Erickson, 1985) and also to the development of a sense of personal agency and empathy (Tomasello, 1999; Monteiro, 2014). Frumos & Munteanu (2011) pointed that the main reason for most children to go to kindergarten is that they ‘socialize and play with other children’. In play, during children’s years, children begin to develop inner speech (Vygotsky, 1978). During play situations children have the opportunity to cooperate and engage in conversation with their peers without distraction (Leseman et al., 2001). Through play children learn to interact with peers in a constructive way (Ray & Smith, 2010). Play is a powerful average for developing skills, emotional regulation (Seja & Russ, 1999), language (McCune, 1995), problem solving (Russ, 1998) and understanding narrative (Peter, 2003). Recent educational polities suggest that many kindergartens being under pressure by districts and government (Ray & Smith, 2010) are focused more on academics skills, creativity, pretend play, free exploration become less present (Ray & Smith, 2010; Baluta, 2014). Play improves outcomes for social development. Pretend play has a positive impact on social skills, social competence (Peter, 2003; Mei-Ju, 2014). Playing, children acquire interpersonal skills; develop relationship, their creativity, and imagination. Playing together, children create their own culture (Ray & Smith, 2010); the temperamental traits and the skills of children also contribute to the kindergarten culture (Lash, 2008). Not all the children are capable to adapt to the rules of kindergarten, at least in the first days. Free play and exploration can be good ways to create a positive and a safety environment.

Kindergarten is an optimal period to promote parent school relationships (Ray & Smith, 2010). Involvement of parents in school activities provides information about children accommodation, development and learning. Parent school relationship supports children’s
outcomes (Christenson, 2004). Children can create stronger relation between home and school when parents become involved in school activities (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Perry, 1999). Positive teacher-child relationships in kindergarten can make the transition in a constructive way; promoting social and emotional well-being of children (Murray et al., 2008; Gultekin & Acar, 2014). Teacher-child relationships in kindergarten ensure trust and emotional security for children. Positive kindergarten teacher-child relationships depend on the relation created between parents and teachers (Walker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2008). Rosenblatt & Peled (2003) claim that for parents to be involved they must have some level of trust in school. Parent education can be a good way to strengthen the relationships between parents and teachers (Cojocaru & Cojocaru, 2011). Parent education eliminates the behaviors that affect the child’s development (Mateos, Amorós, Pastor, & Cojocaru, 2013). It is widely recognized that parent involvement contributes to student achievement (Walker, Green, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2006). The participation of parents in the educational process creates stronger perceptions of their ability (Dauber & Epstein, 1993) to help children develop social skills, and offer many opportunities for children in creating their own knowledge (Cojocaru, 2009; Frumos & Munteanu, 2011). Also, parents appreciate teachers who empower them to participate, and offer strategies for helping with student learning (Patrikakou & Weissberg, 2000). For many families their involvement in children’s education is imposed by the low income, poverty and limited educational achievement (Walker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2008). The family background can often give family the feeling that they are unprepared to interact effectively with schools (Drummmond & Stipek, 2004). However, many low income parents continue to make it work (Weiss et al., 2003). Like parents, teachers may avoid parent’s involvement because of their own personal psychological and cultural barriers; fear of being criticized by parents, few strategies to involve parents (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002). Parent-school relationship may be especially beneficial in the early childhood years for promoting early academic and social skills. Relationships are the key element for a good activity of kindergarten. "Relationships are central to human functioning and relational life is intertwined throughout our lives" (Blustein et al., 2004, p. 426). Life is intersubjectivity constructed because we live in a 'web of relationships' (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). From a social constructionist perspective, language is more than just a way of connecting people. People ‘exist’ in language. Constructionism focuses on relations and upholds the role of the individual in constructing significant realities. The relational constructionist perspective opens space for creativity, for improvisation, and participation is viewed as a relational way of being and knowing (Reason, 1994). Using a social constructionism perspective (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), parentening is viewed as a cultural practice, socially constructed. An appreciative discourse generates involvement and promotes good relations between family and teachers. The role of educators in kindergarten is to facilitate a learning process, where parents can explore and reflect on how they give meaning to experience, and how this experience may open up new possibilities to relate. The focus is on positive results and to create a framework in which people can feel connected and want to be involved (Grant, Hardy, Oswick, & Putnam, 2004). Creating a culture of participation between kindergarten staff and parents can help to a better inclusion, accommodation and transition of children.

2.3.2 School culture and participation

School culture is a major determinant of school improvement and introduces the role of parent education in constructing a positive school culture. Peterson (2002) claims that
understanding and shaping the school culture leads to a success in promoting the learning of teachers and students. To be effective, schools must concentrate on their fundamental mission of teaching and learning, and they must do it for all children. That must be the overarching goal of schools in the twenty-first century (Ravitch, 2000, p. 467). The origins of the use of the term culture to describe life inside schools began with Waller (1932). The author noted that schools have an identity of their own, with complex rituals of personal relationships, a set of folkways, mores, irrational sanctions, and moral codes. Kroeger & Parsons (1958, p. 583) consider culture as "transmitted and created content and patterns of values, ideas, and other symbolic-meaningful systems as factors in the shaping of human behavior and the artifacts produced through behavior". Culture influences the people’s social behaviors and interests, and the way they interact with others. Culture has been defined by Schein (1992) as the deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organization, that operate unconsciously, and that define in a basic "taken-for-granted" fashion an organization's view of itself and its environment" (p. 6). It refers to how people feel about organization, the authority system, and the degree of employee involvement and commitment" (Schein, 2000). Culture includes the shared philosophies, ideologies, values, assumptions, beliefs, expectations, attitudes, and norms that knit a community together" (Owens & Steinhoff, 1989). The culture is meant to describe the character of school as if reflects deep patterns of values, beliefs, and traditions that have been formed over the course of its history. According to Erickson (1987) school culture refers to the way people perceive, think, and feel about things of a school. School culture manifests itself in rituals, customs, stories, and ways of treating each other, and culture’s artifacts such as language (Hoy et al., 1991; Stoll, 1999). This invisible, taken-for-granted flow of beliefs and assumptions gives meaning to what people say and do (Lotrea et al., 2014). "These are the heart of school culture, and what makes it so hard to grasp and to change it (Stoll, 1998)." The concept of culture refers to a shared, learned, symbolic system of values, beliefs, attitudes that shapes and influences perceptions and behaviors (Bodley, 1994; Douglas, 1992; Geertz, 1993). Berry et al. (1992) refer to culture as the "shared way of life of a group of people". Hence, as the authors sustained the term culture is borrowed from anthropology (Glisson, 2000; Ouchi & Wilkins, 1985, Reichers & Schnieder, 1990), unlike the school climate is viewed from a psychological perspective (Hoy et al., 1991). Although the terms school culture and school climate are frequently used interchangeably (Freiberg & Shein, 1999; Maslowski, 2006; Owens, 2001; Van Houtte, 2005), school culture is a better framework to study school effectiveness and school improvement (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008) and school climate may more appropriately be thought of as subset of the broader construct of school culture" (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008).

School culture is a multifaceted concept, composed of different dimensions (Devos et al., 2007; Engels et al., 2008; Maslowski, 2001; Kruse & Seashore Louise, 2009). According to Engels et al. (2008) a positive or a "good" school culture is often considered as one in which meaningful staff development and enhanced student learning are practiced. School culture is closely related to the healthy and sustainable development of a school, the development and well-being of the school members (Zhu, Devos & Li, 2011; Gerstein et al., 2014). In a school culture that enables and encourages innovation, the teachers will feel more encourage to experiment in their classrooms and to collaborate with colleagues (Hargreaves, 1995; Gultekin & Acar, 2014). School culture is "not only the particular patterns of perception and behavior, but also the system of relationships between those relationships" (Prosser, 1999). J. van Maanen (in Cameron & Quinn, 1999, p.17) explained that a major problem in organizations needing to
change their cultures is that "no key elements or dimensions have been identified and no common perspectives available to even help the conversation get started. Change doesn’t occur because it is difficult to know what to talk about and what to focus on". Many researchers (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Halsall, 1998; Hopkins, 1995; Stoll & Fink, 1996) agree that school culture is a crucial variable in school improvement. Hopkins (1995, p. 85) noted that "unless we address the issue of school culture...there is a little chance that school improvement will be achieved". Examining the construct of „school culture, may hold answer as how we might improve student learning in low-performing schools" (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008).

Parent education may be a link to examine and to improve each dimension of school culture. The parent education can creates conditions within schools to sustain the teaching-learning process. Parent education improves the communication within the school, the informal interactions that arise between teachers and involves the parents in the process of the students’ learning (Cojocaru, 2011). Introducing parent education programmes in schools provides new perspectives for parents, students and teachers. Parent education creates opportunities to find solutions to the problems of teachers, parents and students (lack of communication, low motivation in school, dropout, aggressive behavior, failure and dropout, social maladjustment, parental stress etc. (Cojocaru, & Cojocaru, 2011). Offering a range of alternatives, teachers can improve their skills, their taken for granted assumptions, the way they feel about their students, conduct their activity and how they feel about their work. The members are often unconscious about these assumptions; seen as "complex set of shared tacit understandings about the nature of things" (Van Houtte & Van Maele, 2011). The assumptions are likely to remain unconscious until someone – a staff member, student or parent challenges them. Parent education offers a reflection on their behavior and "what lies behind it" (Van Houtte & Van Maele, 2011). Hence they will become (more) conscious of the basic assumptions that underlie the interpretations of what they do (Maslowski, 2006, p. 8). Thurstone (1928) declared that "attitudes can be measured", "attitudes being the sum total of a man’s inclinations and feelings, prejudice or bias, preconceived notions, ideas, fears, threats, and convictions about any specific topic" (Thurstone, 1928, p. 531). As noted the authors (Houtte & Van Maele, 2011), "why then the researchers should not be able to bring these unconscious assumptions to the surface by asking the right questions, namely questions that make respondents reflects on what is actually guiding their behavior"? Another advantage to study the school culture allows exploring the coexistence of different subcultures within schools (Stan & Popa, 2014). From the moment there are different groups within the organization (students, teachers, principals) there is a chance that different subcultures will arise (Houtte & Maele, 2011). Parent education allows distinguishing the beliefs of each group, so we can speak about the teacher, the student, and parent cultures. Analyzing the behavior and not only of each group, parent education can intervenes in each dimension of school culture: "professional orientation, organizational structure, quality of the learning environment, student-centered focuses" (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008). Parent education permits reconstructing and reshaping school culture, as an important means to solve the existing problems at the schools, to transform school administration, and offers new challenges of teaching and learning. Parent education involves parents in constructing school culture, and can be an indicator in any dimension noted previously. Creating parental education programmes in schools (Cojocaru, Cojocaru, & Ciuchi, 2012) can be a link to rethink the unwritten rules and traditions, norms, the way people act, how teachers feel about work and their students. Parent education brings together teachers and parents and is based on the students’ unique interests
2.4 Survey questions

The following two questions were asked in all countries are:

1) What does children’s participation in preschool means to you, and
2) What does parent’s participation in preschool means to you?

And the same questions to parents, what they thought about children’s participation and their own participation. These questions have been curried out in different ways in the different countries; some have questionnaires and other have video-recorded interviews. One mail question is the participation as a notion is more or less used, or not at all in some counties. Here follows some comments from some of the participant counties.

In each of the questions various discourses and ideas about participation appear, it is these categories we here will describe. This has to be viewed in the perspective of what the various projects in the different countries are focusing on, and not the least the age of the children involved. In the case of Sweden, parents have limited Swedish language to communicate on, why they have got some support from other to formulate. In Denmark the project focuses on healthy and learning about health. Parents and staff reflect on children’s lunch time, among other things discussion about a healthy lunch packet.

In the German project children with special needs and low language competencies were interviewed. They had major problems in understanding the question and expressing examples of participation well. Additionally some parents live in disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds. The subject “participation” was highly abstract for them. “Participation” when translated into Hungarian needed some explanation as the concept is described by other words in Hungarian, which are closer to “cooperation” and “involvement.”

For many of the countries’ curriculum, it is stated that there should be a cooperation
and participation with parents, and that children’s should be viewed as any human begin and be considered as competent on taking own decisions (see document about the curricula earlier formulated within SIGNALS). Children’s rights are an essential part of both the school and preschool according to intentions. The right to exercise influence is put forward in several contexts as in the Education Act in many countries, the Discrimination Act and the The Convention of the Right of the Child. Giving children the opportunity to influence is, however, largely on adult skills to involve children and their attitudes and willingness to give children the influence (Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001). The second aspect of Section 12 in UNCRC is that adults should listen to children. Children’s voices and opinions are taken into consideration, which is to take the child’s perspective (Pramling Samuelsson, Sommer & Hundeide, 2011). In order for children to have some kind of influence depends on the involvement.

2.5 Methodology

Our design of the survey can be viewed as evaluation aiming to describe qualitative different ways to talk about participation in the involved countries’ ECE. When using qualitative methods in the evaluation recognizes the importance and relevance of subjective information for in-depth understanding of the program. Datta (1994) believes that to reach an understanding of the program, evaluators The qualitative must incorporate all available information in a satisfactory interpretation model that is able to determine the influences of the program (p.59). One of the challenges is the qualitative assessments of the credibility of data; credibility is one of the targets of quantitative or qualitative approaches criticisms in the assessment, arguing that subjective factors alters the interpretation in terms of proving the influence of the program. Qualitative assessments is emphasized how the program affects the status of the beneficiaries and the environment in which it is functioning. The evaluation using qualitative methods aims to identify relevant variables, to collect in-depth information from participants, taking into account the context in which this trial is conducted and aims to identify interests, intentions, motives, values and explanations participants; It aims to explain the meanings of social reality constructed by participants. Qualitative assessment exceeds the institutional and structural analysis based on objective data by querying the meanings of individual actions or private contexts; therefore, this method provides detailed information on specific intervention possible ways different types of beneficiaries and refines the analysis of contexts in which they could produce the intended change in the program.

Thus, in all countries involved in the project were carried out interviews with staff, parents and children. Type comprehensive interviews conducted by thematic axes, they aimed to capture how different subjects (parents, staff and children) define and understand participation, which are its dimensions through the personal experiences in contact with the school institution.
2.6 Participants in evaluation from the countries involved in SIGNALS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Aim of the projects, to develop participation br:</th>
<th>Age of children</th>
<th>Number of children</th>
<th>Number of staff</th>
<th>Number of parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Developing co-operation between preschool teachers, the management and parents in a Danish preschool in order to promote children’s health and their knowledge about health</td>
<td>5-6 years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Planning, realizing and implementing new kindergarten premises (indoor and outdoor) to create more space for movement and activity oriented learning)</td>
<td>1-6 years</td>
<td>5 (4-6 years)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Teachers, parents and children attending 1st and 2st primary school grade in an interactive context.</td>
<td>7-8 years</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>Parents, staff and children in the course of settling in children to childcare and during emerging literacy program in kindergarten</td>
<td>0-3 years</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceland</td>
<td>Children, parents and staff working on transition in childrens learnings from preschool to compulsory school.</td>
<td>5-6 years</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>Step by step program – encouraging the participation between children, parents and staff in school environment</td>
<td>3-5 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Introduction to preschool for children and parents with other mother tongue than Swedish</td>
<td>1-3 years</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.7 Staff talks about children’s participation

When children’s participation here is focused it is related to when and how children can be involved and be part of the decision process, and in this way influence preschool.
2.7.1 A positive and self-evident perspective that children should be participants in everyday life in preschool

Staff talks about how important it is for children’s participate in daily life in preschool, as a self-evident perspective. Children should be included in all what is going on, and that can be shown in different ways. Specific young children seem to have larger freedom. The school is an institution that has its own structure and its own rules, where processes formative and educational. This means that on the one hand, it is an educational institution, and on the other hand is a social institution, a legal entity and a job. The school is forming knowledge, skills and competencies that underpin the cultural system of society. In discussing the practices and educational institutions, De Winter (2002) argues that for too long, they have “grown older children by keeping them small.” He refers to the dominant ideas and practices of parents and teachers who raise their children without giving them the opportunity to express themselves and not involve them in their education, from the idea that they are too small and inexperienced to decide on his own life. Regardless of educational practices, students will decide issues of their everyday life at school such as: food served, spatial school, colleagues working in group or to sit in the bank or what topics to prepare. The teacher’s role is to facilitate, to “support” children participation in learning. In school, rules, schedule and curriculum can determine the extent feasible the ideal of participation and activities must be adapted to concrete (CIDE, 2006)

*Adults should listen to children’s interests and ideas (SW).*

*It is a positive attitude the personnel should have to let children be involved, also in planning (SW).*

*Everything is children’s worlds, and we change after their needs, all the time” (SW).*

*Children make decisions about their learning and activities in the pre-school (Iceland)*

*Children in kindergartens are to be involved in as many decision making as possible in order to ensure they can choose the most appropriate activities. (HU)*

*Staff aims to involve children in as many activities as possible (HU).*

*Staff considers participating at holiday events as one of the more important indicators for the child to feel/be engaged (HU)*

Whether this is reality or not is another question, but there are a number of staff who talk in a clear and convincing way about children as being and active agent in their own everyday life. Participation of children in kindergarten and community life should not be understood as referring exclusively to extracurricular activities or decisions, but also means information, reflection, adopting a position on a situation or to a review, consultation, cooperation, initiation of shares and participation in the decision. Bearing this in mind, to dissecting the concept of participation in concrete behaviors can distinguish the following elements of participation.

*Living together in Kindergarten, making decisions regarding daily routine, a mutual information and agreement between child and professionals, children
follow their own ideas and needs, each child is asked for his/her opinion and can express it openly, mutual structure in planning psycho-motoric activities, they move and play according to their own needs (GE)

Participation for children means everything they are allowed to try (DK)

Participation is a question of attitude, children have to be viewed and accepted as individuals, their ideas, wishes and need should be accepted. But one also need to make sure that all children can take their own decisions, in daily routines (GE).

Children both in childcare centers and in kindergartens are expected to experiment with all kinds of activities and to carry out whatever they can master in order to support the development of their autonomy and independence. These include dressing, hand washing, toileting, eating, self-serving food, physical activities, etc.. This attitude is the prevailing one in order to support children’s development. (HU)

We can also see how some teachers take children’s perspectives more than their own as adults.

Children ask questions without any fear or hesitation, and they express opinions spontaneously, they also suggest ideas, ways of building or constructing something in the classroom, and they are willing to spontaneously help classmates (GR).

They youngest children seem to be seen as more free than older children.

The small one have pretty free reign in relation to what it is they want (DK)

2.7.2 There are particular moments or situations in which children can participate

In this category, the teachers talk about specific moments or situations when it is more appropriate for children to be active participants.

In Denmark, for example they specifically talk about “fruit time”, as a situation when children can take decisions.

When children eat the fruit they have brought with them from home and during the fruit time, it is also about one child being responsible for preparing this every day (DK).

Children are encouraged to choose the group and to express their wishes regarding the activities in which they will participate. During the day, the children change the group according to their wishes, affinities and contextual interests. In the morning, the children choose the sub-group in which they work, and during the day they can change their sub-group. This happens when there are activities in small groups (RO)

Project topics are selected in common decision making processes (GE)

Children take part in activities according to the rules, join in conversations
that take place on the carpet, but the teacher also provide opportunities for children to express their opinions (GR).

The daily schedule in childcare centers is set up so as to ensure the participation of children as much as possible. E.g. ample time is calculated in the schedule for children to try to dress and/or undress, to wash hands, to be outside in the garden, etc. without waiting time. Children are never moved as a group, but go about the daily routines one by one with the pedagogue. (HU)

2.7.3 Frames for children’s participation

In some of the staff’s expressions focus is on specific situation, like to decide what activity to be involved in, or when they can decide. Participation of children, stimulating active involvement in solving problems concerning his own life, involves fostering their ability to identify their needs and interests and to satisfy them (Masschelein & Quaghebeur, 2005). This idea is supported by Flekkøy (1999), which argues that babies are capable of at least a “rudimentary expression” with which are heard, even if the “views” or “feelings” are more difficult to understand them. He argues that communication is not only a rudimentary self-expression, but early in the process to make decisions, plan and solve problems. Potential child’s ability to participate or very little, is also understood as a reflection of a need, but also as a desire of the child to express his point of view, to practice conducting an election in interactions with others. Because of this need or desire for power manifested by the child, as called Hart (1992, p. 23) participation is seen as necessary by irrevocable right (Masschelein & Quaghebeur, 2005). Literature participation, based on the idea that there is a general group of capabilities such as self-reflection and self-expression which function or performance of the distinctive features of each individual. From the other perspective, these capabilities are the formulation of perspectives, social and communication skills that allow understanding and interpreting the environment, and build skills to negotiate different meanings (Van Gils, 2001, p. 26) to influence both their own behavior and the behavior of others (Flekkøy, 1999, p. 50), to learn from experience, to practice actively making decisions, identify problems, to reflect and to act as an expert on our lives (Hart, 1992, p. 29; Van Dinter, 1999, p. 48). From this point of view, participation is the instrument by which children achieve and run at maximum performance. The staff also talks about what children can not decide or influence.

Staff decides rules in preschool (SW).

Children know exactly what is applicable in preschool (DK).

Our Danish children also bring their lunches, but when the staff is talking about this they can say: No, you have to eat two slices of rye bread before you can take a snack...... it is build in to them that you have to have x number of bread before you can eat snacks (DK)

The program of activities is determined by staff (RO)

Children must respect the rules decided by staff. (RO)

There are frames for participation that the adults decide (SW)
Daily schedule is set up by staff but within the time allowed for different activities children are free to choose what to do and when. (HU)

Staff is also aware that preschool could be more of allowing and let children participate more in decisions.

A reason for not letting children participate more is that it is time consuming, and also that one fall back to old habits (DK)

We do not involve the children as much in decision-making at the moment (DK)

In each group there are many children (32 children). It is difficult to work with so many children at once, and the time for each child is very short. Therefore, we chose to model Step by Step, to divide the children into small groups (each 8 children in each subgroup) (RO)

2.8 Parents about children’s participation in preschool

The Swedish parents, in this study, do come from other cultures and speak not very much Swedish so their answers are very limited. Two of the Danish parents are involved in the parent committee. Many parents seem to think about children’s participation in its literate way, as being included, as opposite to excluded, but there are also examples of more general views of participation.

2.8.1 Perspective of staff’s engagement in children’s participation

A positive and self-evident perspective of staffs’ engagement encourages children’s participation in preschool. Preschool is a child friendly environment for children. Here it appears as if participation is that children should be respected and accepted for their ideas, wishes and need. Child participation involves encouraging and empowering it to make known their views on issues that affect them. In practice, participation is adults listening to children - through all the many and varied forms in which they are expressed. Participation ensures their freedom to express themselves and take account of their views when it comes to decisions that affect them. Involving children in dialogue and exchange of views allows them to learn constructive ways of influencing the world around them.

Gladly express his/her opinion spontaneously, and take part in game with his/her friends, fell happy about going to school (GR).

Staff should respect and respond to children’s wishes, and give individual promotion of the child (GE).

Children make decisions about their activities in the pre school and are given information about the things that involve them. Children have a say in their learning and their ideas are worth listening to and implemented (Iceland)

The general attitude of supporting children to become autonomous, to integrate into the children’s group (community) and to make their own decision is prevailing in the childcare centers according to parents. Children
are never forced to do anything. E.g. Children can choose what to play with and what food to eat both in childcare centers and in kindergartens (HU).

There are particular moments or situations in which children can participate. These specific moments or situations are very similar across various countries. Play is only very obvious situation related to children’s participation. This perspective is the most frequent in parent’s views.

Free choice of peers, of resources, place where to play, and activities they want to be involved in (GE)

I know that every child chooses his place in the class, chooses his bed for sleeping. I think if we consider his choices, the child is happier (RO).

Restructuring and decoration of play and action corners, joint preparation and participation in festivals (GE)

Children decide what play offer they accept (GE)

In decisions process on what they have for their common breakfast (GE)

Take part in activities presented by the teacher, is the teacher’s assistant, and participate in conversations with teacher and classmates (GR).

I take part in celebrations and events, and have good relationship with teachers regarding my child, I also provide financial support at school when prompted, I offer help in any possible way (GR)

### 2.8.2 Children’s involvement in play as participation

Children’s participation is related in their views of play in preschool. Participation can mainly be interpreted here, as they want their children to be included with other children.

Participation is to have someone to play with (SW)

There is a lot of free play (DK)

Children must make friends, to play and to share toys. The teacher should encourage these relationships between children (RO)

Play is the main and most important activity in childcare centers. The daily schedule is set up so as to allow the most possible time for play. (HU).

### 2.8.3 Participation as helping someone with something

Participation is seen as an alternative to traditional education focuses on what the child can do, the potential that it has and how it can be used and developed. From this perspective, the child is seen as a human being who has potential and specific skills and also who has specific needs and interests. Capacities, skills and abilities of the child are essential
elements of the potential that it has and that helps to identify and meet their own needs and interests, without external intervention and without the presence of adults to raise her needs and interests. The perspective that places adult greatly influences the child participation process. Focusing on problems and disability, does nothing but reinforce them, while focusing on strengths and capabilities generate positive experiences of participation, encourage repeat this process and amplify the expected results (Cojocaru, 2005).

Also the Danish parents bring up the “fruit activity” as an example of children’s participation!

Children’s are participation in decisions as choosing between A and B (DK).

Children should not be forced into something they do not want (DK)

Children can help the pedagogues in the preparation and organization of daily activities in kindergartens (HU)

2.9 Children’s own voices about participation

Children do focus on specific tasks or situations for when they can participate and decide. They play is a main focus.

Who I can play with, what do I play, who do I play with, where do I play, in which group (GE)

We participate when we re-decorate the play corner, and the toy I bring from home, when we have toy-day (GE).

What we have for breakfast (GE).

I participate in conversations regarding which outdoor activities to play, about making a new play area in our classroom, and about rules in the classroom (GR)

I decide in which play area I want to play, and make decisions the change play area. I suggest going to the theatre and aquarium (GR).

You can decide what you want to eat, when we eat, and if I want to go into the car room on my own. Only when we eat fruit, then you have to wash your fingers and sit on the sofa, but if you pick your nose, then you have to wash your fingers again (DK)

I am the one deciding all the games (DK).

I can decide what kind of rye bread you will eat, and what kind of fruit and that, and I can decide where to play, if you will play in the doll nook or in the pillow room, or what cloths we have to put on, and then the adults also decide all other things. If you could decide that something should be different in preschool, what should that be?

I would decide what color the house should be. I would also decide when we are in and out, and I would also decide when we could play on the iPad, and I
would decide when we would go out, and when we should change and have new toys (DK)

“I can decide who my friends are” (kindergarten child, HU)

The answers the children came up with were almost identical. They started talking about situations when they are in control. The children all mentioned play as their participation or time when they are in complete control.

“I’m in control when I play”... “I choose where I play – arts, block building”...

“I choose what I draw” (Iceland)

But there is also a list when naughty things are reported.

Yeah, if you don’t come out, if you haven’t counted to.. if Louise has counted to five and no one comes out, then it is written on the note. Mikki never wants to behave, when we say stop, then he hits everyone... Is there anything you would decide if you could? I would just decide that I could ride a pig! (DK)

2.9.1 Summary about Children’s participation

Children’s participation in preschool is a pivot not only for shaping a democratic life, but also for their learning and development, and thus should be expressed and reflected strongly of parents, staff and children themselves.

Staff from some countries (SW, GE, IL, DK) also see children’s participation as a self-evident perspective: children have to be viewed as individuals just like adults. However not all countries have reflected children’s participation as the most fundamental perspective. Nevertheless some more countries (GR, RO) describe children’s participation as something which happens in particular moments, where staff gives children space for their involvement. Yet some countries (RO, IL, SW) also agree in the fact, that there are some borders for children’s participation and own decisions. However at the same time they call for more influence of children.

Parents too reflect on children’s participation in preschool. Parents specially understand play as an area where children influence and participate, but they also are aware that children during the day have different possibilities to make their own decisions.

Decision making and attitudinal issues characterize parents thinking, whereas issues related to the life at the centre are more relevant for the pedagogues (HU).

When it comes to children’s own reflection on their participation not may countries contribute with data. But DK and GE children express that they have possibility to decide what to do, what to eat, and first of all what to play.

2.10 Staff talks about parents’ participation

There are also various ways in which staff talks about parents’ participation, that is similar to the categories of how they talk about children. In some countries parents can take decisions about things that they can not in others, like for example open hours, school holidays and kindergarten organisation, decisions about whether children should have lunch at school or
not, or if they can go home by themselves or not, which seems the case in Germany.

2.10.1 A positive and self-evident perspective of parents as participants in the preschool

We need to have an open attitude towards parents so they feel welcome in preschool (SW)

Parents are our partners. They have representatives in kindergarten board and they participate in decisions regarding the activities, instruction materials, child nutrition etc. We work very well with them (RO)

The introduction to preschool is very important. We have an active introduction, where parents are active with their own child all day, during the introduction period (SW)

Children’s documentations are important in the communication process between, parents, teachers and children (SW)

Cooperation with parents as a question of ownership (DK)

A mutual understanding, parents and staff should discuss and follow shared aims, discuss parent’s wishes/ideas and proposals and put them into practice (GE)

We have good relationship with the parents based on mutual communication (GR)

All countries staff talks about parents in a positive way and believe they have a good cooperation with them.

2.10.2 Particular moment of parents’ participation

There are particular moments or situations in which parents can participate.

At the beginning of each year, we have individual meetings with each parent in order to present the kindergarten, ways of working with children, expectations for parental involvement. We organise these meetings with parents of children who start coming in kindergarten (RO).

They take part in celebrations and events (GR)

They contribute financially to school supplies (GR)

Parents are asked and expected to participate in the two-week process of settling in children at the childcare center. They are to be with the child and cooperate with the staff as it is needed. (HU).

There are regular monthly meetings for parents in the group that their child attends to discuss the life of the group. (HU).

Parents’ involvement means participating in the different forms of contacts (kindergarten, HU)

“We request their participation and help in specific activities such as
upkeeping the garden, and collecting selective waste (HU).

But there are also other activities for cooperation with parents.

We also have drop-in coffee, where parents can just come and have a cup of coffee and look at what is going on and we can talk informally (SW).

Parents can participate in excursions, and drop-in and excursions, can also support parents to learn to know each other. Good if parents can learn to know each other and share experiences (SW).

Parents participate in the celebrations of children, some also accompany the children on a trip, and give financial support for additional activities. All parents participate for the purchase of educational materials used in activities with children. For parents who do not have financial resources, are helped by other parents (RO).

Planning and carrying out shared festivals, where parents can support (GE).

Parents offer accompany the class in an excursion, or theatre events, and are keen to help the teacher with mutual labour work at school (GR).

Time in preschool, food, sleeping routines, are all areas where parents participation and influence are strongest (SW).

Joint events around holidays, open days, children’s day and any other events childcare centers and kindergartens organize throughout the year (HU).

Parents should have and active role and come with suggestions!

Interestingly, most suggestions are made for parents who tend to compare their children with others in the group. Usually, suggestions are made for those who have a grievance against child acquisitions. These suggestions made by parents are usually focused on their children (RO).

Parents have suggestions for general activities with all children, especially when they think of extra-curricular activities (excursions, visits to the city at various institutions, theater etc.) (RO).

2.10.3 To inform parents for cooperation or the opposite

It looks like parents have to be educated by the staff before any cooperation can take place. One can never see the opposite in the answers, that is, that the staff has to learn from the parents except in Hungary, where parents are requested to share knowledge about their child in a written form and orally as well before the child begins to attend the center and during the settling in process, and later also to a lesser extent.

It is very important for parents to inform staff about the children's particular needs. Parents do this especially related to nutrition and child communication. We consider the suggestions of parents and inform all staff of the institution on the needs of the child (RO).
Inform and advice parents on aims (GE)

We try to tell them about roles at preschool, when they begin, so they know what it is like in a Swedish preschool. They more they learn about our preschool, the better for their child. We explain for example the curriculum and how we work with it. We learn from parents about their children, and someone says: “it becomes a better life for children if we cooperate, and learn about child’s experiences at home” (SW)

Install different forms of parental information (GE)

There are frames for parents’ participation, in situations where parents and staff have different opinions about routine situations, as for example out-door activities, is the solution to explain to the parents why we do that (SW).

We try to get our new parents to write a letter and tell about their child in their own native a language, that we then can get translated by someone who knows that language (SW).

It is important to get an interpreter so we can communicate with parents (SW)

A question to ask is if staff believes in information or dialogue with parents. It more looks like they take to position of being the authority who knows and who should tell parents about rules and customs of preschool they have to adopt.

2.10.4 A Parent Committee or Board

Some preschool seems to have special board or committees for parents as formal organisations for democracy and participation. The Danish staff talks a lot about a formal organisation with a parental committee, through who the other parents should could give their opinions and come with suggestions.

For the staff, parents committee is an enormous support. We feel that we has support from parents in decisions that have to take. We advise with them and take into account their ideas (RO)

In our kindergarden there isn’t a formal association of parents, but I know that there are other kindergartens and schools. The representatives of parents, one parent from each group, make up a committee of parents who participate in meetings with the staff (RO)

We are aware that it could be more cooperation between parents and themselves so they could influence more. The same goes for children (DK)

Parents participation in parental stakeholder group in all children’s centers is required by legislation. (HU)

None else, than the Danish staff, gives expressions of that they could become better in participation with parents.
2.11 Parents about their own participation in preschool

Parents do not say very much about their own participation, and it sounds easy to get an impression that many parents feel that preschool is the authority, and they have to adapt to that. At the same time, they are willing to help and be involved when they are requested.

If they (preschool teachers) need help in preschool, we as parents could assist (SW)

In most cases, staff is authoritarian with children, and with parents, also. Often try to impose their views, saying that so are the rules and must be respected. Consider that they are professionals and do very well their job ... are more flexible when they organized extra-curricular activities. Maybe that is why we feel that our opinion counts, when we discuss about these activities (RO)

Staff should be open for ideas and suggestions, listen to them and respect them, and cooperated and make decisions about what is important for the child (GE).

Getting information about what the children have been doing in the preschool and talk to them about their day. Parents and teachers work together and communicate about the children. (Iceland)

2.11.1 Parents participation in particular situations or tasks

A lot of the cooperation is about health matter (DK).

How many hours their child remains at the centre (GE)

Parents feel they are informed well about the life in the childcare center, learn/are made aware a lot about child development and can get involved in activities related to their child. (HU)

Participation in activities that are not part of the regular life of the kindergarten, such as. excursions, making presents, etc. (HU)

“We can feel as equal partners in certain matters, such as organizing excursions (HU)

2.11.2 Some parents are aware that there could be more cooperation and participation

But some of the parents also spell clearly out that it could be more cooperation on daily bases, a little more information about what they have been doing...Of course I could ask about it, and they have a book that I could look into (DK).

The Danish parents also reflect about how they could involve more parents in cooperation!
2.11.3 Summary about parent’s participation

Some countries (SW, DK, IL, GE) express that parents participation in preschool life is self-evident, “parents are partners”. However parent’s participation seems to be most strong in particular moments as example regarding to festivals, excursions. Though parent have influence, staff from the responding countries (DK, SW, GE, RO) express the fact that one-way communication is domineering.

In general the parents themselves see staff as an authority they have to adapt to, but there are also some examples of how parents are influencing and feel they are participating.

2.12 Conclusions

Participation in life might be seen as fundament and tool for democracy and thus should be visible in preschool for parents, children and staff.

The total picture given by the responding countries seems to be that although children are participants in their own life in preschool and do have some influence, their participation are mostly related to their own play and activities.

Same picture is expressed according to parent’s participation and influence. Though they are seen as individuals with knowledge and skills their participation is mostly related to special activities as example planning a festival etc. It is noteworthy that by studying Greek parents’ views concerning their participation we concluded that parents are not keen to participate actively to their children’s everyday school life. This is partly due to the fact that the preschool curriculum lacks a encompassing concept of parents’ participation.

Thus one might critical ask if children and parents really have influence on life in preschool? The answer depends of how radical we want to understand the concept participation.

Studies show that the natural resource wasted and misused in the civilized world are children. With so many wonderful ideas, so much energy and idealism unlimited power to impose their point of view is infinite (Clark, 2005). Children’s ideas, opinions, and their influence are worthy of being considered (Prout & James, 1979; Mayall, 2002). In the family and school it is important for parents and educators to discover early on the strengths of children and provide them the opportunity to showcase them. The evolution of social context requires a change of perspective from which the child is treated. At the macro level, since the late 1980s have increasingly highlighted the many voices of academics, politicians and the general public who support promoting participation in educational practices for children, citizens, students, parents and teachers. For the first time in history, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, treating the child as a person with rights rather than as a person on whom parents to exercise protection. This new perspective has effects not only on children but also on those who care for his upbringing and education. Therefore, adults are the ones who need to shape attitudes towards children, so as to ensure their legal rights (Males, Kusevic, & Siranoviv, 2014).
CHAPTER II: DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES OF PARTICIPATION
DENMARK, GREECE, GERMANY, HUNGARY, ICELAND, ROMANIA, SWEDEN

References

Participation as a Social Perspective for Education) (Utrecht, De Tijdstroom).


CHAPTER II: DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES OF PARTICIPATION
DENMARK, GREECE, GERMANY, HUNGARY, ICELAND, ROMANIA, SWEDEN

CHAPTER III: A JOINT EFFORT FOR MORE SCOPE OF ACTION: PLAY AREA DESIGN - THE GATEWAY TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CULTURE OF PARTICIPATION IN “KINDERTAGESSTÄTten”

A Joint Effort for More Scope of Action: Play Area Design - The Gateway to the Development of a Culture of Participation in “Kindertagesstätten”

by Jutta Schneider, Klaus Fischer

The early childhood system in Germany

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of children</th>
<th>0-6 years</th>
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| Regulation and administration of early childhood services | • Infant toddler centre (0-3 years)  
• Kindergarten (2-6 years)  
• (Family) Day Care centre (0-6 years) |
| Policy responsibility at central level | Responsibility is shared between the federal government and 16 regional state governments (the Länder)  
→ Ministry of Social Affairs |
| Operational responsibility at local level | Youth & Welfare offices, municipalities, churches, voluntary organizations, non-governmental agencies |
| Compulsory pre-primary year | No |
| School starting age | 6 years |
| Do national or regional curricula or guidelines exist | Yes. Framework agreement of the Federal States (2004) and 16 education plans on state level |
| Do the curricula include guidelines concerning transitions or continuity | Yes |
| Length and level of initial training of lead staff and assistant staff | Educator: 12 years of schooling,  
• 2 years at vocational school for educators plus 1 year supervised work placement.  
• 3 years (B.A.) at university of applied sciences  
• 5 years (M.A.) at university of applied sciences  
Child care worker: 10 years of schooling,  
• 2 years at a vocational school for childcare |
3.1 Abstract

The article describes the project as action research, accompanying and evaluating the process of planning and reconstructing the indoor and outdoor premises of a kindergarten as a model of participation and interaction with all stakeholders (staff, parents, children, trustees, academics and architects). In the given project the experiences of all participants are assessed and used to develop teaching modules to serve as a model for a) active and movement orientated learning in the kindergarten setting and b) experiencing steps of participation.

3.2 Presentation of the German Signals Project “Gemeinsam zu mehr Handlungsspielraum“ (A Joint Effort for More Scope of Action)

The German SIGNALS project aims to involve children and parents in the operation of children’s day care centres (or “Kitas”, short for Kindertagesstätten), paying particular attention to play area design. This objective reflects the recognition that the conceptual design of such areas in children’s day care centres has a significant impact on the educational work and on the structure as well as on the quality of the children’s learning processes. Spatial conditions and educational concept interact with one another and ultimately determine to what extent the children (and parents) are enabled to learn actively and self-responsibly, to participate in routine educational activities, to share in the joint (educational and leisure) activities of the day care centre and to contribute to decision-making processes. The German research project aims to initiate, monitor and moderate joint activities and decision-making processes of children, parents and members of the teaching staff in the planning and redesign of play areas, in an attempt to provide the (flat and academic) concept of participation with a dimension in the “real world” that can be physically experienced and intellectually understood by the stakeholders. Based on this experience, they may then develop a culture of participation and implement formalized structures of cooperation at the day care centre. Play area design is therefore meant to provide a training ground for stakeholder models, but also – since it integrates and interlinks spatial concepts, educational activities and children’s playing and learning processes – intended to open up a gateway to the development of a participatory culture in education. (Annex 1)

3.2.1 Research Strategy

The German researchers intended to conduct an “action research project”. Action research aims to induce changes on a primarily practical level, developing solutions for specific problems in specific environments. The insights and results that the German sub-project has been meant to generate are therefore expected to benefit the every-day work of children’s day care centres (their staff, management, and trustees as well as experts / speakers from the area of early childhood education). The idea is to provide professionals in early childhood education with practical and concrete assistance and to support educational institutions, within a temporary and technically limited play area project, in their efforts to develop participatory structures in close coordination with their stakeholders. The fully developed curriculum also features a modular training concept that can be integrated into the training of early childhood education professionals and that provides teachers and lecturers with ideas of how to design appropriate
teaching-learning formats for the formation of professionals. The German project has been conceived as a case study in the context of the German education system and involved the children, parents and educational staff of a Kita that is operated by Caritas Olpe. The Aufwind Kita at Saßmicke provides 45 day care places for children between the ages of 2 and 6 who are allocated to mixed-age, inclusive groups. The national project team also receives support from the Research Institute for Open Space and Playroom Design (the Forschungsstelle für Frei- und Spielraumplanung or FFS at Hohenahr), which is responsible for the organization of planning and construction. The German research team therefore featured the following:

- Children, parents and professional staff of the Aufwind Kita at Saßmicke,
- heads of department and managers of Caritas Olpe,
- architects, landscape engineers and designers of FFS, and
- the project team of the University of Cologne.

3.2.2 Inclusion and Diversity

The Kita’s existing culture of cooperation ensured that the project could be developed and implemented in an inclusion-friendly environment. In the Aufwind Kita at Saßmicke, 22 children without disabilities and 17 children with disabilities (children with special needs) are currently looked after. An interdisciplinary team featuring 8 teachers (some of whom have additional qualifications for teaching children with special needs), a speech therapist, an ergotherapist, a physiotherapist and a kinesitherapist looks after the children. All children and staff groups took part in this project and were involved in different ways in the joint process of play area planning and the participation training courses. The children at the Kita come from a broad mix of social and cultural origins:

- The professional middle classes,
- educationally disadvantaged backgrounds and households below the poverty threshold,
- deprived single-parent families, and
- families with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

For the purposes of the project “A Joint Effort for More Scope of Action”, diversity and heterogeneity represent opportunities. Diversity provides all stakeholders with opportunities to make new experiences and to learn new things, to accept others as they are, to break down stereotypes and prejudices, to allow everyone to discover unfamiliar ways of seeing the world and to develop a culture of learning and living together in the Kita (support of integration/inclusion and inter-cultural competence).

The didactic-methodological concept of the project has therefore been specifically customized to match the needs, the strengths and the development potentials of the individual children, parents and professionals. Against this background, disparities between the individual groups are levelled, and the experience of a common purpose is meant to create a feeling of unity among all stakeholders. The curriculum was developed to take into account the specific skills and competences that are required from the educational professionals who must develop a differentiated approach to this diversity. In the course of the project it also became apparent that the result-oriented and practical approach of the project was particularly capable of involving the fathers of the Kita children, motivating them to take part and to actively participate.
3.3 Needs Analysis: Participation of Children and Parents in German Kitas

As stated in the above, the project was designed to lead to the sustainable development of education and children’s day care in German Kitas. On the other hand, it must also take into account the specific requirements of the cooperating Kita. Therefore, a two-step needs analysis was developed. The needs analysis focused on the subject “Participation of Children and Parents in German Kitas”.

In step one, we wanted to establish the educational policy requirements and current needs of the children’s day care system and its professionals in the country. For this purpose, we analyzed the education plans of the federal states in search of answers to the following questions:

- How is the subject of participation addressed in the education plans? (definition, conceptual frameworks, target groups, educational methods)
- How is participation legally and structurally incorporated?
- Which standards, competencies or procedures should be considered and performed with regard to participation?

In a second step, performed right at the beginning of the project, customized questionnaires (Annex 2 + 3) and semi-structured interviews (Annex 4 + 5) were used to interview parents and professionals about their own definitions of “participation”. It was also established how they believed participation should be integrated into the educational routines of the cooperating Kita. The sample was composed as follows:

- Interviews of educational professionals: N=3 (random selection)
- Interviews of parents: N=3 (random selection)
- Questionnaire for educational professionals: N=12 (participation of all professionals of the facility)
- Questionnaire for parents: N=10 (Questionnaire was distributed to the parents, return approx. 24%)

On top of that, 15 (mainly older) children were interviewed in groups of 5 children about their opportunities to participate in the Kita. Due to the linguistic and cognitive limitations of the children, the interviews revealed no information that could be used or evaluated (see 1.3). It turned out that the subject of participation/involvement was too abstract for the minds of small children which is why these minds had stored nothing that could have been retrieved. The children therefore were in no position to reflect about their opportunities of participating in the system.

3.3.1 Analysis of the Education Plans of the Federal States: Participation in the Kita

The framework agreement of the Federal States (2004) represents an agreement about the principles of the educational work of day-care facilities for children in Germany. The actual details of how such facilities must operate are then filled in by the various education plans on the level of the individual federal states. The framework agreement defines day-care centres as educational institutions with their own profiles and educational methods that must be characterized by the principles of integration and support. The framework agreement identifies aspects “... whose relevance cuts across all curricula and that have the nature of cross-subject
learning objectives’ (2004, 4). They include:

- teaching and encouraging the children how to learn (the skill of learning)
- intercultural education,
- educational work with gender-consciousness, individual support of children with development risks and (impending) disabilities,
- support for children with special talents and
- involving children in decisions that have an impact on their life at school, taking into account the stage of their individual development.

About the participation and the role of the parents, the document says: “Educational professionals and parents share a common responsibility in education and upbringing, and they need to work together as partners. It is very important to engage the parents regularly in discussions about their children and to offer them information and training. When making decisions on important matters that affect the day-care centre, the parents should be involved accordingly” (ibid. 2004, 6). Within the confines of their joint framework agreement, the federal states are free to determine the details and processes of their pre-school education systems, according to what best matches their specific requirements. In the following, we shall set out what provisions the education plans of the individual states make for realizing and implementing participatory concepts.

3.1.1 Participation of Children

All education plans are based on the thought that children are self-active and self-determined actors in the educational process, which must therefore focus on the role of the child as a driving force behind its own development.

“A child discovers, investigates and designs its world and all the things and relationships that belong to this world, through unconventional activities with all its senses right from the first breath. Every child wants to learn and educates itself on its own initiative” (Educational Program of Berlin 2014, 14).

“Children’s day-care centres need to see children as acting subjects in their own educational process, who – through their own skillful actions – construct their own development, education and learning processes, because children strive to conquer their world from the moment they are born. They gain experience, design their world and develop ideas about it” (Recommendations for Education, Rhineland Palatinate 2004, 13).

This concept of “education as self-education/-Bildung”, which is a centrepiece of all education plans, requires the children’s own participation. A successful system of educational support and encouragement requires participation and active involvement. Therefore the plans call for the recognition of children as skillfully acting individuals and for ways of involving them actively into the daily process of education. This philosophy provides the foundation for all education plans, and the idea of actively engaging children in the construction of cooperation schemes as one form of active participation and involvement is implicitly accepted, albeit not explicitly affirmed.

Other education plans advocate the concept of children’s active participation mainly on two grounds: some derive the need for the participation of children from a subject-oriented understanding of education and argue that participation is a crucial key to education. Examples include the following:
• In the Orientation Plan for Education in Baden-Wurttemberg (2011), the Chapter on "Foundations and Objectives of Educational Work" says: “Participation, inclusion, the recognition and high valuation of diversity and the consistent focus on the needs of each child are essential principles of a child-friendly basic education and of the orientation plan” (Chapter 1.1).

• North Rhine-Westphalia treats the idea of children’s participation as a cross-subject learning objective in its plan (see the Chapter on "Education for a Sustainable Development"), describing participation as a fundamental element in the design of educational processes. No details, however, about the methods or about the forms that such a participation might take are provided, and the conceptual framework of the plan is not explained.

• The Education Programme of Berlin (2014) also identifies participation as a dimension of education with relevance for all subjects (see the Chapter on “Education Is Participation and Performance”).

• In the framework of the federal state of Bremen, participation is only briefly mentioned in the Chapter on “Methods of Educational Work”: “….. when planning and implementing educational programmes, it must always be taken into account that children should be actively involved in as many stages as possible” (2004, 36).

• The recommendations for education in the state of Rhineland Palatinate also represent the view that the active participation of children has a firm place in the methodological arsenal of educational work. The chapter on “Independent Learning and Participation of Children” says: “Educational work should be designed in such a way that the children are stimulated to act and to learn independently. Children shall learn to make their own decisions and to be held accountable for their decisions. Through participation in the everyday life of the Kita, children experience key principles of democracy. Participation requires a respectful attitude from the teachers, which needs to be reflected by everyday activities and in particular by their teaching methods such as holding children’s conferences” (2004, 45). Participation is also mentioned in the section on “Establishing Communities and Networks of Relationships” where it is said to strengthen resilience and self-sufficiency. The recommendations of Rhineland-Palatinate state resemble the framework agreement of the states inasmuch as they, too, talk about cross-subject learning objectives, but they fail to treat them as separate dimensions.

Secondly, participation is seen as an imperative that is rooted in a democratic understanding of education (participation as a key to democracy). Examples include the following:

• The Thuringian education plans for children under the age of 10 put the role of participation in a social context. The chapter on "Cultures of Education" calls for the participation of children in two sections, once under the heading "Children’s Rights" and once under "Active Involvement and Co-Determination (Participation)".

• The orientation plan for education in Lower Saxony deals with the issue of participation in its chapter on "Basic Values of a Democratic Society".

• The educational plan of Hessen addresses participation in the context of autonomy and social responsibility (2008, 25). On top of that, an entire chapter is dedicated to the topic "Cooperation and Participation", which demands the participation of children as a logical consequence of a democracy’s perception of itself and which goes on to
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describe numerous skills that children can acquire through the practice of democratic patterns in their everyday world, thus developing their personalities (107).

- In the educational plan of Bavaria (2012) the “principle of democracy” is described as a cross-subject learning objective within fundamental educational principles. “The principle of democracy informs the entire educational process and implies an active pursuit of democratic principles in the world of daily routines. It is based on a culture of encounters that follows democratic principles, and thus it is based on partnership and cooperation” (2012, 22). Furthermore, a chapter with the title “Key Processes for the Quality of Education and Training” deals in detail with the “participation of children in the educational process and the life of educational institutions” (2012, 389ff). Like other education plans, the Bavarian education plan describes the general philosophy of participation, specific educational objectives and participatory elements of educational practice, but it also includes suggestions towards the development of a comprehensive culture of participation.

- The guidelines for the educational mission of Kitas (Schleswig Holstein 2008) focus on the participation of children in the context of power and distribution of power between adults and children and advocate symmetric relations where children need to assume a certain level of responsibility. Like in the framework agreements between the federal states, the topic of “More Participation – Taking Into Account the Relationship Between the Generations” is dealt with in the chapter on “Cross-Subject Learning Objectives in Children’s Day-Care Centres”.

If one considers the totality of the educational plans, there are large quantitative differences (from 8 lines in NRW to approx. 27 pages in Bavaria) with regard to the treatment of the subject “participation”. The degree of detail also varies, with only a few plans providing practical or immediately applicable suggestions of how to implement a participation scheme. Not one of these education plans gives participation the rank of a separate topic: they all treat it as a cross-subject learning objective and as a “supra-ordinate dimension” of the educational process. The participation of children is referred to either in different contexts or with different thematic priorities.

3.1.2 Participation of Parents

A review of the education plans also reveals that the term participation is used almost exclusively in relation to the target group of children. The participation of parents in Kitas is dealt with in separate chapters and under headings such as “Educational Partnership with Parents” (Hessen, Bavaria, Rhineland Palatinate, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania), “Cooperation with Mothers and Fathers” (Schleswig Holstein), “Cooperation with Parents – Educational Partnership” (Thuringia) and “Responsibility for Education – Parents and Families are Experts and Active Partners” (North Rhine-Westphalia). There are hardly any qualitative, only quantitative differences between these plans in the description of the relationships between professionals and parents. While some educational plans describe the relationship between parents and professionals in a fairly detailed way, specifying objectives, principles and practical methods of implementation (Bavaria, Hessen, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania), others restrict themselves to the description of guidelines and fundamental principles (North Rhine Westphalia, Thuringia, Saxony-Anhalt) or focus on a specific topic (Schleswig Holstein: Education and Proactive Educational Policies). The most frequently used word to describe the co-operation between parents and professionals is that of “partnership of education”, and – in respect of the need to support the educational functions of the nursery school – it is said that
the “partnership of teaching ... needs expanding to a partnership of education” (Hessen). Correspondingly, some education plans demand a “partnership of teaching and education” (Baden Württemberg, Rhineland Palatinate) (Hebenstreit 2008, 119). In the different education plans, this partnership is associated with various characteristics, a list which might serve as a description of participation processes or as their general requirements:

- Reciprocal, based on partnership, equal, open, transparent, mutual, active, regular, jointly;
- Cooperation, appreciation, transparency, cooperation, acceptance, awareness, recognition, partner, alliance, sharing, openness, dialogue, respect, encounter at eye level.

Some education plans (Hessen, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Bavaria) furthermore describe different functions of the cooperation between educators and parents. They explicitly describe the parents’ co-determination (Hessen), cooperation/collaboration (Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania) at the Kita and involvement/co-responsibility (Bavaria) of parents in decision-making processes and demand the formal and structural integration of parental involvement into the institutions’ structures. The Educational Program of Berlin (2014, 51) describes participation opportunities of parents as a continuation of the partnership of education on an institutional level and as important building blocks for the development of democratic structures. Lower Saxony’s orientation plan for education (2005, 10) focuses on the involvement and participation of parents as an “Element of Civic Culture”.

While all education plans demand a partnership between professionals and parents and talk about the need to meet each other “on eye-level”, the participation and cooperation with the parents is primarily considered as the task of professional educators.

“In order to promote teaching partnerships and to establish appropriate forms of participation for parents, the professional educators must take the initiative and approach the parents. They issue invitations to parents’ meetings and discussion groups and conduct surveys together with the parent representatives. They speak to the fathers and mothers, always aware of the need to comply with the parents’ family cultures. They also discuss with individual parents which forms of participation would be suitable to their life situation and make appropriate arrangements” (Education Program of Berlin 2014, 51).

Based upon this, some education plans (e.g. Berlin, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania) list the requirements and quality criteria/qualifications that the professional educators must possess.

3.1.3 Conclusion

In principle, the demand for participation can be found in all educational plans. The participation of children and parents is usually addressed independently in separate chapters. With some exceptions (such as the Bavarian educational plan), the relatively general demand for participation as a cross-subject learning objective is phrased in rather sparse, non-specific and theory-driven language, whereas the curricula for individual subjects are described in fine detail and often illustrated with examples. This suggests that participation in the context of early childhood education is considered less important than the educational fields, although a
lasting and serious implementation of participatory methods in Kitas might have broader effects and consequences on education, development and childlike learning. Schweitzer (2010) arrives at similar results in her analysis of four education plans. She notes that it should be critically questioned whether this imbalance can lead to misinterpretations and whether the required concept of participation can be interpreted and practically implemented in this way. It therefore appears, judging from the education plans of the federal states, that the actual implementation of participatory processes in children’s day care centres will always face the difficulty of breaking down a cross-cutting issue to the point where it acquires relevance for the every-day tasks of teaching small children. It therefore is important to deliver more than a mere verbal commitment to the establishment of participation, but also to act and to implement and realize these education plans. It is difficult to say to what precise extent the participation of children is an every-day feature of the educational work in children’s day care centres if all you have to go by are the education plans. (Schweitzer 2010, 41; Rehmann 2010, 48)

With regard to the participation of parents, a similar problem exists. Many education plans describe the theoretical construct of educational partnership rather generally through leitmotifs and basic characteristics. There are only few specific indications for the implementation or methodological and didactic design of this partnership. Furthermore, the terms “participation”, “involvement” or “co-determination” – inasmuch as they are used at all – appear to describe a world where parents and professional educators mainly cooperate in committees and public bodies, leaving little room for any forms and possibilities of a more direct, everyday parental involvement. So far, there are no studies specifically dedicated to the participation of parents. Viernickel et al., however, state that any project and its requirements can only be successfully managed when the need to directly involve families is recognized as equally important as the school education of the children itself (Viernickel et al. 2013, 126). On top of that, the studies of Fröhlich-Gildhoff et al. (2006), Friederich (2011) and Viernickel et al. (2013) have revealed a significant need for an improved cooperation between parents and professional educators, mainly in view of reviewing attitudes and of the methodological skills of the teachers. They argue that this issue needs to be better integrated into teacher training courses, professional development courses and supervision processes. This again demonstrates what we have already seen with the participation of children: that, in order to realize ambitious participation targets, it is not enough to write them down in a mission statement.

3.2 The Needs of the Cooperating Kita: Attitudes Towards and Practices of Participation

After the educational and theoretical obligations and recommendations regarding the participation of children and parents in Kitas have been illustrated (based on the education plans), the qualitative survey of professionals and parents of the Aufwind Kita at Saßmicke is meant to indicate which concepts of participation are predominant in the Kita and how participation is currently practiced and realized in the routine operation of the centre. The results of the quantitative study essentially confirm the findings of the qualitative analysis while providing an additional insight into questions and issues which were not or only partially addressed in the interviews of the respondents. The results of the quantitative analysis cannot be described in detail here, but are available in Annex 6.

Generally, the term “participation” of parents and professionals is described as a process or right
of co-determination, participation and joint responsibility. Sometimes, the term is paraphrased, or alternative terms are used including "to be involved", "to participate in a cause" and "to be heard". Based on the interviews, three main patterns of attitudes and actual practices of participation in the everyday life of the cooperating Kita can be identified:

- A generally critical or ambivalent attitude to participation
- A situational and intuitive involvement of children and parents
- A partial participation on special occasions or in special situations

Here too – similar to the education plans – the attitudes and forms of participation of parents and professionals are addressed in different contexts and with thematic priorities. Statements about a legally binding and structurally embedded participation of children, demanded as a quality standard in the National Action Plan (BMFSFJ 2010 421), are largely absent from the interviews. Institutionalised forms of participation for parents are briefly mentioned, but with little positive and appreciative connotation.

“Generally, no such things like parent’s evenings. Many (..) parents do not attend. We are always glad, specifically (Name) and myself in the small groups, when there are enough people to have a quorum for a parents’ council.” (FK3, 6)

The participation-critical and ambivalent attitude goes along with the fact that the daily lives of children in the Kita is essentially determined by the professionals and also needs to be determined by them from an adult point of view. Although the participation of children is not questioned in general, it is always pointed out that this is only possible in a certain context, within institutional structures and in accordance with rules set by the professionals. Within such a framework, children are given small, simple participation opportunities to develop their personalities. These may be extended depending on the situation, but are generally determined by the professional teachers.

“It is very important that the children can develop freely, that they learn what they really want. But it must also stop somewhere, well, there must be limits. That is clear, but, within their own scope, within what they understand, they should already have a say.” (E1, 4)

“Of course, there are fixed structures and rules, but within those, they are able to make small-scale decisions. (It is important) that one makes it quite clear that there are certain structures, that there is a framework of rules and yes, that there are rules that have to be followed such as simple consideration, social behaviour. But in this framework there are several options to choose, to decide ... Also a say in where I want to play what I want to play, but it is possible in this framework of structures, which are granted, like free spaces ...“ (FK2, 2)

“They can decide, today I wanna do this, I would like to do that. BUT I would never let the reins slip out of my hands completely.” (FK1, 3)

People with critical or ambivalent attitudes argue by pointing out that participation – especially where young children and children with disabilities or development disorders are concerned – is
an unreasonable and excessive demand. They emphasize that the question of how far participation should go causes uncertainty and that the task of giving equal weight to diversity and heterogeneity represents a challenge in the Kita’s everyday life.

“Yes, I think this is DIFFICULT. I find it difficult, because I am not sure, whether I find that GOOD for children or up to WHICH DEGREE I find that ok. Because on the one hand I think that children should not HAVE TO determine so much, as it is not easy for children to make decisions. In the first stage of their lives, they have enough to do with finding themselves, and then to MAKE them decide ... I take a highly critical view of this." (E2, 2)

Disability and developmental disorders are also seen to restrict the potential for participation. In this context, communication skills in particular are described as the basic prerequisites for the participation of children. Not all children have such skills, which can make participation appear more difficult or even unfeasible.

“And when there are children who are able to express themselves WELL and explicitly, and who are as articulate as they are self-assertive, then it is EASY, they make it easy for everybody. But then there are children, where it is more difficult, one has to take care, that (laughs) they do not slip through. (...) Because it can be, that they express that verbally, or a xy (name) expresses his wishes and needs with gestures, or show them like xy (name).... A lot is also just GUESSING, testing. (...) Think about new things and try to (...) find out, where they can bring themselves in at best, what they like, and what they can do in every day-life and WANT to do. So, it is not always easy. For some children it is really DIFFICULT... sometimes you have to SLOW THEM DOWN or PUSH them into the right direction. I think, that this sometimes does NOT look like direct self-determination, but that is what it is meant to be." (FK3, 3)

Another aspect which is seen critically in the context of participation and that may cause ambivalent attitudes is the aspect of time. Professional educators especially point out that participation requires time or time resources. The statements make clear that the wide range of demands and responsibilities of the professionals exceeds the time and the resources provided to initiate and to manage appropriate and customized co-determination and participation processes. On the other hand, it is argued that so much time is needed because child development is a lengthy and time-consuming process, and participation as a first step towards self-responsible, adult lives may take years to develop and to be implemented in practice.

“Often it happens, just when you are under time pressure, or you are poorly staffed, I am sometimes annoyed about myself, that I somehow get involved too much, although I know: if I gave him TIME, he would do it alone. I need ... but at the moment, I mean, I had to take it off him, because I still have this and this and this to do on the list...” (FK3, 5)

“So, for me there are still very large question marks, about what, with regard to the implementation ... that’s a process ... Sometimes, I have children in a group for three years without a major change and after these three years, something developed. Real self-determination at the end of the nursery school period...“ (FK1, 7)
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While the limits of children’s participation will be more likely explained by a lack of children’s
skills and a lack of time structures, the participation of parents seems to depend largely on the
will of the parents to get involved and to participate, to dedicate time. Parental participation is
more often understood – by parents as well as by professional educators – as an active process
of participation and active involvement than it is criticized for being insufficient in scale.
Frequently cited reasons for a lack of parental involvement include the parents’ (apparent) lack
of interest, anxiety, stress and “too much work already”.

“So what I find basically beautiful is when parents ARE once involved, because I think
that’s a little bit sad that it is, as I see it, often too little. Maybe also because many
parents are not necessarily all that interested. I would appreciate it if one could force
them for their own good, so that they become more aware of everything.” (E3, 4)

“I think they always say that’s very important, but when it COMES DOWN TO IT, it is
but then / it fails due to many framework conditions ... then they want to decide as
much as possible, if possible, but sometimes it is fear, sometimes boredom,
unwillingness, stress of everyday life... Maybe it is important to sit in the same boat
more often. (FK2, 5)

When asked for examples of child participation in everyday life, the parents and professional
educators described events and activities in which professionals had given children in certain
situations the opportunity to determine – individually or collectively – important topics that
they wanted to talk about and on which they wanted to arrive at some sort of common
decision. This included mainly opportunities to express oneself in play situations, to help design
the rules for joint activities (e.g. breakfast) and to take a stand in issues about spatial and other
arrangements; but always within confines, basic rules and regulations having been determined
by the professional educators. In contexts of situationally/intuitively granted participation
(self- and co-determination) in educationally framed everyday situations, professional
educators recognize their educational responsibility and maintain their authority in the event
that the child does not head into the direction which they believe is the correct one.

“...What they are trying to put together / what they are playing now and so on. It’s
clear that they shall determine it themselves. Of course, sometimes games must be
played under guidance or in a circle of chairs. Where they arrive after, well, having
received some guidance.” (E1, 4)

“Have a say in chair circles, what do we do, how could it look like now. To remodel
corners of activity. Three years ago, we redesigned these corners a bit ... playtime
opportunities within the group. (...) Determination of game themes, too. So depending
on where it is going...and yes they determine then, where it goes and you ask them, tell
me about it, what could you play. In that sense, by simply taking up their interests. The
children tell somebody something and thus determine their subject or what has just
happened in our group.” (FK2, 3)
The frames set by professionals reflect their normative ideas, their educational goals or the structures of the everyday organization of the institution. In principle, the professional teachers are certainly aware that an involvement of children into decision-making processes has the potential of stimulating the development and self-education of the children.

“I believe that it gives him a lot of security because the things he can do constantly repeat themselves. And when he gets an assignment, that also makes him confident, that somebody apparently thinks he is capable of doing it. Well, I think that he likes it. He is always very proud and (laughs) happy.” (E3, 4)

“I think this is important because when they REALIZE that they can decide a lot by themselves, they become more independent. So that / (...) The more they can make on their own, and also give them their free space, and sometimes allow for mistakes, that’s totally okay ... (...) the better they can estimate things themselves, make decisions and defend their opinions.” (FK3, 4)

Nevertheless, opportunities for self- and co-determination are only granted spontaneously, depending on the situation and intuitively, i.e. not in accordance with established rules.

“And how that looks in detail, I decide very often, I think, according to INSTINCT, so: Do I give a child the chance to do as he or she wishes, for example, in a conflict, do I let them settle it by themselves? Or do I step in? Or I let children determine on their own where they play, or do I make suggestions, or do I even perhaps say “Do that now exactly as I tell you!” That depends highly on the situation and again is related to the child, which is then again subjective: What do I trust him to do? And what I know, what that specific child can do.” (FK3, 1)

Other statements reveal that the level on which participation is granted in the Aufwind Kita is actually rather low and that both parents and children mistake “pseudo-participatory” practices for the “real thing”. Some statements reveal an understanding of participation as “taking part” and “joining in”. Participation is all about the opportunity of doing things self-responsibly. This attitude does not per se include the possibility of making one’s own decisions or to have a say in group decisions. Parents also defined participation as information, consultation and mutual exchange. These stages are indeed important prerequisites, but they do not serve as sufficient criteria for high-quality or high-level participation. Neither do they represent viable forms of practiced participation.

“...So, I have the feeling that (...) the children are well integrated into the processes ... That he simply well, yes, he assists. Be it in the washroom while brushing his teeth, that he knows where his towel is. Where any of these things belong to or when the food is being prepared, that the kids set the table and even get a cloth in their hands at the end. An older child may wipe tables, for example, or put the chairs back to where they belong. What I also find very nice, is that they carry out the work, and it really does not matter whether there is still a grain of rice left, what counts is the fact that the child do it.” (E2, 3)

“... Yes. So that someone is getting involved just a little bit. Partly maybe TO HAVE a say, if you want. And, of course, to get informed even when things are about to happen
that could have been otherwise swept under the carpet." (E2, 1)

As a third pattern, partial forms of participation are mentioned in the interview statements. These are used in the cooperating Kita on special occasions and in special situations when they are gradually developed further to become structurally embedded forms of participation. Partial participation allows children and parents to propose options, wishes and requirements that go beyond the daily routines and to assist in the design of common projects and activities such as celebrations, games or other exercises in the phase of settling in (familiarizing).

“There are also, I think, as I have not been involved in it for a quite a long time, yes, kindergarten festivals, potato festivals, festivals of the friends of the institution, summer festivals, lantern crafting, afternoon singing. So, I guess, there are opportunities for parents to get involved.” (FK1, 5)

“I also liked the FAMILIARIZING, as I could attain it in a quite flexible way. There already we have already been HEAVILY involved, up to this point ... I have accompanied xy (name of child) and in doing so I have also witnessed how they do that. And they were flexible, as xy (name of child) could not separate from me after two or three days. So they extended the period with regard to the child. And I could also have continued it, but then I eventually said that we move rather backwards, maybe it’s just too early for the child. But that was always in close consultation with me, what is good for the child, what makes sense, and not whipping out a paper called The Berlin Model, page three, so-and-so many days have elapsed (laughter), now you must go.” (E2, 7)

Parents and professional teachers agreed that events relating to disability, therapy and inclusion were particularly important for the implementation of partial participation. Their statements show that the professional educators deal with these topics intensively and try to provide a wide range of participation opportunities especially for the parents.

“I am invited to the therapeutic appointments with respect to xy (name of child) where I SHALL also take part. I think that is a good idea ... There’s an extra note which was given to xy (name of child) that I can join the therapy that she receives, I think once a month... thus, I learn it a bit, because I’ve also previously accompanied her all the time. Those are the first points of contact that I had experienced here. (E2, 6)

“Now we also have many taxi children with me in the group. It is then just nice if ... We have these note booklets, we make entries every DAY, and the parents can, if they want ... well, they can play a part, I think, in a really easy way.” (FK3, 6)

This particular willingness to make considerations for the specific situations of children with disabilities and their families is very positively assessed by the parents and presented in an appreciative manner. In the view of the parents, this form of partial participation is a way of “practicing” inclusion which enables the children to participate in life.
“... And what I find really great about xy (Name of a child), and what I really noticed about xy (name of child), is that she is involved in everything. She does not have the physical requirements, because of her age. But she is involved in everything. So if it’s time to eat, then xy (name of child) goes there, xy (Name of a child) is allowed to sleep when she is tired, she plays just normally with all the children, no matter how old the children are or what her options are. She is pushed in a pram when they play outdoors, for example. She becomes involved EVERYWHERE, EVEN at occasions where one might first think, yes, yes, she cannot do that at all. And I find that REALLY really good.” (E2, 3)

“Yes for my daughter that means perhaps even more than for a healthy child, because she, I guess, has often been rejected in the course of her life or maybe even pushed to the background. Yes, and for xy (name of child), this means, regaining the ability to participate in normal life.” (E2, 4)

As a summary it can be said that it is indeed known what participation should deliver, but that the term is mostly defined by its restrictions or its limitation to certain activities and areas of participation. The critical/ambivalent attitude towards participation expressed by many interviewees and the fact that situational participation and participation opportunities on special occasions are restricted by the rules and educational principles of professional educators show that “participation” in the cooperating Kita is still understood as “taking part” in activities that are offered by the staff. Although the contextual frameworks of a stimulation of self-education, the learning of democratic patterns of behaviour and participation are largely (or totally) ignored, the professionals exhibit good intentions towards the development and the education of the children and cooperation with the parents. In view of the development and inclusion awareness targets of their education, the children are provided with spaces in which they can develop self-sufficiency and responsibility in the framing of joint decisions, while their parents are encouraged to involve themselves in the life of the Kita. Nevertheless, the facility lacks legally and organizationally entrenched structures of participation for children; existing bodies where parents could raise their voices are underused and hardly provide serious options of participation.

3.3 Conclusions

Based on the UN Convention on the Rights of Children which regulates the participation rights on an international level (German National Committee for UNICEF 2001), children’s rights in Germany are specified by the German Constitution, the Civil Code and the Child and Youth Welfare Act (Hansen et al. 2011 S.47ff). Additionally, regulations for day-care centres, municipal statutes and education plans of the federal states enshrine consultation and participation requirements of children and parents. The results of the needs assessment make it clear, however, that – even if the legal requirements for participation processes in educational institutions are clear and participation has been agreed to represent an objective of a modern education – the Kita under review has not (yet) fully implemented this agenda. The results of the interviews with parents and professionals corroborate the criticism expressed by Schweitzer (2010) that education plans are too abstract in design and of little help in practice to bring down
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the concept of participation from the heights of academia down to the level where the actual education of children takes place (Schweitzer 2010 41). The still predominant critical attitude and a lack of a structurally embedded culture of participation at the participating Kita demonstrate the need of developing concepts that are ready to be implemented and that can control participation processes.

In respect of the children’s and young people’s right of participation, the National Action Plan says that children must have the possibility “... of making their interests known as well as their desires, hopes, fears and problems wherever their concerns are involved. Therefore (...) the National Action Plan proposes instruments for the effective participation of children and adolescents. The development of quality standards for participation and the embedding of children’s rights and participation rights in education plans, training and study regulations and in specific professional development courses for professional educators should be emphasized.” (BMFSFJ (nd), 5) The German Signals project has been designed to develop and implement a curriculum that can be integrated into existing training and professional development modules and that will allow the establishment of a “culture of participation” in children’s day care centres.

3.4 National Curriculum for the Development of a Joint Culture of Participation in Kitas

The German curriculum “A Joint Effort for More Scope of Action” not only focuses on themes, contents and objectives for the participation of parents and children in Kitas: it also combines the cross-subject learning objective of participation with aspects and elements of modern play area designs in Kitas. The curriculum pursues two objectives:

1. Redesign and improvement of play, exercise and meeting spaces (indoor and outdoor spaces) of the educational facility;
2. Improvement of the opportunities for participation of children and parents, and the implementation of a culture of participation in the facility.

Play area design has been selected as a field where participation models can be rolled out and tested. It also provides an ideal gateway to a participatory educational philosophy by integrating and interlinking spatial concepts, educational activities and children’s playing and learning experiences. The following explanations describe the assumptions and principles of the curriculum, explaining the structure as well as the realisation and implementation of the curriculum in the educational practice.

3.4.1 Basic Assumption and Structure of the Curriculum

The curriculum is based on the fundamental assumption that participation is more than just a subject or element within the educational process. Participation as a cross-subject learning objective of early-childhood education represents more of a professional attitude. Human beliefs and actions in the field of education are not only influenced by professional skills and personal competencies but also by individual biographies and social environments, moral concepts and attitudes. Attitudes – conscious as well as unconscious structures of perception, subjective frameworks and idiosyncratic “models of reality” – influence the process of implementing
knowledge, skills, social skills and self-competence into action (Schneider et al. 2015, 69f). This means that the selection of subjects and forms of participation as well as the methods of converting them into action are generally determined by the attitude of the educators who are involved. External mediations or the implementation of specific participation methods would therefore be insufficiently thorough. Only a change in the attitudes of the professional teachers and the introduction of new ways of understanding participation can have a really profound impact and pave the way towards educational processes that put the emphasis on participation. According to Schache (2012), educational philosophies are not the product of a short-term adoption or of a deliberately intentional process. “They have grown, depend on knowledge and have been refined in practice” (Schache 2012).

Annex 7

In order to influence the attitude of professional educators towards participation in a sustainable way in favour of a participatory educational philosophy and to strengthen their competence for participatory action, it seemed to be necessary to develop a curriculum structure that takes into account and unites the two dimensions that derive from the notion of attitude: knowledge and experience. It was also very important for the German team to integrate children and parents as further target groups into the curriculum. The development of a participatory integration culture requires the integration and further development of all participants. Based upon these assumptions, we established the following 2-column structure:
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Figure 1: Structure of the Curriculum

The first column of the curriculum is oriented towards (self)experience, i.e. the primary target of all teaching-learning formats (workshops, etc.) is to provide new participation experiences and action spaces for all target groups involved (children, parents and professional educators). In joint interaction processes, participation should be personally experienced in a positive way. In order to allow such experiences and to make them happen, a joint Play Area Project is initiated first to prepare the structural embedding of the children’s and parents’ rights.

The project-oriented approach in the Signals curriculum is based on the insight that a participatory approach for the implementation of participation processes is essential. “Participation cannot be reduced to a mere surface phenomenon. It is not a strategy that can be adopted at will, independently from one’s core convictions and attitudes. A participation-focused approach requires the wholehearted commitment of the professional. Attitudes can only be changed through an intense involvement on an every-day level, characterized by an alternation between supervised experience and reflection” (Hansen et al. 2011b, 48). Experience-oriented participation projects are the perfect “entry-level” projects. They enable the participants to deal with a clearly defined subject within a clearly defined time frame, and most of these projects end with the development of a finished product. Within the manageable project frame, participation allows all stakeholders to acquire first-hand experiences that can later be put to good use in the project’s downstream stages. Although children, parents and educational professionals are equally involved in the play area design within the Signals project, the professional teachers were given a dominant status/role in the first column of the curriculum. In order to implement sustainable participation processes into educational practice, i.e. to extend their effect beyond the Play Area Project, professional educators must gain individual experiences with the integration and participation of children and parents. The activities and workshops for the play area planning with children and parents are run autonomously by the professionals, but are professionally controlled and supervised. The results and experiences gained in the Play Area Project are used, on the one hand, for the redesign and new design of the rooms, while the experiences provide, on the other hand, an important foundation for the professional development and conceptual consulting of the educators, thus ensuring the conceptual link between the two curriculum columns.

The second column is knowledge- and skills-oriented and focuses on the required professional and personal skills of the professional teachers as well as on their professional attitude towards participation. The Participation Training and Conceptual Consulting embedded in this part of the curriculum aims at the professionalization of the staff with regard to their participation skills and meets a requirement from the quality standards for the participation of children and adolescents (MFSFJ undated). This is what it has to say about the attitude and skills of the professional educators: “Participation can only succeed if the educators show that they respect the children. This requires the educators to reflect upon their own view of human beings and its relevance for educational acts”. And: “Participation can only succeed if the educators have the proper methodological skills” (BMFSJ undated, 17). Even Hansen et al. (2009, 48) refer to the necessity of methodological skills, while Rehmann (2010, 51) concludes in her master’s thesis: “Participation requires democratic knowledge (theoretical and methodological), participation-
oriented skills and a respectful attitude”.

In order to distinguish it from other professional development concepts, two particularities of this curriculum should be pointed out. First of all, the professional development of the professional teachers not only covers the acquisition of participation-relevant skills. The close interaction between “participation” and “play area design” also allows the discussion of selected educational concepts and of didactic forms and methods of a participatory childhood education. As these contents are transmitted, discussed and integrated into a team process, adapted to the development and requirements of the Kita, a conceptual consulting is explicitly part of the second column. The second distinguishing feature concerns the participation of parents. On top of the direct participation at the Play Area Project, the participation of parents is considered equivalent to the participation of children, and the cooperation of parents is a topic of its own in professional development courses of teaching-learning units.

3.4.2 Principles of the Curriculum

The principles of the curriculum are described in Annex 8. They illustrate the basic orientation of the curriculum and should be understood as integral features of all activities, workshops, units for professional development, exchanges, discussions and planning rounds.

3.4.3 Modules and Contents of the Curriculum

“Quality in the development of children and adolescents has various dimensions: It is based on the targets and realisation strategies (concept quality), on the design of the interaction between the participants (process quality), the framework conditions (structural quality) as well as the handling of results (result quality) and the enabling of personal benefit (benefit quality) in terms of the experiences of the subjects” (BMFSFJ 2010, 8). The curriculum “A Joint Effort for More Scope of Action” strives to achieve processes of change in all dimensions, adapting its overall structure to comply with the quality criteria of the Federal Department for Family, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (2010) that apply to all participation processes. The specific quality standards for participation in Kitas are particularly relevant for the module structure of the column “Participation Training and Conceptual Consulting”. They describe the features, opportunities and challenges of the field and specify what the professional educators must deliver in respect of the following three aspects:

- Attitudes of adults: Participation can only succeed if the educators show that they respect the children. This requires the educators to reflect upon their own view of human beings and its relevance for educational acts.
- Structural embedding of participation: If the principle of participation is embedded in a “constitution” for the day-care centre, or if it is implemented by introducing conferences or children’s parliaments, the children learn that they have rights of their own.
- Participation skills of adults: Participation can only succeed if the educators have the proper methodological skills. (BMFSFJ 2010, 17)
Therefore, participation in Kindertagesstätten requires

- That the professionals clarify their understanding of participation and their idea of how they want to shape educational relations.
- That they reflect on the balance of power in the Kita.
- That they communicate with children, parents and each other respectfully.
- That they clarify the rights of children and parents at the facility.
- That they create structures in which children and parents can exercise their rights.
- That they support the children and parents in the exercise of their rights.
- That they tell the children, parents and others what rights they have and make participation visible.
- That the professionals inform and involve the parents.
- That the participation structures and processes reflect and evolve in close cooperation with the children and parents.
- That the professionals have the necessary skills (through training, coaching, counseling, etc.).
- That professionals have the necessary resources in time, staff, scope of action. (BMFSFJ 2010 19)

The curriculum meets these requirements through the modules and contents described for the realisation of participation in Kitas.

The second methodological orientation structure of the curriculum modules is dedicated to the process for the planning and execution of participatory projects developed by Regner and Schubert-Suffrian (2011). As this process can facilitate the realisation of projects (2011, 36), the individual steps described here and the steps of participation defined with reference to Schröder (1995), Hart (1992) and Gernert (1993) determine the modular structure of the first column. The individual modules have been specifically designed for the topic of play area design in Kitas. Practical examples for applications (Annex 9) give an insight into the contents of the modules and the methodological approach of the German Signals project.

3.4.3.1 Column 1: Modules of the Play Area Project

Receiving information – Preparing the ground/warm-up: Depending on the party that seize the initiative, three different methods of selecting issues for a possible participation of children and parents can be distinguished – top-down issues, eye-to-eye issues, and bottom-up issues. Since the issue of the Signals project (play area design) is a top-down issue – the idea had been proposed by the organization that runs the centre and its members of staff – it was all the more important to provide professionals, parents and children with information right from the start of the project and to prepare the ground for their involvement. One objective of the project was to comply with the principles of openness, information and transparency, all the way from the start of the project to its completion, in order to ensure the full integration and involvement of all stakeholders.

Getting a hearing - Taking stock of existent views: At this stage, the predominant objective is to determine what views children, parents and professionals are holding of the current state
of affairs and how they feel about it, so that a foundation for the further course of the project can be established. It has proved useful to record positive as well as negative perceptions and opinions (Regner/Schubert-Suffrian 2011, 37). Such an exercise of taking stock of existing views serves to reveal a wide range of ideas and opinions and creates space for important democratic and social learning processes. Stakeholders will, for example, be compelled to engage with opposite points of view and to defend their own opinions.

**Getting a hearing - Firing the imagination:** In this stage, all stakeholders are encouraged to give free rein to their imagination and to jointly develop new ideas for spatial concepts. The Signals project demonstrated that the opening of new conceptual horizons is of essential importance, since many of the initial suggestions of children, parents and even teachers merely reflected their respective backgrounds of experience and provided little on which to develop innovative (spatial) design concepts.

**Getting a hearing – Brainstorming:** Once all stakeholders (target groups) have developed a notion of what is possible and once they have expressed their wishes and suggestions, all of these ideas must be gathered and conflated. It is important to accept all ideas at this stage of the proceedings, without grading them in any way or checking them for their feasibility.

**Getting a hearing – Turning ideas into detailed proposals and plans:** In the subsequent stage, the ideas of the individual stakeholder groups must be converted into more detailed proposals and, perhaps, pooled or sorted.

**Co-determination – Arriving together at decisions:** Before ideas can be implemented, it is generally necessary to give certain ideas priority over other ideas. This can happen through mutual agreement or a vote. For children, an introduction into the principle of majority voting and the selection of appropriate voting procedures is of particular importance.

**Joint Realisation and Implementation:** When all decisions are made, the last step of the participation project to follow is the joint realization and implementation of the project plan with all participating target groups. A participatory implementation expands both the experience and the participation competence participation of children, parents and professionals. The practical experience of participation and joint working and acting can promote togetherness and solidarity with the project and its stakeholders as well as social and communicative and democratic skills. A visualization of the temporal sequences may be useful especially for long-term projects.

3.4.3.2 Column 2: Modules of the Participation Training and Conception Consulting

**Familiarization with/Approach to a participatory educational philosophy:** In this module, the initial priority is to deal with the fundamentals (definitions, steps, forms) of participation and to develop a common understanding of the word “participation”. A look into the legal requirements shall make clear that children and parents are entitled to have a say in decisions about matters that affect them. The inextricably linked concepts of education and participation are discussed in the light of the educational objectives of participation. In this context, spatial and conceptual inputs and reflections are also part of the training. The experts explore the question which spatial-material and organisational-structural conditions have an impact on the possibilities of involving children and parents and which interactions exist.
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between play area design in the facility and their educational work. Ultimately, the
professionals acquire the skills that are required for planning the play area project by
familiarizing themselves with various approaches of implementing a regulated participation
culture.

**Methodological Qualification of Professionals:** This part of the professional development
course focuses on fundamental participatory didactics and provides the professionals with the
methodological skills required to develop and implement a participatory educational
philosophy. On the one hand, concepts of early education are discussed such as “open work”,
workshops and project work. On the other hand, the professional educators learn about
moderation and visualization techniques and processes for the formation of opinion and
coordination and how to use them to deal respectfully and considerately with children and
parents. Strategies of cooperating successfully with parents, team work and networking will
also be addressed.

**Transparency & Clarity in the Team:** This module aims to clarify what the professional
educators mean when they talk about participation in the Kita and which hopes and fears they
associate with this concept. The educators are meant to reflect on their own experiences with
participation, to think critically about the distribution of power between educational
professionals and children and to redefine their own role as “experts” in the field. "Participation
can be experienced if the team clearly states: What can children decide in our facility and what
not? Addressing this question usually leads to intense discussions and also makes it clear that
participation raises both fears and hopes. The team should agree a common understanding on
key issues. The areas in which different teams provide children with a voice may also be
different. What is important is that children are given any voice and any such rights at all”
(BMFSJ 2010 17). Further clarification within the team is needed with respect to the creation of
the new spatial concept, the future use of space/organization as well as the responsibilities and
tasks within the team. During the reorganization of the play areas, various change processes are
triggered. Training and conceptual advice offer the necessary framework for the understanding
within the team.

**Development of Participatory Structures:** In this module, different ways of embedding
participation into organizational structures are discussed. The aim of the module is to create a
team consensus about the bodies that need to be installed and about the procedures of any
future participation arrangements at the facility. They should also agree on the need to write a
constitution or a similar document to fix the rights of both children and parents as well as the
participation and decision-making structures. Particular emphasis will be placed on the new
participation and self-determination opportunities of children and parents that result from the
need to redesign the spatial concept.

**Distribution of Information & Dissemination:** “Participation needs publicity, initially within
the facility. The children need to know when the delegates’ conference meets or what issues are
to be decided. Documentation, reports, photos, etc. provide information not only to the parents
but also to visitors of the Kita" (BMFSFJ 2010 17). This module is intended to enable educational professionals to implement participatory bodies and forms of participation in the Kita and to make people outside the Kita aware of their existence. Suitable methods of achieving this objective will be presented, and facility-specific strategies for disseminating information will be developed.

3.4.4 Implementation of the Curriculum

Several workshops were held to assist the implementation of the curriculum, to which the parties were invited whenever it was felt that further instruction was needed (no regular rhythm or fixed dates). Both, target-group specific and cross-group activities were offered. At the beginning of the project, workshops for the preparation of the play area project and the planning of the new spatial concept were prioritized. New participation structures were introduced during the trial runs of participatory methods within the scope of the play area project, creating the basis for a further qualification of professional educators. The professional development activities and conceptual discussions therefore increased significantly as the project moved into its later stages. Due to the close link between the play area project and the concept of participation, the modules and contents of the two columns were not processed subsequently but in close interaction with one another. As a consequence, any single workshop might easily have discussed results and experiences from different modules. The module structure is therefore not the same as the sum of all implementation activities. The curriculum includes workshops that have been prepared, conducted and moderated by the responsible project worker as well as practical activities and workshops that have been independently organized by the professional educators. It is therefore not possible to say exactly how many workshops were completed under the project. The workshops and activities with children and parents usually took 2-3 hours to complete; the workshops, the days set aside for conceptual discussions and the interdisciplinary exchange meetings with professionals lasted between 2 and 8 hours. Altogether, the following methods were used for the implementation:

- Self-experience and participation opportunities for all target groups
- Self-responsible educational activities of all professional educators in an educational context
- Reflection, exchange and settlement processes within and between the participating groups
- Counselling and professional development courses for the professional educators

3.5 Conclusion – Summary

The realization and implementation of the curriculum has been continually evaluated throughout the process and adapted to current needs and conditions. Since the monitoring and co-operation with the Aufwind Kita at Saßmiche will be continued beyond the completion of the Signals project, additional effects can be reviewed at a later date, e.g. with regard to the sustainability of the implementation measures carried out. The already initiated development processes and changes made with respect to interior design, conceptual development in the team and participation culture clearly speak for the efficiency and effectiveness of the structure of the developed curriculum and didactics.
Dissemination & Sustainability: The national curriculum was developed and implemented under the terms of a pilot project that was carried out in an institution run by a major German non-profit association. The involvement of cross-facility working groups in the implementation of the curriculum and the internal networking structures of the non-profit association increase the probability of “band wagon effects” and of similar processes that favour the wider dissemination of a participatory educational philosophy across all Caritas institutions.

In addition to the already published publications and lectures on individual steps and results of the project (see Homepage), the curriculum and further results of the project will be applied and distributed through the following activities and measures:

- Selected modules of the education plan were already tested in the course of the project at the university education of Masters’ students of the University of Cologne (Degree program: Early Childhood). These will be made available from WS 2016/2017 in the form of a regular semester event and implemented in appropriate teaching modules. The education plan can therefore be recommended for the design of training and qualification modules in courses at colleges and universities.

- The research team from the University of Cologne will offer training / professional development / in-house training courses about participation as well as monitoring services for participatory play room projects even after the project has been completed (at request). Professional development courses on these topics are already available in various educational institutions.

- Programmes and strategies of the education plan as well as further professional contributions about “play area design” and participation are published by a team of researchers of the University of Cologne in cooperation with the research office for leisure and playing space planning 2016 of the Ministère de l’Éducation nationale, de l’Enfance et de la Jeunesse (Luxembourg). The 80-page brochure is addressed at professionals in early childhood education and intends to make a contribution to the introduction of participatory structures and an adequate, child-friendly concept of educational space for the schools and educational institutions in Luxembourg. It is currently being discussed if and to what extent professional training and development courses and consultancy services may be offered to support and complement similar projects at Luxembourg’s institutions.

- The questionnaires for parents and professionals developed for German-speaking countries provide the first opportunity of analyzing existing participation structures in day-care facilities for children. They provide professional educators, management, school associations and speakers with information about the areas where children and parents are involved, how often this occurs and what forms of participation are already an integral part of the educational work of the institution. They also reveal any need for intervention or discussion. The questionnaires are available on the Signals homepage and will also be distributed through academic journals in 2016.

- The results and best practice examples of the German project remain available on the Signals homepage (www.signals-eu.com); the link from the homepage of the University of Cologne to the Signals project will also remain active.

- Annex 10 + 11
**European added value**: The cooperation between 7 European partner countries has proved very rewarding. In discussions among colleagues, the different situations and processes of democratization of the various countries and the resulting challenges to the respective educational systems could be addressed and dealt with in a productive way. Firstly, this encouraged each country to look at ways of paving the way for the participation of children and parents while extending the framework in which national results are interpreted. The exchange of experiences about research activities was highly useful for the design and implementation of the national project, and so were the acquisition of new perspectives and the best practice examples of the partner countries. And secondly, the experience of diversity and the international dimension of the Signals project made it possible to establish common routes and milestones towards the design of a European educational system with a higher quality of participation and to embed this agreement into the domestic projects.
CHAPTER III: A JOINT EFFORT FOR MORE SCOPE OF ACTION:
PLAY AREA DESIGN - THE GATEWAY TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CULTURE OF
PARTICIPATION IN “KINDERTAGESSTÄTTERN”

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### The didactical basis of health education

by Anders Skriver Jensen, Stig Broström & Ole Henrik Hansen

#### The early childhood system in Denmark

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of children</th>
<th>About &lt;1 to 5 years old</th>
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<td>Regulation and administration of early childhood services</td>
<td>• Preschools, 1 to 5 years old</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Infant (toddler) institutions 0-3 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Family day care 0-3 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Preschools, 2,10 to &gt;5 years old</td>
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<td>Ministry of Children and Education</td>
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<td>Operational responsibility at local level</td>
<td>Offices within the municipalities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do national or regional curricula or guidelines exist</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do the curricula include guidelines concerning transitions or continuity</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Length and level of initial training of lead staff and assistant staff</td>
<td>3 ½ years university college education for preschool teachers (BA degree)</td>
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4.1 Abstract

The study of values in education has remained rather underdeveloped in Denmark. In this context, values are principles that guide human action and judgements of whether actions are good or undesirable. Values are also connected to the choice of educational content. Besides content formulated in the Danish national curriculum (language, social competences, aesthetics knowledge and skills, physical and motor skills plus knowledge on nature and science) a number of educational themes are also expressed in interaction between children and preschool teachers, such as health and a healthy living, peace and freedom, ecological and sustainability development, which Klafki (2001) names epoch typical themes. In the SIGNALS projective we have focused on health values communicated by the preschool teachers during the everyday life. Both health values are related to what we eat and how children protect themselves from illness. The study has a didactical dimension, which means that the four values (democratic caring, disciplinary and health values) are considered to belong in the teaching curricula. The project ends up with ideas which can be helpful for preschool teachers to define, argue for and formulate value education aims and objectives, and conduct, document and evaluate the pedagogical efforts in this domain.

4.2 Introduction

This chapter presents a knowledge-based model for pedagogical reflection, which should be useful for pedagogues in their work with health education. Day-care health education comprises theory and practice of both formal and informal activities aimed to teach the children health-related issues, and to give them new competences. Health is defined positively, meaning that health is more than merely the absence of illness; it also includes both physical, mental and social quality of life and overall well-being (WHO, 1946). The children described in the article are 0-5 years of age.

The approach of this chapter is didactical, which means that health is considered to belong in the teaching plans (also referred to as curricula). Pedagogues must define, argue for and formulate health education aims and objectives, and conduct, document and evaluate the pedagogical efforts in this domain.

A teaching plan is a physical document, in which the pedagogues describe aims and contents of their planned activities. This chapter does not provide specific directions on how to produce a teaching plan but does provide concepts and questions for reflection in the work with teaching plans. The inspiration for the model derives from the SIGNALS EU project. SIGNALS is the abbreviation of the Comenius project (Strengthening Activity-Oriented Interaction and Growth in the Early Years and in Transition) funded by the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Union. Seven partners participate in the project, mainly universities, from Germany, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Romania, Sweden and Iceland. The projects are different between countries and they choose a variety of ways to implement them. The children in the Danish project were 3 to 5 years of age and the project were planned as an action research project. Together with SIGNALS this article include data from the Danish action research project (BiC) Barnet i Centrum [trans: The Child in the Centre]. In this project the children in focus were 0-3 years of age and the aim were to develop relevant pedagogical theory and practice concerning different educational themes: Didactic (Bildung), closeness and relatedness.

In an effort to encourage health educational reflection, this chapter presents different answers to questions such as:
4.3 Theoretical outsets: Working with teaching plans

What are the outsets for the pedagogues when they produce teaching plans and conduct their practice? Inspired by Print (1993), we operate with four distinct didactical outsets, while recognising that they are very often intertwined in daily practice. Each outset is presented in brief below. All four focuses on learning, but while some connect learning to open processes such as comprehensive personal development and formation (‘Bildung’), others emphasise well-
defined learning objectives. What impact does this have on health education in day-care?

- **The Disciplinary outset:** As the name implies, this outset emphasises the topics and disciplines of academia as the outset for the teaching plans (see fig. 2 below). The (distinctions between) disciplines should be adapted to, and applied in, day-care. Knowledge and competences from each discipline should be the aims with the child’s learning. This does not necessarily imply that disciplinary knowledge should be ‘imparted on’ the children: Contemporary didactics often describe the child’s learning as an active process of interpretation and construction.
  - Key words: The child’s acquisition of disciplinary knowledge.

- **The Technical outset:** Unlike the disciplinary outset, the technical outset is based on behavioural psychology, i.e., on studies of behaviour among humans and animals. Our behaviour comprises everything we say and do, and can therefore be observed (and measured). Technical pedagogy aims to influence the child to make he/she change behaviour. Technical pedagogues use methods and concepts that ‘work’.
  - Key words: Measurable objectives and readily applicable means.

- **The Humanistic outset:** This concept refers to a cultural and scientific aim to place the individual at the centre of attention. Humanistic psychology applies a comprehensive view on man, and considers questions about identity and existence (e.g. “Who am I?”) to be part of any teaching process (Bühler & Allen, 1973). From this outset, knowledge and competences are subordinate to a versatile personal development (formation/Bildung), and is therefore distinct from the two preceding outsets. The humanistic pedagogue embraces the notion of an active and constructing child, but, as mentioned, prioritises the whole person over both disciplinary knowledge and cognitive skills.
  - Key words: Formation and identity.

- **The Critical outset:** This outset, which sometimes fall under the heading of ‘progressive education’ (Kampmann, 2013), is partly based on critical theory; an academic approach that questions societal suppression and inequality. The outset emphasises how work with the teaching plans must contribute to the formation of a setting based on solidarity and equality, in which children and pedagogues together may explore societal challenges such as sustainability and inequality. Solidarity implies an effort to help weak or at-risk groups and individuals, and a critical pedagogical concept of formation aims to prepare the children to think in terms of solidarity and action (so-called ‘critical awareness’). Both in terms of the focus on formation and in several other ways, the critical outset overlaps with the humanistic, but is rather more focused on solidarity agency in relation to contemporary societal challenges.
CHAPTER IV: THE DIDACTICAL BASIS OF HEALTH EDUCATION

Key words: Formation and critical awareness.

4.3.1 Needs analysis: Questions for reflection on the four outsets

• What/which outset(s) do you identify with the most, and why?
• What/which outset(s) do you think would be best to define health education, and to work with health as a specific topic or issue?

4.3.2 The didactic rectangle

Broström (2009) introduces the didactical rectangle. This model comprises four key elements that must be taken into consideration in the planning and conduction of pedagogy in day-care. Thus, the model is useful as a means to organise the work with teaching plans.

![Figure 1. The didactic rectangle](image)

- Content refers to the topic, subjects and themes that children and adults work with together.
- The pedagogue must reflect on the contents in relation to aims and objectives for the pedagogical practice, and select, plan and conduct courses and evaluate them.
- The child participates in, and contributes to, everyday life in the institution.
- The composition of the community of children can vary. Usually, the child will be part of a specific group (e.g. 'The Strawberries'), but in the course of a normal day, the child will be part of smaller groups, possibly organised by the adults (e.g. 'the older children’s group').

Each of the four elements interact with each other, and thus represent a development of the classical didactical triangle, which does not include the community of children as a separate element (see e.g. Jank & Meyer, 2006, p. 57). Practice in day-care is, to a large degree, based on smaller groups of children, which is why the group or community merits inclusion in this model.

In the present chapter, we shall primarily examine two of these elements: 1) the
contents, and 2) the pedagogue.

### 4.3.3 Health education learning plans: A model for reflection

By combining two of the elements in the didactical rectangle with the four outsets of work with the learning plans, we get a table of different potential elements in the didactical considerations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How do we define health as educational content?</th>
<th>Disciplinary</th>
<th>Technical</th>
<th>Humanistic</th>
<th>Critical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organised in disciplines or modules</td>
<td>Organised in 'packages' or concepts</td>
<td>Based on the child's everyday needs</td>
<td>Based on relations between everyday practice and society</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What characterises the pedagogue?</td>
<td>Has a background in health care</td>
<td>Is certified</td>
<td>Is listening</td>
<td>Is political</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Model for reflection on health education learning plans

In the following section, we present and explore the model in Fig. 2, and it is shown how it can be applied in relation to health education.

### 4.4 The health education-related contents

In this category, the outsets differ in terms of whether the health educational content is pre-defined or if it, so to speak, emerges from everyday practice with the children as active participants. On the one hand, the critical and humanistic outset will emphasise health as a focal point (e.g. as part of an ideal for formation/Bildung), and/or as a fundamental principle for planning of activities and other pedagogical content. Health is an everyday issue, and should as such not be specified in advance in a finished curriculum replete with tasks, materials et al. This is unlike the technical and disciplinary outsets, which emphasise the importance of defined and delimited amount of knowledge, norms, behaviour and skills. These differences are further described below.

#### 4.4.1 Health education organised in 'disciplines'

From the disciplinary outset, the Strawberries could work with health on Tuesdays from 9 to 10.30, starting in early September and ending with a presentation for the parents in late November. In the same period, the children would work with several other topics, and there
would be a schedule, much like we know it from school. The contents of the weekly health sessions would be thoroughly worked out in advance, and would all be part of an overall plan to ensure a progression in the individual child’s acquisition of health-related knowledge (e.g. healthy diet, the joy and necessity of physical activity, attention to one’s own body etc.). Aims, purpose and contents are, insofar as possible, based on health-care – based knowledge.

4.4.2 Health-related contents organised in ‘packages’

Tested concepts comprise the core of the technical outset. Maybe the municipality have developed a ‘health package’ with material and contents about health: a puppet theatre on bacteria, a book for reading aloud, and two signs to put up in the bathrooms. This material is used with the children in a highly pre-planned manner, and the course is called successful if nearly all the children wash their hands after going to the bathroom (before the course only one in three would wash their hands after going to the bathroom). Thus, the learning program, or ‘package’ is used to spotlight a specific behaviour. In this respect, the technical outset resembles the disciplinary, but has a more narrowly defined and complete content. From time to time, the disciplinary outset includes technical elements.

4.4.3 Health education based on everyday practice

In a humanistic outset, it is a good idea to include health content related to concepts such as identity, needs and well-being in the work with the teaching plans. Abraham Maslow (1976) formulated a theory about human needs: The basic needs include air, food, movement etc. At the next level, we find emotional needs (comfort) and social needs, which means that we need to feel part of a community, to feel recognised and to have the opportunity to express ourselves.

In the humanistic outset, the child and its needs are at the centre of an interdisciplinary and comprehensive pedagogical practice, which is why this outset will tend to present health as a pedagogical principle for everyday practice rather than as a narrowly defined topic. Reflections on health-related contents may on given occasions revolve around interpretations of needs that emerge from everyday practice, e.g. when children are brought or picked up by their parents, or new children are introduced to a group, shared meetings, lunch, fruit baskets, play etc. Another important element is the physical layout, which should ensure that the day-care institution is aesthetically pleasing as a setting that supports formation and well-being.

As with the critical outset, the humanistic outset defines the child as an inherently valuable individual, rather than as someone who will one day become valuable, such as an apprentice or student.

4.4.4 A solidary and democratic content

A critical outset overlaps with the humanistic in the focus on the child’s formation through meaningful interdisciplinary activities. The critical outset aims for health content and activities of a collective and socially relevant nature. For example: Two pedagogues and a group
of children go to a playground in a not very well-to-do part of town, where many of the children live. At the playground, they plan a number of games and activities for a large excursion for the entire day-care institution the next week. Several of the children from the less resourceful families enjoy being on their home turf, and enjoys the attention ‘their’ playground gets. The pedagogues manage to talk a couple of the local parents into participating. Due to its focus on societal challenges, the critical outset calls for more preparation than the humanistic.

Those who work from a critical outset will typically discuss the municipal healthcare policy and the nutritional plan in the day-care institution, and engage in local politics, write letters to newspapers and collaborate with the parent groups in the institution.

### 4.4.5 Questions for reflection on the content

- How much can and should pedagogues plan health education activities beforehand? Why?
- Should health be taught as a separate subject, or should it be integrated into everyday activities? Present arguments for both views.

### 4.5 Analysis: The pedagogue as health educator

Below are four versions of a pedagogue’s role and professionalism. Broadly speaking, the question is whether the pedagogue is a narrowly specialised professional or more broadly oriented.

#### 4.5.1 The professional

From the disciplinary outset, the pedagogue plays a key role as planner of the health-related activities. (s)he likely has a health-related education, perhaps as the result of post-vocational training (e.g. a Master’s degree in Health). As a professional, (s)he keeps up with the most recent development in the field, and (s)he presents this to the children in carefully planned courses. In the work with the learning plans, (s)he updates the dietary recommendations, and adjusts the aims and contents for the modules or courses the institution provides concerning health.

In primary school, it is considered best that one teacher teaches Danish, another math and so on. Similarly in the didactically oriented institution where the pedagogues each have their own professional domain, and as such cannot necessarily step in for each other. The health-oriented pedagogue is in charge of the health-related courses, and must ensure that the institution reaches the pre-defined aims for the health education, and (s)he counsels and collaborates with the board of parents on defining the dietary policy, including what can be served at birthdays, on excursions etc.

#### 4.5.2 The certified technician

While the disciplinary pedagogue is broadly oriented in his/her field, and applies
his/her knowledge to formulate aims and design courses, means of documentation et al., the technically oriented pedagogue’s professionalism is expressed through a knowledge about how best to implement and conduct predefined concepts and courses. One example of this technical professionalism could be: Two pedagogues have taken a course and have been certified to communicate the municipal ‘health package’, as mentioned above. These pedagogues are responsible for implementing the activities and courses in the package. These two are the only pedagogues who are familiar with the script for the puppet theatre, who have practiced asking the formulated questions as part of a carefully scripted conversation about the contents of the children’s lunch boxes, and also the only ones who can conduct the before-and-after tests to assess the change in children’s propensity to wash their hands after going to the bathroom and other hygiene-related everyday behaviour.

It should be evident that the technical pedagogues, even more than the disciplinary, are specialists at communicating a specific topic.

4.5.3 The listening pedagogue

The pedagogue who works from the humanistic outset aims to be an emotionally present caregiver, and is as such prepared to respond to the needs and themes that the children communicate both verbally and non-verbally. Well-being is a key element in the positive definition of health, and the humanistic pedagogue keeps this in mind in his/her work. These pedagogues do not specify detailed health-related courses in the learning plan; rather, they write brief narratives about events that unfold in the informal learning environment of everyday practice, and use these stories to reflect on the child in its context. For example: Oscar has been moody of late. He has been on the fringes of the groups of children that have played together, but one day he joins up with Ivan and Peter to play with dinosaurs. The pedagogues quickly respond by taking pictures to document their game, and subsequently produce a small story around it (Carr, 2005), in order to document the boys’ social competences, imagination and not least the joy they get from playing together.

With the child in the centre, it is evident that the humanistic pedagogue is a general pedagogue (as opposed to the type referred to as ‘disciplinary pedagogue’, who is much more specialised). The content that makes sense for the child in a given situation will always transcend predefined distinctions between realms of knowledge, for example in separate disciplines. The adult must be able to seize the opportunities presented by the children, and use them to facilitate activities that promote well-being, learning and development, and which are therefore health-promoting.

4.5.4 The political

The pedagogue that works from a critical outset is also a generalist as the disciplinary pedagogue, albeit with a distinct political disposition. Although it is important for the critical pedagogue to listen and be present in the moment, (s)he has a well-defined agenda for the learning and formation that should take place, an agenda which is mostly worked out in advance. This pedagogue will ideally establish shared projects that relate the children’s experiences with social and societal (i.e. political) issues, in which health is one element among several. Critical awareness does not occur spontaneously; the children need support from, and to be challenged by, the adults, which is why the pedagogue plays an important role as
caregiver, supervisor and even teacher of solidarity and democratic values.

Example: An institution is working on a common theme about cultural encounters. The theme was planned and entered into the learning plan in some detail. One group of children are working with paper and glue to produce a collage. In the playground, another group is taught how to play an African version of Catch. At a table, we find Oscar and Muhammad eating lunch, while they have a spirited discussion of whether or not Oscar’s sausage with remoulade on rye is ‘unclean’ because it was made from pork. In this situation, we have a genuine cultural/religious encounter alongside a familiar health-related theme on everyday food and calories. The critical pedagogue must be both alert and careful here: It is one thing to plan certain activities, but quite another to seize the spontaneously emerging opportunities for critical health-related learning as they occur in the spaces between the planned events.

4.5.5 Questions for reflection on the pedagogue’s role

- Form your own opinion: what does it mean to work pedagogically with health in crèches and kindergartens?
- What are the key qualities for a health educator in preschool?

4.6 Closing remarks

The humanistic outset is probably prevalent in contemporary Danish day-care health education, although elements from the disciplinary, technical and critical outsets are certainly also present. The data from the SIGNALS project confirm this, and also underlines how the four outsets discussed in this chapter are meant to be understood as mainly analytical categories for reflection, and not ready-made labels to stamp out different pedagogues. As a pedagogue, you will often draw on elements from more than one outset as you engage in practice. There are, however, certain limitations to the opportunities to combine outsets: It makes more sense to picture a humanistic disciplinary pedagogue than a critical technician. This discussion relates to the dichotomy between what we might refer to as the continental (primarily German) formation- or Bildung-oriented didactics (Didaktik) on the one hand, and the Anglo-Saxon efficiency-focused curriculum-tradition on the other (Broström, 2013, Westbury, 2000).

A pedagogue or group of day-care professionals with insight into the different didactical positions are better equipped to formulate their own outset for their work with health-related learning plans than those who lack this insight. This model for reflection will hopefully provide an overview of some ways to conceptualise the nature of the contents and the potential roles of the pedagogue in health education in day-care.

4.7 In addition

The continuous discussion at the researcher meetings have contributed to a more varied reflection in the Danish team and in our meeting with the practitioners. The content of the different national projects and traditions opened for new perspectives and educational views. The cross-national discussions have been challenged and also very fruitful.
4.8 European added values

The cooperation with the European partners has contributed to an addition of values to the Danish traditional early childhood understanding. First of all the shared dialogues and discussions have contributed to both a new insight in new cross-country educational understandings but also the shared presentations have raised questions and new reflections on own educational understanding which often is not questioned in own culture. Among many things cross-national Didaktik dialogues about how to construct and organize the curriculum has been very fruitful and inspiring.
References


CHAPTER V: "PARTICIPATION" AS A COLLABORATIVE LEARNING PROCESS IN FIRST-
AND SECOND GRADE: A TIME-CONSUMING PROCESS COUNTERACTING THE
ACHIEVEMENT OF COGNITIVE LEARNING

CHAPTER V

"Participation" as a collaborative learning process in first-
and second grade: a time-consuming process counteracting the
achievement of cognitive learning

by Kalliope Vrinioti & Eleni Griva

The early childhood system in Greece

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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Policy responsibility at central level</td>
<td>Childcare/education (5 months - 4 years) Ministry for Health and Social Solidarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Early Education (4 -6 years) Ministry of Education, Research and Religious Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operational responsibility at local level</td>
<td>The Municipality board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compulsory pre-primary year</td>
<td>Since 2007 compulsory attendance was introduced for 5 years olds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School starting age</td>
<td>6 years (primary school)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do national or regional curricula or guidelines exist</td>
<td>Yes, since 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do the curricula include guidelines concerning transitions or continuity</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length and level of initial training of lead staff and assistant staff</td>
<td>4 years university education for preschool teachers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.1 Abstract
The Greek SIGNALS project aimed at developing children’s active participation in primary school and family environment and strengthening adults’ (teachers’ and parents’) skills and strategies of cooperating with children and co-constructing knowledge. It was designed based on the Hart’s (1995) model, the Shier’s (2001) model of participation, and Willis’ (1996) task based model. The data revealed the realization of the false types of participation, on the part of all participants, as being the greatest benefit. In other words, they understood what it is not participation (Manipulation, Decoration, Tokenism) according to Hart’s model.

5.2 Introduction
Based on the main goals of the multilateral Signals project, the basic aim of the Greek project was to develop some appropriate practices for children attending the 1st and 2nd grades of a Greek primary school with the purpose to make them experience ‘participation’ as a pleasant learning process in a task-based framework, and as an interactive process with their peers, teachers and parents. In other words, the project aims at developing active interaction skills among children and between children and adults (teachers and parents), with particular emphasis on enabling children to participate actively and to co-decide on various ‘realistic’ issues in the school and family environment. The interaction and oral communication skills and strategies and social skills development were achieved in a game-based environment. Moreover, an attempt was made to improve teachers’ skills, in order for them to be able to develop children’s communicative and social skills in close cooperation with parents. Before presenting our national project, it is worth mentioning a brief outline of the broader context in which we developed the project.

In the recent years, a large percentage of Greek teachers have been cautious and suspicious of any researcher who asks for their permission to cooperate with them in the school context for research purposes. This specific stance is attributed to the strong controversy that has been developed between the state and a large number of teachers, because of an attempt from the part of the state to implement the law of teacher evaluation, without taking consideration teachers’ strong reaction against this law.

This strong contradiction has created a climate of ‘division’ and suspicion in many Greek schools, which results into teachers’ regarding as “suspect” any researcher wishing to work and collaborate with them in the school environment, because of their fear of being evaluated indirectly. This abovementioned situation has limited the number of schools that were available to cooperate with us in relation to the SIGNALS project. Thus, instead of cooperating with two different schools as we had originally planned, we were ‘obliged’ to carry out our project in only one class. So, although in the first year we initiated SIGNALS project by conducting an initial record and analysis of 45 first grade children’s (two classes) perceptions and preferences regarding classroom interaction, cooperation and their communicative strategies, in the second year we continued our project with a class of 25 children.

Nevertheless, despite the rather favourable climate, just above mentioned, it is important to note that our national signals-project was included in the school weekly timetable. In this way, it could be examined whether our project is generally applicable to the second grade of Greek
schools, despite the expected difficulties that will be presented in the subsection: “Pre - and primary school teacher’s views on children’s learning”. In such a context, the project aimed at:

- Developing skills and strategies of co-constructing knowledge.
- Encouraging children’s expression through verbal and nonverbal communication.
- Creating an environment for children’s active participation.
- Create conditions for parents’ participation in their children’s learning process.
- Improving teachers’ skills, in order for them to be able to develop children’s participation and social skills in close cooperation with parents.

5.3 Initial Needs Analysis

The project attempted a systematic appreciation of a needs-based approach to course design. For this purpose, before the design of the project the following actions certain were taken by the research group.

5.3.1 Field investigation

-A pre-record and analysis of the target situation was conducted. To this end, visits were planned to be made to the two primary schools. The purpose of these visits was to involve all stakeholders - teachers, directors and parents - in the project.

-A needs analysis was carried out with the purpose to identify: i) 1st grade children’s perceptions on classroom interaction and cooperation, ii) school teachers’ views and perceptions on learning, pupils’ participation and their needs in task-based approach, iii) parents’ views

-Training seminars were carried out for the class teacher and the assistant researchers (postgraduate students) on the following topics:
  - Developing children’s participation and active interaction with peers and adults.
  - Task-based approach.
  - Communicative skills and strategies.
  - Evaluation of children’s progress in communication skills.

-Pilot implementation of the project

5.3.2 The Greek language curriculum and the concept of “Interaction”

Since the core subject area of the Greek approach in the SIGNALS falls into the area of Applied Linguistics, we tried to identify the concepts “interaction”, “participation”, “communication” “cooperation” and “play” in the Language Curriculum of the First and Second Grade of primary education (Cross Curriculum Framework of Greek Language for Primary School, 2003). An attempt was made to examine the Greek Cross-Thematic Curriculum Framework for Language in terms of the following research question: Does the Greek Language Curriculum of First and Second Grade of primary education aim at strengthening children’s skills for active interaction?
In other words, is the strengthening of children’s skills for active interaction one of the basic aims of the Greek Language Curriculum of First and Second Grade of primary education? The specific research question is divided into five subquestions related to the five concepts (“interaction”, “participation”, “communication”, “cooperation” and “play”) under investigation. These concepts were used as «indicators» of strengthening children’s skills for active interaction.

To answer the abovementioned question, content analysis was used to examine the 45 pages curriculum (30,357 words in total), with focus on that part related to the first and second primary school grade. The analysis of the five concepts was context-specific. In the Greek language curriculum, the concept of “active interaction”, which is recommended to be taken place within an Activity Oriented framework, was recorded as a ‘term’ of high frequency. However, it was revealed that the specific concept is mostly implied by the context, but it is not explicitly articulated.

This framework was determined with 17 occurrences related to “participation” skills development and with 18 occurrences in relation to “cooperation” skills development. “Communication skills” development (79 occurrences) is the ultimate goal in this curriculum, which can be enhanced in a game based context including a variety of playful activities (28 references). However, it is worth mentioning that, in the Greek language Curriculum, no reference in relation to teacher’s participation in children’s games was identified. Thus, the teacher does not assume a role of “playmate” of the group, and as a result teacher’s role as “constructor of knowledge” is not highlighted.

5.3.3 First Phase of pilot implementation: Children’s interviews

Insights into the children’s preferences were obtained through the interviews with 45 primary grade pupils, whose comments and preferences complemented the data provided by the teachers and parents. The purpose of those interviews was to identify children’s preferences to classroom interaction and cooperation and their participation in favourite games. The interviews were conducted in a playful context, through using flashcards, which stimulated children’s motivation for their participating in the “question – answer” process.

The verbal data, after being coded qualitatively (Miles & Huberman, 1994), resulted in 39 codes, which were grouped into eight categories classified into four basic themes: a) children’s preferences in games, b) justification for their preferences, c) cooperation in the play, d) children’s reaction to game disruption. In this preliminary “needs analysis” the game proved to be a useful tool for creating a ‘non-threatening’ and interactive environment, encouraging children’s cooperation and active participation. The analysis provided a complete account of children’s preferences for group activities and physical games, showing particular preference to “chase” (N=26) and “hide and seek” (N=21). Most of the children also declared that they like playing with others, because they feel comfortable (N=22) by cooperating with their schoolmates. They showed particular interest in playing with their classmates (N=15), as they feel familial with them and get special pleasure and enjoyment (N=15).

5.3.4 Second phase: pilot implementation of game involving children’s active
participation, interaction and co-decision

5.3.4.1 The game: Restructure the song
The children participated in a physical activity with the title “Restructure the Song".
Two well known songs were used:
- If all the children on the earth hold hands firmly
  boys and girls in order and start the dance
  the circle would be large enough to hug the earth once
  (Yiannis Ritsos)
- “Round-round all with Manolis being in the middle / hands and legs in the line /
  and all sit on the earth / and Manolis in the little chair (Greek folk game).

More precisely, the children got involved in the game “Round-round all with Manolis being in the middle” ("Γύρω-γύρω όλοι στη μέση ο Μανώλης"), where the children were asked to restructure the song by cooperating, interacting and communicating in groups. After having restructured the game, the children were asked to present it in their own way. While the children were playing in groups of four, two assistant researchers were recording their communicative strategies in a "communicative strategies instrument" that was created for the purposes of the project.

Requirements: cones, ropes, hula hoops, balls, baseball bases etc. Eight pieces of paper (with the lyrics of two different kid songs scabbled) two pictures (matching to each song)

Description:
1st phase: There are two teams consisted of four children each. First, we set up an obstacle course e.g., a piece of rope to jump over, a hula hoop to crawl through, cones to run around, etc. In the middle of the course each child takes a piece of paper (with a part of lyrics) and goes back to his team.
Objectives: ‘circuit training’, developing locomotor skills, running, jumping, hopping etc.
2nd phase: Afterwards, each team should put in order the jigsawed songs and assign the correct picture.
Objectives: jigsaw reading, identifying communicative strategies and skills, enhancing work in groups.
3rd phase: Finally, every team presents a song to the other groups.
Objectives: identifying communicative strategies and social skills.

5.3.4.2 Assistant researchers’ Observations: “communicative/interactive strategies instrument”

While the children were playing the game * “Round-round all with Manolis being in the middle * and cooperating in groups of four, the three assistant researchers were recording children’s communication and interactive strategies in a “communicative strategies instrument” created for the purposes of the project.

The data indicated that the children made from a medium to low use of compensation and
interactive communication in an attempt to communicate the message effectively during intergroup and intragroup communication. More precisely, they employed the following strategies:

- Compensatory Strategies: paraphrasing, using avoidance, Message changing, using extraveral behavior
- Interactive/communication Strategies
  - social strategies: Asking for repetition, Asking for clarification, Turn-taking using
  - achievement strategies: Repeating, Using fillers, Self-correction

5.3.4.3 Parents’ interviews

Regarding children’s parents, some focus group interviews were conducted with a number of parents in order to record:

- their perceptions on issues related to children’s participation in home activities.
- their behavior to children’s interaction within family environment.
- their engagement in out of school activities.
- their attitudes to children’s involvement in the project.

In other words, an attempt was made to identify and record parents’ participation in their childrens’ activities, as well as their attitudes to children’s involvement in the project, since their attitudes were believed to have an important effect on their children’s learning progress.

Parental involvement in their children’s school life as well as in out of school activities has been proved to have a lot of advantages for the children’s active participation in educational activities and their school performance. It was revealed that although the parents showed a positive attitude to be involved in the project, and expressed their willingness to participate and cooperate with their children in a number of activities, they were not used in participating in such actions, since there were no initiatives from the part of the school.

5.3.5 Pre - and primary school teacher’s views on children’s learning

During the stage of initial needs analysis of the national signals-project we investigated both primary school and pre-primary school teachers’ views. It was decided to ask both groups of teachers because according to the hypothesis of our research, the views of the Greek primary school teachers and those of preschool teachers on children’s learning would be different.

The critical appraisal of the differences but also of the similarities of the views of both groups was the starting point of the design and the development of the Greek SIGNALS project because these views have an impact upon the teaching and learning process in the first and second grade of the primary school and are, hence, factors which facilitate or, on the contrary, impede the development of participation and co-decision.

Although the convenient sample (N=222) (130 primary school teachers and 92 preschool teachers) of our investigation is not representative for the entire population of Greek pre - and primary school teachers, its findings and especially those which confer information concerning the way the respondents understand the importance of children’s active participation in daily educational process, were helpful to us to respond to the teachers’ perceived needs.
CHAPTER V: "PARTICIPATION" AS A COLLABORATIVE LEARNING PROCESS IN FIRST- AND SECOND GRADE: A TIME-CONSUMING PROCESS COUNTERACTING THE ACHIEVEMENT OF COGNITIVE LEARNING

This study expands on earlier research of Danish and Swedish colleagues who initially designed and utilized the survey questionnaire in Denmark and Sweden (Broström et al. 2012). In 2014 this research project was carried out, by using the same questionnaire, in six countries one of which was Greece (Broström et al. 2014). To identify teachers’ views about how children learn in preschool and primary school, the questionnaire comprised four main questions: What situations can be characterised as learning? What activities are important for learning? What are the best conditions for children’s learning? How do teachers understand participation in relation to children’s learning in preschool and, correspondingly, in primary school. Each question had a set of 6 to 10 predefined response options. Teachers were asked to rate the importance of each of the response options using a scale of 1–4 (1 = most important and 4 = least important); multiple response options could receive the same rating.

From the comparison of the views of the two groups, we found common perceptions of the importance of the role of school and of the participation of the parents and children in the learning process and school. In contrast, differences were identified between the two groups regarding specific aspects of learning. For example, in relation to knowledge acquisition, primary school teachers’ focused particularly on their own presence and the presence of the school as a source of knowledge, than on any other potential source of learning in the child’s life. Although teachers seemed to judge the child’s own experience to be a vital factor in learning they seemed to regard the child’s ability to make independent choices as a less important factor. This revealed that the teachers consider the child’s self-motivation in learning as relatively less important.

The next histogram provides a comparative presentation of preschool and primary school
It is interesting to note that, although teachers seemed to value the children’s active participation in team working they stated that they consider the children’s ability to influence everyday class activities as less important.

Given that different pedagogical approaches are implemented in the curricula of preschool and primary education, the current study assumes that both curriculum and level of education affect the participants’ perceptions about the way children learn. The results indicated that teachers’ perceptions reflect only to some extend the current pedagogical approaches to children’s learning, whilst some of the important dimensions of learning are absent. Moreover, both groups of teachers seem to acknowledge in general what is considered as “pedagogically correct”, but also display a limited degree of understanding of contemporary pedagogical approaches. These differences can be attributed to the different levels of education investigated, and to the differences in the curriculum at these levels of education (Vrinioti & Matsagouras 2004; Vrinioti 2013).

In relation to primary school teachers, it was revealed that although a part of them are familiar with modern concepts, such as “Participation”, “Interaction”, “Co decision”, “Communication”, “Cooperation”, “Activity-Oriented Interaction”, they are not willing to upgrade the traditional classroom approaches and outdated teaching methods. Hence, there is a contradiction on the part of the primary school teachers in the sense of, on the one hand, their perception of the modern concept of “Participation” as an innovative educational process and a ‘democratic’ tool and on the other hand, their teaching practice by falling back to old teaching theories and adopting traditional teaching approaches. This is because they believe that the implementation of the modern conception of ‘participation’ and ‘interaction’ is time consuming.
5.4 Design and implementation of the project

5.4.1 Rationale and description of the Thematic Units

The Greek SIGNALS project was based on the following principles: "Participation", "Co-decision", "Communication", "Cooperation", "Interaction". Since a topic-based approach (Bourke, 2006) was followed, the teaching module designed by the research group, consisted of ten main thematic units that were based on children’s needs and interests and were related to “School and Social Life” (see table 1).

The ten interventions were designed to carry out in a game-based (Wright, Betteridge & Buckby, 2005) and task-based framework (Willis, 1996), with the cooperative activities being at the core of the project, where the children were provided with opportunities for active participation and cooperation while making decisions and solving problems. Thus, the project gave particular emphasis on enabling children to participate actively and on using their right to co-decide on issues of concern both in the school and at home. It was the researchers’ intention therefore to select and design tasks that would facilitate oral communication, interaction, and cooperation. The need for well-designed group activities and games seemed to be of a great significance. Two categories of activities were included: outdoor physical activities such as races, chases and hopscotch, role play games, and classroom activities, such as constructions, sorting, ordering, or arranging puzzles, pantomime etc (Griva & Semoglou, 2013).

In such a game-based context, interaction was developed through a "task-based" approach (Nunan, 2004; Willis, 1996), with the cooperative games being the core of the project, either active games that require space for movement, or quieter games and activities that can be used in the classroom. Games can provide opportunities for interaction, communication and cooperation and raise the level of co-operative consciousness within the class. Co-operative games i) enable children to work together in a caring and co-operative way, ii) include all children, to develop both communication and problem solving skills. An attempt was made to create an environment of authentic communication among peers, between the children and the teacher and between the children and their parents. Thus, learning occured through interactive, communicative activities that provided children with the opportunity to interact within group, to communicate and express themselves on topics of their interest.

Another key issue is to enhance adults’ wish to motivate their children’s involvement and their ability to organize appropriate processes and conditions for developing children’s interaction with peers and their parents. Towards this direction, the class teacher could act as the ‘bridge’ between the research team, the parents and the children. She could also propose or even make modifications to the activities and actions designed by the research group, based on her teaching experience and her relations with the students.
### Table 1. The thematic units of the project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic units and topics</th>
<th>Aims</th>
<th>Specific Objectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Thematic Unit:</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>We live together</em>… (1)</td>
<td>Children Participation</td>
<td>- Development of basic social skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Topic:</em> “me- you- us”: our relations</td>
<td>Children communication</td>
<td>- Awareness of social conventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children-teacher communication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children-children cooperation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children-teacher cooperation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children-children cooperation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children-teacher cooperation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **2. Thematic Unit:**    |                                                                      |                                                                                  |
| *We live together*… (2)  | Children Participation                                              | - Social skills related to interpersonal relationships in different contexts and situations |
| *Topic:* A visit in the classroom | Children communication                                     | - Values and social behaviours within group                                      |
|                          | Children-teacher communication                                      |                                                                                  |
|                          | Children-children cooperation                                       |                                                                                  |
|                          | Children-teacher cooperation                                        |                                                                                  |

| **3. Thematic Unit:**    |                                                                      |                                                                                  |
| *We live together*… (3)  | Children communication                                              | - Basic elements of communication (verbal and nonverbal)                        |
| *Topic:* Communicating with others | Children-teacher communication                                     | - Effective communication (assuming roles, following rules, turn taking)        |
|                          | Children-children cooperation                                       |                                                                                  |
|                          | Children-teacher cooperation                                        |                                                                                  |
|                          | Children-children cooperation                                       |                                                                                  |
|                          | Children-teacher cooperation                                        |                                                                                  |

| **4. Thematic Unit:**    |                                                                      |                                                                                  |
| *We live together*… (4)  | Co-decision                                                         | - Expression of my feelings                                                    |
| *Topic:* Our feelings    | Children Participation                                              | - Acceptance of feelings of others                                             |
|                          | Children communication                                              | - Feelings that could lead to conflicts                                        |
|                          | Children-teacher communication                                      | - Creation of a positive climate in the classroom                              |
|                          | Children-children cooperation                                       |                                                                                  |
|                          | Children-teacher cooperation                                        |                                                                                  |
|                          | Children-children cooperation                                       |                                                                                  |
|                          | Children-teacher cooperation                                        |                                                                                  |

| **5. Thematic Unit:**    |                                                                      |                                                                                  |
| *We live together*… (5)  | Co-decision                                                         | - Developing skills, behaviors, and values to establish relationships, to solve problems of everyday life |
| *Topic:* Handling/managing conflicts | Children-children cooperation                                     | - Reporting incidents of bullying in the school environment                    |
|                          | Children-teacher cooperation                                        |                                                                                  |
|                          | Children-children cooperation                                       |                                                                                  |
|                          | Children-teacher cooperation                                        |                                                                                  |
|                          | Children-children cooperation                                       |                                                                                  |
|                          | Children-teacher cooperation                                        |                                                                                  |

| **6. Thematic Unit:**    |                                                                      |                                                                                  |
| *Christmas*              | Co-decision                                                         | - Awareness of the cultural diversity                                          |
| *Topic:* Christmas all over the world | Children Participation                                     | - Different customs from all over the world                                     |
|                          | Children-children cooperation                                       |                                                                                  |
|                          | Children-teacher cooperation                                        |                                                                                  |
|                          | Children-parent cooperation                                         |                                                                                  |
CHAPTER V: “PARTICIPATION” AS A COLLABORATIVE LEARNING PROCESS IN FIRST- AND SECOND GRADE: A TIME-CONSUMING PROCESS COUNTERACTING THE ACHIEVEMENT OF COGNITIVE LEARNING

7. Thematic Unit: Take care of myself (1)
   Topic: health and nutrition -1
   Co-decision
   Children Participation
   Children-children cooperation
   Children-teacher cooperation
   Children-parent cooperation
   Children-children interaction
   Children-parent interaction
   - The value of proper nutrition
   - Understanding the food nutrients
   - The relationship between nutrition and good health

8. Thematic Unit: Take care of myself (2)
   Topic: health and nutrition -2
   Co-decision
   Children Participation
   Children-children cooperation
   Children-teacher cooperation
   Children-parent cooperation
   Children-children interaction
   Children-parent interaction
   - Healthy eating habits
   - Awareness about the importance of a balanced daily diet
   - Preparing a healthy diet: food groups in our diet

9. Thematic Unit: Take care of myself (3)
    Topic: exercise-health and diet
    Co-decision
    Children Participation
    Children-children cooperation
    Children-teacher cooperation
    Children-parent cooperation
    Children-children interaction
    Children-parent interaction
    - Developing children’s ability to choose healthy habits
    - Exchanging ideas on healthy living

10. Thematic Unit: Leisure time
    Topic: Play – learn-create
    Co-decision
    Children Participation
    Children communication
    Children-children cooperation
    Children-teacher cooperation
    Children-parent cooperation
    Children-children interaction
    Children-parent interaction
    - Exploitation of leisure time
    - Cooperation and Interaction in leisure time activities
    - Qualitative use/exploitation of electronic media

5.4.2 Project Implementation

As it has been mentioned in the introduction, the innovative interventions, which were incorporated in the school weekly timetable, were mainly delivered by the class teacher in cooperation with the assistant researchers (three postgraduate students). All of them were trained and familiarized with the programme’s aims, procedures and innovative methods with the ultimate purpose to provide optimal conditions for children’s participation, cooperation and interaction.

In that context, an attempt was made to make children understand that “the production of oral and written language is a cooperative and creative process” (Cross Curriculum Framework of Greek Language for Primary School, 2003) by enabling them to interact and co-decide on issues.
of concern. An attempt was made to help children learn by a) being with others, while feeling secure and confident enough to take risks, to explore, to take part in challenging experiences (Broady, 2006; Johnson & Johnson, 1999), b) being involved in making choices and decisions, and solving problems, c) doing mostly in group work, which allows for meaningful communication and help between them (Broady, 2006; Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

5.4.2.1 Stages of implementation

The project lasted for four months and was carried out in the following three stages:

a) Pre-task stage
In the first stage, the children were introduced to the topic and task in a multisensory learning context (e.g., stories, ppt, video clips, songs, pictures, realia, questions and answers etc.) and were exposed to language related to the theme (children learn new content words and phrases that are essential to the theme and the task). In addition, the children were motivated to participate in the games and communicative playful activities that follow in the next stage.

b) Task cycle:
The purpose of this stage was: a) to prepare the children to perform the task in groups and b) to promote peer-peer and children-teacher interaction, as well as to enhance children’s active participation in the task and develop co-decision and communication / interactive skills, c) to help children learn by being involved in making choices and decisions, and by solving problems, d) to create an enjoyable and playful environment resulting into immediate outcomes.

The teacher split the class into groups of 4-5 children, asked them to observe a model of how to perform the task and presented “The Group Work Rules”. The children were encouraged to use the language creatively and spontaneously through participating actively in activities and performing them by deciding together on the ‘solution of the problem’. In other words, they cooperated on a common group task, helping each other, interacting with each other during “problem-solving negotiation and assuming responsibility for contributing to the group task. Upon the completion of the task, the leader of each group announced their decision and presented the process of solving the problem to the teacher and the classmates.

In such a context, collaborative learning and interaction were at the core of this stage, and emphasis was stressed on pointing out the importance for the children to express arguments. Furthermore, emphasis was placed on interpersonal relationships and group dynamics, by providing children with opportunities and encouraging them to participate actively in the learning process with the purpose to achieve efficient learning outcomes. The teacher was a coordinator, supervisor and experienced member of the group, who encouraged children to explain or describe these displays to their classmates.

c) Follow up phase
The purpose of this stage was: a) to provide feedback to the children, b) to make children practice newly acquired knowledge through participation in a cooperative physical activity, c) to motivate parents’ involvement in cooperative/interactive activities. The teacher gave feedback on the content and quickly reviewed what was presented. This feedback led children to modify their output. Then, the teacher gave an activity to the children as a homework in order to perform it in cooperation with their parents.
5.4.2.2 Parents’ involvement in cooperative activities

In that framework, parents’ involvement in their children’s activities by interacting and co-deciding was considered of great importance. The research group, bearing in mind the possible difficulties to be encountered in relation to parents’ cooperation, designed with care and caution the way parental involvement could be achieved. Given the fact that the project took place in a town, where parents are not familiar with their participation in such projects, the steps which were followed during the implementation were very specific and carefully planned. The class teacher was the ‘link’ between the school, the children, their parents and the research team. After discussing with her about the way in which parents could be involved, we decided that it would be appropriate for them to participate in the project gradually.

The purpose of the first five interventions was to make children learn to work in groups, to cooperate with their peers, to interact, to participate and take decisions together on a common target. In the following teaching sessions, their parents’ involvement became more clear. For example, in the case of the thematic unit “Christmas”, the children were asked to discuss the issue of ‘diversity’. The story and the Rudolph song were the trigger to discuss children this particular issue with their parents.

Parents’ involvement became even greater in the last thematic units related to “health and nutrition”. The children in cooperation with their parents prepared the week’s menu. So every child in a weekly diet schedule noted down the meals for a week, and when they came back to school, they discussed their options with their classmates. Moreover, the children prepared a game board with the title ‘my family game board’. This game included orders with ‘healthy choices’ that were going ahead the pawn and orders with ‘unhealthy choices’ that were delaying the pawn. The game was completed with the help of their parents at home.

In the thematic unit “health and nutrition” the children were asked to get a board of their daily meals at home, which was divided in five parts: breakfast, brunch, lunch, afternoon meal, supper. Thus, the children, cooperating with their parents, had to keep a record of their daily diet. The following week, the children brought with them their complete daily food plans along with their experience to share with their classmates and the class teacher.

The process of children’s making decisions in cooperation with their parents is clear in the following examples: «My mom kept reminding me to write down on the plan whatever I ate...», «I showed the plan to my dad and he hanged it on the freezer in order for me not to forget about it...», «...my dad is a military soldier and he’s out of the house all day, but my mom told me to write down all the meals in a draft paper, and when my dad came home at night, we would all write down my meals on the schedule». Furthermore, another child told us: "My mom wanted to cook meat once again, but I showed her on the table that we eat meat on Monday... so, we must not eat meat again. We decided all together to cook lentils".

In the thematic unit “Leisure Time”, we also asked children’s parents to participate actively in performing the activities with their children. The children showed a strong willingness to work in groups in order to make the game and set rules in the classroom, whereas they promised that they would complete it when they get home. So the children got a board game at home with the purpose to shape and reshape it by playing and interacting with their parents. When
children were asked about that experience, they stated: "My dad comes back home from work late in the evening... I had been waiting for him to ask him about his day at work and I wrote it down in the game". Most children declared that they shaped and reshaped the game mainly in cooperation with their brothers and sisters: "my sister told me to write something, but I was not sure, and I asked my dad...He told me that it was nice and right... so we wrote it". On the other hand, a boy mentioned: «We played the game with my brothers and sisters, but they didn’t like it as much as I and mom did...», «My dad helped me a lot with the rules because I made a lot of spelling mistakes...». «We played too much on Saturday and we felt a little drowsy in the end...». In this way there was a gradual parents’ involvement in the learning process, which required their cooperation and interaction with their children on issues that concerned them.

By using this school-home ‘bridge’, we had the opportunity to: a) communicate the objectives of the project and involve parents in the learning process, b) draw information from children about their parents’ interest and their effective participation.

5.5 Project Evaluation/Estimating the effectiveness of the project

On-going and summative forms of evaluation were conducted in order to record the effectiveness of the Greek Project with the employment of the following instruments:

- focus group interviews were conducted with the children’s parents at the end of the project.
- focus group interviews were conducted with the children, at the end of the project, to record their satisfaction from the project and the difficulties they encountered.
- Journals were kept by the teachers once a week in order to reflect on the learning process, on issues related to children’s participation, communication and interaction.
- Journals were kept by the assistant researchers (postgraduate students) once a week in order to reflect on the learning process, on issues related to children’s participation, communication and interaction.

5.5.1 Parents’ views on their experience from the project

At the end of the project, a three hour follow up meeting was held. During that meeting, there was a fruitful discussion with the parents of nineteen children on issues related to their involvement in the project. In the thorough discussion we had with them, their opinion on the philosophy and the objectives of the project were expressed, and their experience from their involvement in cooperating with their children was exposed. Parents gave us interesting information about:

a) their children’s views on the project:

"Our child talked us a lot about the games you played, she loved it and wanted to play every day", "She loved her team and told me that they had all become friends"

b) their children’s enthusiasm before and after each intervention:

"Children were affected much by the program of diet, even changed sometimes their diet at home...they tell us what foods are healthy and which are not"

c) their children’s willingness to cooperate with their parents in performing activities:

"We played the game they brought home, he told us about the instructions and we played all together"
d) parents involvement in activities:

"It is nice for parents to take initiatives such as a father who went to his son’s classroom and showed them how candles are made", "We take into account their opinion on the issues that may involve them for example what we will eat today, sometimes make compromises".

Parents reported on their children’s positive attitude to sharing their experience related to the interventions with their parents. In addition, the parents showed a high degree of willingness to further promote cooperation with the class teacher in relation to any other initiatives. They felt very pleased with the interventions, and declared that they were motivated to cooperate with their children at home and to get involved in the game brought by the children at home, as well as to interact with their children in order to solve problems.

Although the parents, who participated in the project, showed willingness to share their experiences with us and the class teacher, they commented on the ‘distance’ between ‘school and home’. In any case, the meeting with the parents proved to be a ‘bridge’ between their interest in participating in activities and the general absence of initiatives from the part of the school. The meeting ended with the agreement from the part of all stakeholders on building further cooperation in the future, and initiating further actions and activities that bring school closer to home.

5.5.2 Children’s views

The children expressed their positive views on cooperation, interaction and co-decision both with the other peers at school and their parents at home. They declared that at the beginning of the project the process of working in groups sounded strange to them, because the children were not used to group working. So, they encountered some problems related to cooperation and interaction "‘He/she didn’t listen and did whatever he wanted (lack of teamwork)”, "He/she was not cooperating”. «Ch. was talking without teacher’s permission and he wouldn’t let me talk... he was making me mad all the time...». However, those difficulties were overcome in the next lessons although in a few cases when they disagreed without being able to find a mutually acceptable decision.

The children’s responses revealed their satisfaction to participate in collaborative activities, to exchange ideas within group, to take decisions, to find solutions and to develop close relationships and mutual respect in every other moment of their school life: "I liked a lot of things. I liked that we were all together Mr. Spyros, Ms. Jenny, Mr. Vasilis and the whole class". M. and G. shared the same view with V. "I liked it because we are now all together and it’s nice". "I liked it because now we are all friends.” They liked participating in a game based context: "when we played pantomime because we made guesses in cooperation” The task-based learning approach as well as going out of the classroom received most of the children’s ‘votes’: "I liked the tests in the gym because we collected files and in the end we made a puzzle." "I liked it very much that we played and we painted! I wish we had this class every single day...”, «What I liked the most was the game with the mandarin in which we named it, it was very fun!», «I was so happy to play with my own table game. I didn’t know that we could make our
own game, I thought that we could only buy one from the toy store...»,
Moreover the children were satisfied with sharing their experiences with their parents as well as with the opportunity they had to cooperate and interact with their parents in activities trying to find solutions: “I liked the fact that we took the board game at home and played with my family”, «I liked the activities we did at home, because I played with my dad and mom and we solved it...».

5.3 Teachers’ journals
It is worth mentioning that at the beginning of the project implementation, the class teacher perceived working in a task-based context as a time consuming process, because certain conditions should be created from the part of the teacher in order for the children to have the possibility of active participation and co-decision. However, after the third teaching session, she considered the interventions that were implemented in a playful, interdisciplinary context as a successful experiment(!), since those games and activities motivated the children to participate actively and to co-decide on ‘realistic’ issues that concern children. For this reason, she suggested to organize activities involving various topics and enable children to freely express their views, interact, cooperate and co-decide on issues within a task-based framework, in the ‘flexible zone’ context. More precisely:
Concerning the thematic units, she reported that the thematic topics of the interventions covered a variety of content concerning “children’s relationships, communication with others, emotions, conflict management, healthy nutrition and the management of leisure time”.

In relation to the implementation of the project, she highlighted many advantages and a few weak points. She declared that the children were organized in groups of four - five students with the same composition during the project. In each intervention the children were encouraged to freely express their opinions, to support them with arguments, to cooperate harmoniously and to find solutions to the problems. She stated that it was a great idea to implement the project in a task based framework. In such a context, the children working in groups had the opportunity to communicate with each other, interacted and co-decided, and they agreed on the preparation of the five main daily meals - dishes, always keeping in mind the pyramid diet, which the children had noticed and discussed about it in the previous stage. Groups having various materials at their disposal (cardboard, markers, food pictures) built the tray with the above dishes and argued about their options. During the intervention, the children interacted, discussed and decided together, they chose sports and presented them by using pantomime or in any other way each group decided to adopt. The aforementioned intervention proved to be successful, since the children in all groups mentioned some activities and sports that contribute to health and then decided together how to present them to their classmates. However, she pointed out that during the performance of some activities requiring specific skills or causing difficulties to some children, dissatisfaction was expressed, and conflicts were caused within group. In such cases, the teacher’s active presence and coordination was necessary.

In relation to parental participation, she stated that the parents were involved in the intervention by cooperating with their children in the completion of the weekly nutritional schedule. All children completed the schedule and considered cooperation, communication and interaction between them and their parents as a pleasant experience. Moreover, they expressed
their desire to include one of their meal based on the food pyramid that they worked on within group.

5.5.4 Assistant researchers’ journals

The assistant researches (postgraduate students’) recorded and reflected on issues related to: a) the positive aspects of the project, b) the difficulties encountered by the children in an interactive context, c) their personal experience from the project.

The postgraduate students (assistant researchers) incorporated the ‘game based context’ and the opportunities given to the children to “participate actively, to interact and take decisions in cooperation with other peers and their parents” among the positive aspects of the project. They also highlighted the effective cooperation they had with the class teacher, as well as parents’ willingness to get involved in the learning process.

They commented on the fact that the positive results of the interventions were obvious from the third lesson onwards, since the children were not used to working in such a context. A typical example is a girl who was characterized by the teacher as “a very shy child”. From the fifth intervention onwards, she began to feel safe within the group, took initiatives and used to express her point of view by declaring “everybody has to express his/her opinion”, since all children must have equal opportunities and can express themselves. Moreover, an anxious and naughty boy who did not show any interest in cooperating with his peers in the first sessions, with the teachers’ help, he began to wait for his turn to speak, he was interested in listening to the views of other members of the team and he collaborated effectively with the team members. In the last interventions, the child was integrated in the team and showed interest in cooperating and interacting with the other members of the group. He listened the instructions given to groups with enthusiasm and exclaimed: ’Perfect! Come on let’s talk! What do we do? Let’s decide!’ etc. Moreover, a timid girl from the fourth lesson onwards started participating in the process and interacting with the other members of the group. As time passed, the children employed a number of communication strategies such us turn taking, active participation and co-decision while working together. They also pointed out that: “… working in groups, was in itself a challenge for those children who had never worked together and probably we did it, as the class teacher said, being completely satisfied with the active role of each pupil in his/her group. For this reason, she kept the same composition of the groups during the rest of the sessions...”.

As far as the difficulties encountered by the children in a task-based context, the postgraduate students recorded the children’s unfamiliarity with participating in group working and cooperating and interacting within group. In the first meeting, difficulties concerning co-decision within their team were met by the children. However, in the following sessions they were assigned to make a craft, so they could get to know various characteristics of collaborating and interacting with others and realized the benefits of such a cooperation. Particularly, in the first two interventions “we faced a serious problem with a naughty boy who was not accustomed to cooperating with peers, so in many cases burst into tears and left his group. In the next interventions, the boy began to work in harmony with the other girls of his team and...”.
in some cases he was the leader of the process!”. Some other difficulties were related to turn-taking as well as to some misunderstandings of the process of collaboration: “they did not easily understand what was going on and they showed some communicative difficulties while trying to understand the rules”. For example, in the thematic unit ‘health and nutrition’ the assistant researchers recorded: “we talked with the pupils about what their breakfast would include and we pointed out the importance of healthy breakfast. Then, we handed out pictures to the pupils with various foods and we gave cardboards in the shape of pyramid to design the Mediterranean pyramid. D. wanted at first to make it by himself but when he completed it, we make him understand that it was not right. So we decided to cooperate and design it all together. All the children were satisfied with the output of such collaboration!”

In an attempt to reflect on their personal experience from the project, the assistant researchers focused on the fact that the class teacher, who cooperated with the assistant researchers had never implemented such a cooperative approach in a task-based framework in her teaching experience, because she believed that it is time consuming and does not promote cognitive skills. However, upon the completion of the project, she declared that during their fifth month intervention, she was so satisfied with the outcomes of the interventions that she was willing to implement cooperative methods of working in a task-based framework in her classroom next year. The assistant researchers mentioned that the class teacher was very satisfied with their active participation in the interventions. As the assistant researchers recorded, the teacher thanked them for “not being just observers in the lesson but active participants in the process, since your help is important both for children and for me”.

Concluding, they admitted that through their involvement in the SIGNALS project they realized that they should change their philosophy related to the educational process that takes place in a classroom and they could create a more cooperative atmosphere involving children’s active participation. They highlighted: “we tried to change children’s daily ‘routines’ with the risk to fail. However, working all together as a team, having received the appropriate training, we overcame most of the difficulties and problems and achieved an effective outcome”.

5.6 Concluding remarks

This project was one of the few attempts for authentic communication and interaction between the pupils and the teacher and among the pupils, providing them with the opportunity to develop communication and social skills through an active participation in a variety of interactive activities. The project’s innovation was mainly based on children’s active participation in a ‘task-based’ context as well as parents’ cooperation with their children in collaborative activities.

The data indicated the need for reflection on the current practices and improvement of the practices in relation to: a) task-based learning, b) providing children with opportunities for active participation, cooperation and co-decision, c) developing skills and strategies of co-constructing knowledge d) encouraging children’s expression through verbal and nonverbal communication. Based on the positive aspects of the interventions that were ‘traced’ from the project evaluation, we suggest that such a programme could be implemented as an alternative educational practice in some other primary schools in Greece. Positive aspects resulted also
from parental participation, since parents’ involvement in their children’s activities by interacting with them and co-deciding proved to be an important factor in children’s learning process. In the proposed cooperative working context, children felt free to express themselves, and to interact with other peers on a common target. Mostly, the ‘weaker’ and introvert pupils felt relaxed to express their views without the fear of any ‘rejection’, since they realised that all opinions are useful when being involved in a process of co-deciding. In such a game-based environment, children get to know ‘themselves’ and the ‘others’ in a better way.

Concluding, teachers could experience the culture of ‘democratic dialogue’ and realise that ‘participation -cooperation - interaction’, as learning sub-processes, are not time consuming, compared to the traditional ones. On the contrary, they compose a creative process resulting into children’s development of communication, cognitive and social skills, and as a result achieving learning to do, learning to learn and learning to be together. For this purpose, the Greek Research Team will provide training possibility for both pre- and in-service levels of pre-and primary school teacher education.

5.6.1 European added value

Significant expertise was brought to the project by each partner, as all the universities included in the consortium are well established institutions with wide experience in education and training, with emphasis, however, on different fields. Besides their expertise, all partners brought different cultural perspectives to the SIGNALS project and provided insight into their national contexts. Thus, the synergy of the specific multinational scheme proved to be a fruitful experience by establishing a multidimensional picture of the issue under investigation and addressing cultural and social variations among EU countries. The partnership cooperation and the exchange of best-practice examples proved to be a helpful and useful experience on two levels: a) the design and implementation of the national project; b) the gain of an expanded perspective of interpreting the national project results.

5.7 Dissemination and Sustainability

Some units of the Greek SIGNALS syllabus have already been tested in the following pre-graduate courses in the Faculty of Education of the University of Western Macedonia.

1) Curricula of Early Childhood Education. Teaching Strategies (K. Vrinioti)

2) Strategies of Acquiring/learning a language and Communication strategies (E. Griva)

3) Social pedagogical approaches in the primary school (I. Thoidis)

Moreover, the principles, the design and the results of the Greek project were presented and discussed at the following international and national conferences:

"A paper with the title “Pre-and primary school teachers’ views on children’s learning: A critical appraisal of the Greek case” (K. Vrinioti & I. Thoidis) was presented at the 25th
EECERA Conference, Barcelona, Spain (7-10 September 2015).

*A paper with the title “Participation’ as a learning process: A project at the first grades of primary school” (K. Vrinioti & E. Griva) was presented at the 2nd International Conference on Reimagining Schooling, University of Macedonia- Thessaloniki (24-26 September 2015).

*A symposium related to the implementation of the Greek project will be organized by K. Vrinioti with all members of the Greek research group at a seminar conducted by the University of Western Macedonia- Florina, on 4th December, 2015.
CHAPTER V: "PARTICIPATION" AS A COLLABORATIVE LEARNING PROCESS IN FIRST- AND SECOND GRADE: A TIME-CONSUMING PROCESS COUNTERACTING THE ACHIEVEMENT OF COGNITIVE LEARNING

References


CHAPTER VI

“Settling-in children at ECEC centre” as a potential for participation and cooperation between parents, children and staff

by Marta Korintus

The early childhood system in Hungary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of children</th>
<th>20 weeks to 6 years</th>
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<tr>
<td>Regulation and administration of early childhood services</td>
<td>➢ 20 weeks to 3 years (bölcsőde)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>➢ 3 to 6 years (óvoda)</td>
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<td>Policy responsibility at central level</td>
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<td></td>
<td>➢ Early Childhood Education and Care (for 3 - 6 year-olds) Secretariat for Education, Ministry of Human Capacities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Operational responsibility at local level</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Compulsory pre-primary year</td>
<td>Since 1 September 2015 attendance is compulsory for 3 year-olds in óvoda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School starting age</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do national or regional curricula or guidelines exist</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do the curricula include guidelines concerning transitions or continuity</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length and level of initial training of lead staff and assistant staff</td>
<td>2 years upper secondary or BA for childcare pedagogues in bölcsőde</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>3 years BA for kindergarten pedagogues in óvoda</td>
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6.1 Abstract

In accordance with the aims of the SIGNALS project, the Hungarian study set out to look at social competences and skills of staff, parents and children in situations of settling-in children to ECEC centre, with the objectives to assess existing practice and to find ways to enable parents and staff to improve the quality of pedagogical exchanges to better accommodate children’s needs and to ensure their better participation. The research applied an analytical framework created by the legislation, the National Guidance, the local pedagogical curriculum of the ECEC centre, the curriculum content related to principles of participation and involvement, the notion of children’s perspectives, and Shier’s model. The results indicate that social and communication competences and skills of staff and parents alike need to be improved. Existing communication channels and contents should be improved and research to show ways of achieving the participation of children under the age of three should be carried out in order to ensure better pedagogical exchanges, and better accommodate children’s needs.

6.2 Introduction

The rationale for the SIGNALS project - as introduced on the project website - follows a framework outlined by The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recognizes that it is a fundamental right and obligation for parents to be involved in their children’s development and education, and by research that shows that parent engagement is important for enhancing children’s wellbeing and learning, and is also strongly associated with children’s later academic success and high school completion rates (Starting Strong III, 2012).

The SIGNALS project aims to enable parents, early education staff and children to build together positive relationships that will enhance the development and education of young children; improve the interactive and pedagogical competences of education staff and parents.

The Hungarian “childcare project” focuses on settling-in children under three years of age in early childhood education and care (ECEC) centres (bölcsőde) within the framework of a year-round cooperation with parents.

6.3 Aims

In accordance with the aims of the SIGNALS project, the Hungarian study wishes to support democratic participation and consideration of the perspectives of children. Accordingly, “the overarching goal is to enable parents and professionals to find a joint approach to child development and learning, and to improve the quality of the pedagogical relationship between educational staff and children,” as laid down in the project’s proposal. The specific aim is to look at social competences and skills of staff, parents and children in situations of settling-in/adaptation of children to ECEC centre, with the objectives to assess existing practice and to find ways to enable parents and staff to improve the quality of pedagogical exchanges to better accommodate children’s needs and to ensure their better participation.

6.4 Context

The settling-in procedure guidance was initially developed in Hungary in the 1980’s. At the time...
the approach was very child focused. During the 1990’s and early 2000’s, the focus has changed to encompass not just the child but the whole family, and awareness and attention to working with parents grew. Settling-in children is now nested in a general framework of engaging parents in ECEC services. According to the national guidelines for work in ECEC centres for under 3’s, an adaptation/settling-in period with the participation of parents is to be ensured for children newly admitted to the centre, and the process is to be designed so as to meet the child’s and the parents’ needs. However, there is a huge variety of implementation across the country.

6.4.1 Legislative background

The Act 31 of 1997 on the protection of children and guardianship affairs and the related Regulation 15/1997 are the relevant pieces of legislation for all kinds of children’s services, including ECEC for children under the age of three. It lays down the foundations – among others – for ensuring children’s and parents’ rights within the services and for working together with parents. The requirement for developing a local curriculum covering compulsory contents and taking into account the National Guidance is set.

6.4.2 National Guidelines

The National Guidelines is a 72 page-long document, covering all aspects of the work. It is not a piece of legislation itself but the regulation on the operation of ECEC centres for children under the age of three refers to it as the main guidance to be observed.

The curriculum within the Guidance is 12 pages long with chapters relating to: 1) the objectives, 2) the basic concepts, 3) the tasks, 4) the principles, 5) the main situations, 6) the additional services for families, 7) documentation and 8) the milestones of children’s development by age three. Children’s rights – based on the UN Child Rights Convention – and parents’ rights and duties are outlined.

‘Cooperation’ is mentioned 14 times in the curriculum, mainly in the context of working with families and with other services and organizations. It is acknowledged that families have the responsibility for upbringing children. ECEC centres have to respect this and work with families in a manner that provides help and assistance for this task. Parents are to be partners for the staff in ECEC centres, which is especially true during the time of settling-in children. Cooperation is one of the main concepts governing the work with children also, stressing the importance of listening to children, of taking their views into consideration and of supporting (rather than directing) their activities. Cooperation is also mentioned as the desirable way of staff members working together in the interest of children.

The term ‘interaction’, occurring 10 times, is very closely related and used with the term ‘cooperation’. The most frequent occurrence however, is in connection with children’s play, language development and learning.

‘Participation’, occurring 7 times, is the word for which there is no one good translation in Hungarian. However, the concept is used most often in relation to children’s developing self-reliance. The idea of children’s participation in all activities, especially in the ones related to care routines and self-help.
‘Democracy’ as a word is not mentioned in the curriculum but the idea is expressed 6 times, as respecting children’s rights, families’ cultural, religious and other kinds of diversities; as helping children’s social relations to become open, emphatic and tolerant; as a way of staff’s working, and as an approach to supporting children’s personality development.

6.4.3 Relationships and cooperation with parents and settling-in children at ECEC centre

Cooperation with parents is outlined in the Guidelines as a year-round series of events including:

• open days for prospective parents to visit the centres in the district to learn about their pedagogy and daily schedule, to assess the environment, etc. to be able to choose the one they would like to use.
• events organized early summer for prospective parents to familiarize themselves with the staff and spend more time with other parents and children in the centre they wish to use
• registration (all year admittance is available but most children start at the beginning of the school year in September)
• staff visits to the families to learn about the child’s environment, habits, daily routine, etc. and to establish closer contacts with the child
• settling-in period when the child begins to attend the centre, with the participation of the parents (usually about two weeks during which the parent spends gradually increasing time in the centre with the child during the first week, then gradually withdraws and lets the pedagogue spend more and more time with the child and take over supporting the child’s activities.)
• regular small group meetings (usually bi-monthly) for the parents to discuss different issues related to the life of their children’s group.
• holiday events and preparations for these
• daily meetings between parents and staff at drop off and collection times.

6.5 Research

The adaptation process was studied within this framework, especially to assess cooperation, participation and competency of children, parents and staff.

6.5.1 Research questions

• What are the weaknesses and strengths of current practice in terms of involving children and parents (i.e. participation)?
• What are the needs met and needs not met for all agents in the situations studied (children, parents and staff)?
• What competencies are needed to redress situations where needs are not met or could be improved?

6.5.2 Analytical framework

The term nevelés has a central role in early childhood work in Hungary. It is a holistic concept, including not just care and education but also health, behaviour, and social skills – everything
needed in life. It has, therefore, much in common with the concept of ‘social pedagogy’ (as used, for example in Denmark or Germany) or “education in its broadest sense”. (Source: Kaga, Bennett, Moss: Caring and Learning Together, UNESCO, 2010). Nevelés expresses that care and education are inseparable concepts. When you provide care, you also teach children directly or indirectly and vice versa. In other words, it relates to “pedagogy”. The national curriculum is based on this concept, and relate to cooperation, interaction, participation and democracy/democratic approach.

Pramling Samuelsson (2010) discusses the differences between child perspectives and children’s perspectives, pointing to the difference in taking into consideration what is best for the child – based on the knowledge of children in general and on the knowledge of a particular child (child perspective or child centeredness) – and having children actively expressing their views and contributing to shaping their environment (children’s perspectives). Shier’s model (Shier, 2001) for enhancing children’s participation in decision making provides an easy practical tool to use for establishing the level of children’s participation in a group, such as (1) children are listened to, (2) children are supported in expressing their views, (3) children’s views are taken into account, (4) children are involved in decision-making processes, (5) children share power and responsibility for decision making. Acknowledging that “at each level individuals and organizations may have differing degrees of commitment to the process of empowerment” and that the children in our research were younger than three years of age, this model was applied to assess and to reveal the extent to which children’s views and perspectives are part of the working routine in the ECEC centre chosen for its good practice.

Realising and accepting that children’s way of experiencing their environment enables the adults to understand the child’s world is especially important for work with young children who have not mastered verbal communication yet to a full extent. Harcourt and Einarsdottir (2011) referring to several publications however, stress that researchers’ interest in listening to children by trying to learn about their knowledge, perspectives, views and opinions is not without tensions. Among others, reference is made to Mannion (2007) who suggested to reframe the field of children’s participation by focusing on child-adult relations instead. In line with Mannion’s approach, our project focused on child-pedagogue-parent interactions.

The project applied an analytical framework created by the legislation, the National Guidance, the local pedagogical curriculum, the curriculum content related to principles of participation and involvement, the notion of children’s perspectives, and Shier’s model.

6.5.3 Research procedure and methods

An initial document analysis focused on the content referring to participation, cooperation, interaction and democracy in the legislation, the national guidelines, the local pedagogical curriculum and the information about settling-in children.

The documented good practice of engaging parents in an ECEC centre for children under the age of three in one of the biggest districts of Budapest has been selected to serve as a training module.

A focus group discussion with the participation of four parents, two staff members and the
manager of the centre was organized to assess concerns about and satisfactions with the centre’s practice of engaging parents.

A short questionnaire was administered before and after the settling-in period to 5 families and pedagogues to find out how parents and staff members were thinking about children’s and parents’ engagement.

A survey was administered in the centre to the parents of new children and all pedagogues. The ECEC centre has 132 places, half of which were available for new children at the time of the survey. There were 35 returned questionnaires from parents, which represents a 53% response rate. Out of the 22 employed pedagogues 15 responded and 11 questionnaires were returned by students spending the practice time of their studies in the centre at the time.

Diaries written by the pedagogues about children during the settling-in period, and photos of joint events were also collected.

An attempt has been made to establish children’s perspectives and opinion by focusing on their relationship with the pedagogue, with the parent and with the other children during the settling-in period by analysing the diaries and the notes written to parents. The diary of each child covers the daily events, what the child did, how he/she felt and how she related to staff and the other children.

6.6 Discussion

6.6.1 Participation of the child

The analyses of the returned questionnaires administered before and after settling-in children reveal that there is consensus among parents and pedagogues that participation for children means mainly to be able to make decisions, to be supported in their attempts for self-reliance and being able to get to know the daily schedule and being integrated into children’s group (community). However, parents are also of the opinion that children feel included if activities are not forced on them but rather they can freely choose what to do, whereas pedagogues consider participating at holiday events as one of the more important indicators for the child to feel/be engaged. Interestingly, children’s feeling of security was mentioned only by parents. Decision making and attitudinal issues characterize parents thinking, whereas issues related to the life at the centre are more relevant for the pedagogues. These responses indicate a strong child-centeredness.

After going through the settling-in period and experiencing the difficulties and successes of the adaptation process, parents’ views have not changed essentially. Rather, they have indicated subtler, more detailed understanding of their children’s involvement. Children’s feeling of being secure gained an even greater importance. Parents emphasized that being able to make choices and being asked to participate in or join some routine tasks made children more relaxed and secure; it was easier for them to adapt to the new environment if some activities (such as taking a nap with favourite toy, having the bread sliced the way the mother does, etc.) were carried out just like at home.
Pedagogues have not changed their views after the settling-in period about the participation of children either. Their responses showed a good understanding of how to achieve children’s involvement and participation, such as: attempting to involve them in the daily routine, to consider and meet their needs in order to make them feel at home in the new environment, leaving enough time for them to experiment with routines such as washing hands, adapting the pedagogy to the different needs of different children especially of special needs children, having the mother present during settling-in, offering favourite toys, etc.. The diaries show very detailed and concrete examples of behaviour, feelings, attitudes and activities of children every day from day one to day 14, mapping each child’s progress and transition from the home to the ECEC centre’s environment. Since many of these young children have not mastered verbal communication yet, and even those who have were stressed by the new situation, their needs, difficulties and successes were established by using the parental questionnaires, the survey responses, and the entries of the diaries written by the pedagogues, which sometimes registered the parents’ views as well. So, children’s perspectives were made visible by the observational records of the diaries, which might have been biased. The concrete examples of the diaries indicate that pedagogues pay close attention to children’s behaviour and adjust to their needs (such as allowing enough time to say goodbye to the mother, leaving more time to using the soap and washing hands, letting them sit and watch other children rather than insisting on their joining the others, etc.).

6.6.2 Participation of the parents

Parents and pedagogues seem to agree mostly on what it means for parents to be engaged in the childcare centre. Pedagogues are of the opinion that parents involvement in the process of settling-in children is the most important indicator of their participation, followed by being involved in different activities such as parent group meetings, parents’ forum for representing their interests and taking part in celebrations and different organized events. Possibilities to observe life in the childcare centre are thought to make parents feel involved. However, pedagogues think that written communication with parents, such as the availability of the child’s documentation and pedagogues’ reports and notes to look at hardly contribute to parents’ feeling of being involved. Parents on their part think that following children’s development to a greater extent contributes just as much to feel they are participants as involvement in activities related to the child and getting to know the life at the centre. They do not value participating in decision making and in activities as much as the pedagogues think. In other words, parents are more child-focused, whereas pedagogues seem to consider involvement in the life of the centre as the most important factor to make parents feel engaged.

The evaluation of the short questionnaire after the settling-in period have revealed parents’ appreciation when staff asked for their’ opinion thereby achieving a direct and open communication that participating in the settling-in procedure made it possible for them to get to know the life at the centre more intimately, events were enjoyable, that their opinions were sometimes taken into account, they were invited to some events, they were asked about their child’s activities at home, and even that attention was paid to whether children drink enough during the day.

Pedagogues felt that parents’ participation in settling-in the child have increased their
knowledge and understanding about the daily routine at the centre. Parental involvement was shown by the daily communication and questions about their child at drop off and pick up times and active participation in small group meetings where they also made acquaintance with the other parents as well. Staff made decisions about settling-in children in cooperation with parents.

### 6.6.3 Mapping of needs, difficulties and successes of participants during the settling-in period

Qualitative and quantitative focused analyses of all collected data and the diaries were used to pinpoint the consensual elements (summarized in Table 1.) and major differences in regard to needs, difficulties and successes identified by staff and parents in situations of settling-in children.

| Table 1.: Needs, difficulties and successes of children, parents and staff |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Needs                                            | Difficulties                                    | Successes                                      |
| Children                                        |                                                 |                                                 |
| parent’s presence, security, care, acceptance, loving attention, time, gradualness | separation from parent, adapting to new situation, unknown environment, daily schedule, eating, sleeping | settling-in well, self-reliance, growing to accept and like staff, sense of achievement, new friends |
| Parents                                         |                                                 |                                                 |
| to be accepted, being informed, trust, empathy, feedback, child to feel good | separation from child, change, observing rules, communication, understanding the practice at the centre | child feels good child is self-reliant, getting to know staff and life at the centre, successful cooperation, good communication |
| Staff                                           |                                                 |                                                 |
| cooperation of parents, tolerance, forming good relationship with parents, information about the child and family, trust | expectations of parents, absence of cooperation with parents, settling-in more than one child at a time | child accepts staff, successful settling-in, good relationship with parent, positive feedback from parents |

There is general agreement that children need to feel secure, which can be granted by the presence of the parent. Acceptance and loving attention are prerequisites to create an atmosphere enabling the active engagement of both parents and children. Similarity between a child’s experience in the centre and the home in terms of routine activities and schedule facilitate the adaptation to the new environment.

Getting to know and meeting children’s individual needs are not mentioned in the responses of
the survey, although the practice is different as shown in the diaries about settling-in each child. Paying attention to individual needs are either taken for granted (since there are many related references in the diaries of settling-in) or, all or most children are considered to have similar needs derived from a developmental perspective. Children therefore seem to be viewed as a group in the reflections of our respondents. The contradiction between the study results and the actual practice of making meticulous notes on children’s everyday life prove the need for more detailed information and competent communication skills on the part of parents and staff alike to be able to convey a realistic picture of each child’s needs, difficulties and successes in order to represent children’s perspectives. It has become evident that research focusing on finding ways to learn about/assess the perspectives of children younger than three years of age is needed.

Parents expressed that it is not only their child but they themselves also need to be accepted. However, for them, being informed and to receive feedback is just as important as to experience mutual trust and the empathy of the pedagogues while they go through the difficulties of separation from their child. The importance of communication is highlighted by the fact that it is often mentioned in relation to their needs, difficulties and successes alike. Nonetheless, when asked what kind of needs, difficulties and successes pedagogues experience, very often parents could not answer. Definitely, they do not know pedagogues’ work well enough, which gives rise to the thought that pedagogues need to reconsider the content of the information provided for parents and the ways of communicating effectively.

Pedagogues seem to attach more importance to “good relationship with parents”. This features among their needs, difficulties and successes as well. Communication is less salient. It appears as “receiving information about the child and the family” among the needs, and as “positive feedback from parents” among successes. Both parents and pedagogues expressed similar ideas about their relationships but they differ in the emphasis attached to it. As our results reveal, there is room for improving competencies in communication.

6.7 Summary and Conclusions

Hungarian parents tend to value self-reliance as the most important thing for young children to learn, both at home and in childcare centres. This priority coincides with the pedagogical mission of the bölcsőde – to facilitate children’s healthy self-sufficiency in routine daily life. (Brayfield and Korintus, 2011)

However, applying Shier’s model of pathways to children’s participation in decision making indicate that children are listened to, and are supported in expressing their views but it is not a policy requirement for staff to actively involving children under three years of age in decision making. Whether it happens or not, and whether children’s views (suggestions, indications, etc.) are taken into account is up to individual staff members, who are definitely not trained in the different ways and methods of considering children’s views.

In sum, the results of the research show that in spite of studying a centre with good practice, there is need for more information, for mutual trust and understanding, for good/excellent communication and communication skills on the part of pedagogues, for ample time for developing good relationships, for feedback and for an accepting, loving atmosphere. It has been revealed that parents’ knowledge about pedagogues is minimal (as indicated by the number of
missing parental answers related to pedagogues’ needs, difficulties and successes). On the other hand, pedagogues do not feel the need to ask for parents’ opinion, only getting to know parents – as one way to learn more about the child – is important for them. Even though we chose a centre with good practice, it has become evident that the social and communication competences and skills of staff and parents alike need to be improved. Existing communication channels and contents should be improved and research to show ways of achieving the participation of children under the age of three should be carried out in order to ensure better pedagogical exchanges, and better accommodate children’s needs.

6.7.1 Exploitation / Practical application

The results of the research are to inform the updating of the National Guidance for childcare centres with the better defined concepts of participation, cooperation, interaction and democratic approach to implement and to improve engaging parents and children in activity-oriented interactions.

6.7.2 Dissemination and sustainability

The results of the project are disseminated at conferences organized for practitioners working in ECEC centres, teacher trainers and people responsible for policy development in national and local level in order to sensitize them about the issues of democratic participation of parents and children.

Guidelines for ECEC centres related to settling-in are to be developed as national guidance to be applied in local curriculums. The guidelines are to be distributed through regular national dissemination channels.

6.7.3 European added value

Participating in the SIGNALS project has given us the opportunity to meet and work together with well-known European researchers who share our interest in improving the lives of young children. Information and publications could have been collected without the project but participation and cooperation made it possible to think together and share ideas. Following each other’s line of thought and reasoning at the project meetings and having the opportunity to visit different sites and meet local professionals gave food for reflection and discussion. Having the chance to work with colleagues from other countries enabled us to better understand different approaches and systems on the practical as well as on the conceptual level. Participation, cooperation, interaction were not only the keywords for the project but were the guiding principles for our joint work.

References

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SIGNALS webpage: http://www.signals-eu.com/description.html

http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/crc.pdf
CHAPTER VII

Improving parent competences in promoting literacy development

by Agnes Nyitrai and Judit Podráczky
Kaposvár University

The early childhood system in Hungary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of children</th>
<th>20 weeks to 6 years</th>
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</table>
| Regulation and administration of early childhood services | ➢ 20 weeks to 3 years (bölsőde)  
| | ➢ 3 to 6 years (ővoda) |
| Policy responsibility at central level | ➢ Early Childhood Education and Care (for 20 weeks - 3 year-olds) State Secretariat for Family and Youth Affairs, Ministry of Human Capacities  
| | ➢ Early Childhood Education and Care (for 3 -6 year-olds) Secretariat for Education, Ministry of Human Capacities |
| Operational responsibility at local level | Municipality |
| Compulsory pre-primary year | Since 1 September 2015 attendance is compulsory for 3 year-olds in ővoda |
| School starting age | 6 years |
| Do national or regional curricula or guidelines exist | Yes |
| Do the curricula include guidelines concerning transitions or continuity | No |
| Length and level of initial training of lead staff and assistant staff | 2 years upper secondary or BA for childcare pedagogues in bölsőde  
| | 3 years BA for kindergarten pedagogues in ővoda |
7.1 Abstract
In this chapter we present some results of the Hungarian kindergarten study within the framework of the SIGNALS project. The research of the University of Kaposvár deals with the issue of emerging literacy of young children, focusing on the involvement of parents, children and pedagogues. The present chapter looks at the issue mainly through the eyes of kindergarten pedagogues.

7.2 Introduction
Our study was implemented within the framework of “SIGNALS” Strengthening Activity-Oriented Interaction and Growth in the Early Years and Transitions project within the COMENIUS sub-programmes of the EU Lifelong-Learning Programme, which has been co-ordinated by the University of Cologne in the period between 01/01/2014 and 30/09/2015 with the participation of seven countries (Germany, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Island, Romania and Sweden). The Hungarian consortium-partner is the General Directorate of Social Affairs and Child Protection. Kaposvár University has been taking part in the realisation of the project as a local partner.

In this chapter we present some results of the Hungarian kindergarten study within the framework of the SIGNALS project. The research of the University of Kaposvár deals with the issue of emerging literacy of young children, focusing on the involvement of parents, children and pedagogues. The present chapter looks at the issue mainly through the eyes of kindergarten pedagogues. Another project planned to be carried out in the near future will complement the present one by looking at the issue through the eyes of parents.

Our aims were to design methodological programmes for kindergarten pedagogues to develop their own competences for supporting literacy development of children and for supporting parents’ competences which enhance literacy competences, since it seems to be clear that promoting emergent literacy development is one of the most important means of addressing disadvantages.

7.3 Context: education in kindergarten (óvoda)
There have been kindergartens in Hungary since 1828. These are the first stage of public education for 3-6 (7) years old children. It used to be compulsory from the age of 5, but starting from 1 September 2015 it is compulsory from the age of 3. There are 13-25 children per group. All kindergarten pedagogues are qualified at BA-level.

Kindergarten-education is legislated on two-levels: The Education Act of 2012, which is the legislative framework for kindergartens and the National Curriculum of Kindergarten Education, which is a compulsory guidance for every kindergarten in Hungary (regardless of the maintainer). The National Curriculum of Kindergarten Education has supplements for the education of special need children, for church-kindergartens and for kindergartens for minority children. The National Curriculum of Kindergarten Education was introduced in 1997, and its last modification was in 2012. The National Curriculum of Kindergarten Education is a 9-pages long document.

“Each kindergarten formulates its own programme within this framework. A competence profile
of the goals to be achieved at the end of the children’s participation in kindergarten is outlined, alongside organisational aspects and the tasks of kindergarten staff. The official framework principles emphasise a child-centred and rights-based approach. The main tasks are seen to be encouraging a healthy lifestyle, and supporting emotional and social development. The need for community networking is emphasised, and a number of kindergarten activities are outlined. These include: play; poems and stories; singing, music, singing games; drawing and other manual activities; learning about the environment/world (Korintus, 2009). Movement, learning and working activity, e.g. laying the table, looking after animals, etc. are included, too. The National Curriculum of Kindergarten Education gives a high priority to play as the primary and most important activity of young children.

7.4 Theoretical background of “Kindergarten project”

Emergent literacy (Clay, 1966, in: Szinger, 2007) means “growing into” written culture in the preschool period with 1) storytelling and picture book reading; 2) imitating writing and reading in play; and 3) experiences in daily activities with parents and with pedagogues. Storytelling and picture book reading experiences are playing a key role at an early age, and parent-child interaction, which supports pre-school age literacy development, is of utmost importance in early-childhood and pre-school education (Réger, 1990; Nelson, 1998; Bus, 2002; Cairney, 2003; Rodriguez et al, 2009). Children’s family literacy environment varies significantly; while some children have regular experiences in listening to tales or stories and looking at story books at home, others come across this experience in the nursery (bölcsőde) or in the pre-school for the first time. One of the major determining factors in these differences is parents’ qualifications (Réger, 1990; Nyitrai, 1995; Nyitrai & Darvay, 2013). It has been known from research results for decades that children whose parents regularly tell them tales and stories exceed their peers who are lacking this experience by approximately 1.5 years in development (Nagy, 1980, Czachesz, 2001). The different socio-cultural situations of families imply significant differences in the literary environment surrounding children, and the compensation of related disadvantages is an essential task of institutional education (Bernstein, 1999; Szinger, 2007; Nyitrai, 2012). There are some works especially for supporting family literacy projects, for developing parents’ competences in storytelling and picture book reading (Nutbrown, Hannon & Morgan, 2005).

There have been significant changes in recent decades regarding attitudes to co-operation with parents in terms of both content and methodology (Epstein, 2001; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). As a result of these changes improving parental involvement has become a major target at international level and it has been more and more emphasised in the educational policies of developed countries. There are a number of initiatives among the EU recommendations encouraging the strengthening of the institutional relationship with parents, promoting parental involvement and developing parents’ competences. Our research results from Hungary show that although steps have been taken to form partnerships, there are no significant results yet: teachers often think that parents are not interested enough while parents think teachers do not give them enough feedback and help (Hegedős & Podráczky, 2012; F. Lassú, 2012; Podráczky, 2013). According to our experience, parents’ involvement and their willingness to be involved depend on the children’s age and the teacher’s characteristics. Teachers and parents must rely
more on each other at younger ages of children and this circumstance is more favourable for forming a partnership.

There is an extra chapter dealing with the contacts of kindergarten in the National Curriculum of Kindergarten Education; and a part of it is about the cooperation between kindergarten and families. The principle of this cooperation is: parents (families) have the responsibility for upbringing their children; kindergarten has got an additional, sometimes corrective role in this process. The cooperation between kindergarten and families is a basic condition for the development of children. There is a rich variety of building up contacts in the kindergarten: talking, meetings for parents, "open days", special programmes for children and parents, e. g. excursion, playing-afternoon, storytelling-afternoon, etc. There is differentiated communication with families. Differentiation means building partnership in the knowledge of the needs, values and structures of the families, way of lives and activities of parents. The positive effects of a good partnership (involvement of parents of kindergarten life) are:

- Parents can observe their children in the group; they can transfer the most appropriate methods.
- Parents have a better understanding of the educational process, of the age characteristics and of behaviour of children.
- Parents can follow the methods of kindergarten pedagogues and extend their own parental competences (Nyitrai-Szombathelyi, Kicsák, Villányi & Zóka, 2009).
- Kindergarten-pedagogues know better the children’s background, and can allow for the habits of families in education.
- Kindergarten pedagogues get more appreciation and more help from parents.

7.5 Research and discussion

7.5.1 Questionnaires about the participation/involvement of parents and children

The questionnaires for needs analysis focused on the subject “Participation of Children and Parents” in kindergarten. Participation is a central concept of kindergarten-pedagogy, but it is not easily defined. Meanings of participation and involvement are somewhat different: perhaps the word “involvement” implies a greater emphasis on activity. We asked children, parents and pedagogues about their senses and experiences with their own participation. Our questions were:

Kindergarten pedagogues:
1. Please describe what you think participation means for children in your preschool!
2. Please describe what participation of the parents mean?

Parents:
CHAPTER VII: IMPROVING PARENT COMPETENCES IN PROMOTING LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

1. Please describe what you think participation for your child in the preschool means!
2. Please describe what participation for you means in your preschool?

Children:

1. Give me some examples of when you can participate in preschool?
2. Give me some examples of in what way you can participate in your preschool?

The sample was composed as follows:

- Questionnaires for pedagogues: N=6 (random selection)
- Questionnaires for parents: N=3 (random selection)
- Interviews with children: N=3 (random selection)

In the next part we analyse parents’ concepts about their participation in activities and involvement in decision making in kindergarten, and kindergarten pedagogues’ concepts about parents’ participation in activities and involvement in decision making in kindergarten.

It seems that parents’ concepts about their own involvement are similar to the concepts of kindergarten pedagogues about the involvement of the parents. We think it can be a good base for the further development of parents’ involvement.

1. table: Parents and pedagogues about parents’ involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pedagogues about the involvement of parents</th>
<th>Parents about their own involvement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation in programmes for children</td>
<td>Participation in programmes for children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in organisation of programmes for children</td>
<td>Involvement in decision making about children’s programmes and activities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participation in programmes for parents</td>
<td>Participation in programmes for parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting to know the life in kindergarten</td>
<td>Involvement in decision making about conditions of kindergarten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in the development of conditions of kindergarten</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Involvement in education of children together with kindergarten pedagogues</td>
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In addition to the high degree of similarity, it is striking that involvement in decision making was marked several times by parents; pedagogues marked parents’ activities in the organisation of programmes. Parents would like more involvement in decision making, pedagogues would like to get more help from parents in delivering programmes, e. g. parents’ evenings, children’s day programs, excursions, open days, celebrations etc. Parents’ involvement in education of their children together with kindergarten pedagogues seems to be very important for
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pedagogues; it is one of the basic ideas of the National Curriculum of Kindergarten Education.

We asked children, parents and pedagogues about children’s participation, too. Some examples from children’s answers:

- “we can decide what to do”
- “we can choose fairy tales during storytelling”
- “we can choose friends or partners in play”.

The parents talked about the cooperation between pedagogues and children. Parents had an idea, that children had possibilities of decision about friends, play, eating something or not, etc. They found the involvement of children in prosocial activities very important. The kindergarten pedagogues gave similar answers about children’s participation.

7.6 Focus-group interviews with pedagogues

Our own objectives to design a programme aimed at improving parents’ competences which enhance literacy development. Our research on which the programme is to be based focuses partly on mapping kindergarten pedagogues’ opinions of children’s attitudes to tales, story books and media and of the factors influencing these as well as of their own roles, opportunities and co-operation with the parents. We made focus-group and semi-structured individual interviews with 30 kindergarten pedagogues in Kaposvár (it means: there were about 306 children). The interview questions were related to the following:

1) Storytelling habits at home, trends and changes;
2) Children’s attitudes to tales, storytelling, books in infant-toddler centres and in kindergartens;
3) Supporting parents’ involvement, possibilities for co-operation, promotion, mutual reflection regarding storytelling.
4) The place and the role of storytelling in the work of educational staff. (Professional opinions on the role of tales. Preparation. Available professional literature to rely on. Further training and consultation opportunities. Success and difficulties. Co-operation with other members of the staff).

As a by-product of the interviews, certain elements of the interviewed educators’ parent-image also emerged and we regard these as a major determining factor of the relationship with parents and with children.

7.7 Some result of focus-group interviews with kindergarten pedagogues

7.7.1 Storytelling in the families

There is a great variation related to storytelling in families of children attending kindergarten: storytelling takes place often, rarely or never in families. Books are rarely given to children as a present, and sometimes with the aim of supporting development, not only for enjoying them.
There are some “trendy tales”, first of all Disney-productions. The kindergarten pedagogues talked about the changes of parent-child communication, too, they thought, intimacy between parents and children isn’t as important as it was before. Usually, children are watching TV instead of picture book reading or storytelling with parents at home. They are often alone in these situations, without their parents, so in the most of these situations there isn’t enough control and help to understand contents. Some children have got their own tablets, etc. for watching cartoons. There are also some positive experiences, e.g. some of parents have old picture books from their own childhood, etc.

7.7.1.1 Children’s attitudes to tales, storytelling, books in institutions
Kindergarten children like storytelling, but they can listen to it less and less, because of spending a lot of time watching films at home. They like picture book reading together with their pedagogue. They rarely bring books from home to the kindergarten. The pedagogues have positive experiences in visiting the library with children. The media-tales are often present during the play of children, pedagogues’ opinion is not positive about it. The families – mainly mothers – have strong influence on attitudes to storytelling of children: more storytelling at home result in better understanding of stories, tales in kindergarten, too.

7.7.1.2 Supporting parents’ involvement
Kindergarten pedagogues have not only positive experiences with parents’ involvement. They tried common storytelling to parents with their children but have ambivalent experiences. They tried interactive storytelling with parents but it wasn’t successful either. There was drama play on parents evening, too. They had adverse feelings first but their attitude improved later. Most of the parents talk to pedagogues only in situations when there are problems with the development or the behavior of their children. Pedagogues usually recommend reading picture books to parents, but they don’t know whether the parents take their advice or not.

7.7.1.3 The place and the role of storytelling in the work of the education staff
Kindergarten pedagogues don’t really know the contemporary literature for children, they have difficulties with it, and they don’t really know the new cartoon films for children (it depends on how old their own children are). Pedagogues would like to have consultation with HUNRA (Hungarian Reading Society).

7.7.1.4 Opinion of pedagogues about parents’ habits of storytelling at home and about parents’ involvement
Analysis of the interviews shows negative tendencies of pedagogues’ opinions about parents’ competences and behaviour in situations of storytelling with their own children at home: out of 52 opinions of kindergarten pedagogues only 7 were positive. Kindergarten pedagogues have expectations toward parents and there is a strong nostalgia for the families of earlier decades in their hearts; they think parents had better attitudes to their children some years or decades ago. It is very interesting because nowadays parents are usually older than ever before. Pedagogues often notice a lack of interest on the part of parents however, the help received from pedagogues is not considered sufficient. To achieve some improvements regarding this situation, it would be necessary to know more about the pedagogues’ opinion on parents’ educational habits as these concepts have deep impacts on the cooperation between pedagogues and parents, and it would be important to know more about parents’ opinion about
their own and the pedagogues’ competences.

7.8 Parents’ evenings

Our target was to design a programme for kindergarten pedagogues for developing their own competences to support literacy development of children and for supporting parents’ competences to enhance involvement and literacy competences.

To achieve our goals, we organised a four-part series of parents’ evening in the kindergarten for students’ practices of Kaposvár University once a month, 4 times during the spring of 2015. The evenings were organised to cover special stages of literacy development.

The issues were:

1. Movement and language development in infancy
2. The role of attachment between mother and child in language development
3. Why shall we tell stories, fairy tales every day?
4. Literacy development, skills for learning reading and writing

The moderator of the conversations was the director of the kindergarten. There were a fix team of experts every time, including a psychologist, pedagogue, kindergarten pedagogue, health visitor, special educator and primary school teacher. Parents and pedagogues of the kindergarten for students’ practice of Kaposvár University and “outside” parents took parts in these programmes. (The leaflets about the evenings were available in all kindergartens and nurseries of the town). Some parents participated at each occasion; others made selections and participated only at some evenings. Sometimes parents liked some issues so much that they invited their friends for next time. Usually the mothers were present; occasionally grandmothers or fathers came, too. The evenings started after 5 pm and every programme lasted one and half hours. Childcare was organised for the children whose parents participated at the evenings.

The construction of parents’ evenings was the same every time. Each issue had an expert. The talk began with a brief (cca10 minutes) introduction of the issue by the expert. These introductions could help tuning up the issues, wording the questions. After the introduction all the participants were discussing the issues, asking questions or could tell about their own experience.

The methodological framework for the evenings was provided by Carl Rogers’ nondirective method. The role of moderator and of experts was to facilitate the conversation, to give positive reinforcement to parents’ examples. Empathy, unconditional acceptance and congruence have a big role in these discussions. It wasn’t compulsory to speak, there weren’t good or bad questions, answers. Participation of the experts in conversation depended on their own competences. There was a good atmosphere in these evenings. In our opinion everybody got something: good ideas, good examples, positive reinforcement, etc.
After each evening we asked the parents to fill in a questionnaire about their satisfaction with the organisation, the experts, and the usefulness of the evening. Most parents found these programs very useful, they got new information and good ideas and they felt more confident. The evenings helped pedagogues in thinking more diversely about literacy development and about parents’ role in it, and gave some good ideas to working with parents, to supporting their involvements.

7.9 Summary and conclusions, European added values

Describing kindergarten pedagogues’ opinions about parents’ competences and their experiences with parents’ involvement were only the first steps of our study. In the course of further research we would like to study the pedagogues’ image of parents, as we consider this to be the major determining factor of the relationship with parents and children.

In the field of methodological development we would like to develop
1) a continuing educational project which could
   - help to optimize the relationship with parents / families
   - form attitudes toward parents
   - focus on different methods to actively involve parents
2) programmes for pedagogues to develop their own competences in supporting literacy development of children.

7.9.1 Dissemination and sustainability

We presented the results of this pilot-study with the results of our research dealing with same issues in nurseries in Kaposvár at conferences in Hungary and at ERPA Congress in Athens, 2015.

Another project planned to be carried out in the near future will complement the present one by looking at the issue through the eyes of parents.

We would like to design a design methodological program for kindergarten pedagogues to develop their own competences for supporting literacy development of children and for supporting parents’ competences which enhance literacy competences. We would like to organise a special training for our students regarding these topics.

7.9.2 European added value

In the SIGNALS project we could work together with well-known European researcher. This cooperation gave us possibilities for thinking together and sharing ideas. The discussions were very interesting and useful. The project was a good example for participation, cooperation and involvement, too.
References


Nyitrai, Á. (2012): A kompetenciák fejlődése, a fejlődés nyomon követésére és segítésére
CHAPTER VII: IMPROVING PARENT COMPETENCES IN PROMOTING LITERACY DEVELOPMENT


CHAPTER VIII

Improving Parent and Children Participation in Romanian Preschools

by Stefan Cojocaru, Alexandra Galbin, Delia Rusu

The early childhood system in Romania

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of children</th>
<th>6 months to 6 years</th>
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<tr>
<td>Regulation and administration of early childhood services</td>
<td>preschool 6 months to 5 years old&lt;br&gt;pre-primary classes 5 to 6 years old</td>
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<td>Policy responsibility at central level</td>
<td>Ministry of Education and Scientific Research</td>
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<tr>
<td>Operational responsibility at local level</td>
<td>The Municipality board, School Inspectorate County</td>
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<tr>
<td>Compulsory pre-primary year</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School starting age</td>
<td>6 years (primary school)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do national or regional curricula or guidelines exist</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do the curricula include guidelines concerning transitions or continuity</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length and level of initial training of lead staff and assistant staff</td>
<td>3/5 years university education for preschool teachers</td>
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</table>
CHAPTER VIII: IMPROVING PARENT AND CHILDREN PARTICIPATION IN ROMANIAN PRESCHOOLS

8.1 Abstract

The aim of Romanian chapter is to present the approach used in 13 rural schools with the highest dropout rate and with a predominantly Roma school population within the framework of the SIGNALS project. The approach has an empirical base and is a combined research and development project. The project started with a rigorous literature review, continued with the pre-intervention phase, followed by phases of the project implementation, and finished with the methodology research. How this approach contributes to develop parent and children participation in Romanian preschools, from the perspectives of children, parents and teachers is discussed.

8.2 Introduction

The Signals project aims to enable parents, early education staff and children to build together positive relationships strengthening the participation of young children, improving pedagogical competences of education staff and parents. Starting from Signals goals and principles promoted, the national project, based on Appreciative Inquiry perspective, proposes to develop an institutional background that is designed to improve child participation following the next directions: developing materials for staff and parents, training the staff, parents, and bring together children with their parents to get involved in kindergarten activities. To accomplish the national objectives project in the first phase we took into consideration, and analyzed all the perspectives and needs of participants (parents, children, and staff), then we created our strategy for intervention. Based on the discussions, and conclusions we developed support materials for staff, and parents, and also two guides for teachers, child participation, and positive approach of child’s behavior.

8.2.1 Theoretical background

8.2.1.1 Promoting child right to education

The article 26 of the United Nations (UN) 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, “Everyone has the right to education”, and most nations are signatories to this Declaration. The concept of education as a fundamental legal right Article 13, Clause 2 of the UN’s (1966) International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights extends this commitment to education as a fundamental right, including the universal right to a free and compulsory primary education. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) further strengthens and broadens the concept of the right to education; in particular through the obligation to consider in its implementation the Convention’s four core principles: nondiscrimination; the best interests of the child right to life, survival and development of the child to the maximum extent possible. Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, elaborates the right of the child to education. The Convention recognizes the right of every child to a free primary education, and encourages the development of the secondary education that is accessible and available. Romania enacted the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990 via Law nr.18/1990, which has been amended by Law nr.272/2004. This most recent legislation forms the bulk of Romania’s protections for children and enactments of the provisions of the Convention. Article 47 – (1) claims “The child has the right to receive an
education which would allow him or her to develop his or her capacities and personality, in non-discriminatory conditions*. Paragraph (2) also states that the child’s parents have priority in choosing the type of education for child, must enroll the child in school, and ensure the child’s regular attendance of the classes. Unfortunately school dropout rate it’s still an unsolved problem in Romania; poverty, the lack of workplaces, low level of parent’s education etc. affect school attendance (UNICEF, 2012). 33% of children aged 0-17 years are at risk of poverty as they grow up in households earning an income that is below 60% of the national average household income (UNICEF, 2012).

The problem of school attendance is a political issue discussed at national level in Romania. The politician Raluca Turcu draws attention in a recent press release* to the fact that in Romania 27% of children which should go at school, aren’t included in the educational system. Also, she sustained that “700.000 of Romanians children don't go to school; it is equivalent to 28.000 classes with 25 students, means 1.400 middle schools, statistics provided by ISE Romania (Institute of Education Sciences)". "700.000 children must be involved in the system. If the children aren’t enrolled in the system, they should be identify and brought to school, and integrated in school system". The question is what we should do and how do it?

8.2.1.2 Strengthening positive parenting

Children learn their most important lessons about life from their observations of and interactions with their parents (Bandura, 1977; Bronfenbrenner, 1989). Parental educational behaviors are highly correlated with similar behaviors in their children. Parent role modeling and instruction can have lifetime effects on child’s future. Parenting practices are perceived to be the most influential factors affecting children’s outcomes (Shulruf, 2011). Family background is strongly associated with educational achievement, health and acquisition of capital in adulthood (Guo & Harris, 2000). Sheridan (2001) noted that once parents’ personal aspirations increase, the children’s aspirations will increase, too. In addition to educational attainment, child behavior is also significantly affected by parents’ behaviors. For example, unsafe living conditions and stress caused by economic conditions and not only, can lead to more insensitive parenting, associated with less favorable emotional for children’s raising, development and education (McLoyd, 1990). Many parents are dealing with parental stress, violence against children, poor communication, poor capacity to defend the interests of children in relation to institutions (Cojocaru, 2011).

Positive parenting is one of the key strategies that form the inventory of techniques aimed to support families, together with counseling, crisis intervention, family therapy etc. (Cojocaru, 2009). Parental programs promote parental competences and the positive development of the children (Rodrigo et al., 2013). Positive parenting practices, such as consistency, emotional warmth, and involvement, encourage children to succeed in live (Cojocaru, 2011). Also, parental programs promote family communication, improves quality of family system and parental skills (Amoros et. al., 2013; Low, 2014). Disadvantaged children are less likely to experience school success (Ready, 2010). An important feature of parent education programmes in Romania is the fact that they are aimed primarily at parents belonging to vulnerable and disadvantaged categories of population (Cojocaru, 2011; Cojocaru et. al., 2011). Positive parenting develops the relations between parents and children by encouraging support behaviors from parents and by altering non-productive or harmful behaviors (Small, 1990). Parent programs are adapted to features such as children’s age and children’s problems (Cojocaru, Cojocaru, & Ciuchi, 2011), developing conditions for enhancing family functioning
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capacity (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). The characteristic of positive parenting programs is their participative approach which „helps the parents gain control over their own lives, become better defenders of their own interests and of their children’s, in their interaction with social agencies and institutions, to engage more actively in their children’s education through direct involvement or through the acquisition of resources” (Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez & Bloom, 1993, p. 93-94). Parenting programs can be very effective if parents are empowered as agents of their own learning and development. Parental involvement can be a good intervention to help parents develop and enhance their parenting skills and to avoid inadequate child-rearing (Rodrigo, Byrne, & Alvarez, 2012; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2010). The interest in positive parenting programs it the fact that they contain a number of “promises” solutions to the various problems: dropout, aggressive behavior, social maladjustment (Cojocaru, Cojocaru, Ciuchi, 2011). Parental involvement in the education of children is actually the main driver behind academic success and attainment (Hara & Burke, 1998). Constructing a positive parenting helps children to develop cognitive and non-cognitive skills, necessarily in the process of transition (Aljadeff-Abergel, Ayvazo, & Eldar, 2012).

8.3 Need analysis

8.3.1 Aims

The Signals national project attempts to create a favorable framework to the protection and promotion of children’s rights by improving parenting skills. Starting from the following questions, certain actions mentioned below were taken into consideration to investigate the character, values, potentials and challenges of parent participation in Romanian preschool settings, before the planning phase of the project.

Problem statement and research questions

- How to enhance the participation in public kindergartens in Romania, for children 0-6 years to improve the context of learning and childcare?
- What are the institutional prescriptions that encourage the participation of parents and their involvement in collaboration with professionals of the kindergarten?
- What are the roles and responsibilities of parents perceived by them in terms of collaboration with professionals from preschool?
- How professionals perceive their roles in working with parents?
- What are the challenges of collaboration between parents and professionals preschool?
- How is described by professionals and parents the family and institutional roles in relation to the education and care of children?

8.3.2 National System

In the Romanian preschool education system are included children with ages between 3 years and 6-7 years. The activities take place in kindergartens with a regular, extended or weekly program (Education Law, 5th of January 2011, art. 28, al. 1). The Romanian Preschool Education System is structured on 2 levels: the first level follows children socialization between ages of 3 and 5 years, and the second level follows training for school of children with ages between 5 and 7 years.
According to the new Law of Education proposed by the Educational Minister Daniel Funeriu and approved by the Government on 5th of January 2011, the preparatory class will be moved in the primary education. In order to assure the quality of education and to optimize the resources management, the educational units and the local public administration authorities can decide establishments of school consortiums that are contractual partnerships between school units. Regarding Roma people the practice and studies show that access to preschool education increases with the integration of Roma children in the educational system. This is because kindergarten helps children from disadvantaged families to obtain a set of social aptitudes which would permit them afterwards to get involved in scholarly activities, and to be easier integrated in classrooms. In reality though, the access of Roma children in kindergartens is at a lower level of participation comparing with the other children, and this fact doesn’t do but to increase the existing inequalities. Roma children, lacking preschooler preparation, participate later in school, they integrate with difficulties in the educational requirements and they represent the first template of absenteeism and school drop-out, considering the institution of education an unattractive environment and hardly understandable (Save the Children and IKEA Foundation Study, 2012). Roma people are persons without a state or self government to protect them, they survived millenniums through preserving their, almost intact, traditions. Even now, in XXIst century, these almost 8 million Roma people living in Europe constitute a distinct ethnic group, with their own rules and laws, where the mobility, the permanently looking for a job that could provide them a better life, give them the main feature as a transnational national status (Save the Children Study, 2004).

8.3.3 Legislative background

Law no. 272/2004 on Children’s Rights Protection and Promotion, republished in 2014 emphasizes the child’s right to freedom of expression - Art. 28 (1) and the right to freely express his opinion on any issue that concerns him - Art. 29(1). Also, a particularly important aspect referring to these rights is the right of children to be educated by their own parents, not to be separated from their parents against their will, unless expressly and exhaustively provided by law (art. 38), to alternative care (art. 39) and to maintain personal relations and direct contact with parents, relatives and other persons to whom the child has become attached. Other important legislative regulations: right to health and access to health services and reeducation; right to education; the child’s right to rest and leisure, to participate freely to cultural and artistic life according to his age and skills, and other. It emphasizes the child’s right to freedom of expression - Art. 28(1) and the right to freely express his opinion on any issue that concerns him - Art. 29(1).

According to the National Authority for Child Protection and Adoption, participation rights allow children to have a say regarding their lives. They provide children the opportunity to express their views, to discuss issues which they consider important, and to seek and receive information relevant to them. In some cases, the Romanian legislation explicitly allows children to have a say after a certain age (for example: the child who reached the age of 10 has the right to express his opinion in any judicial or administrative proceedings concerning him; the child has the right to choose his religion at the age of 16, but his religion cannot be changed without his consent not even before the age of 14; the child who reached the age of 14 can ask the court to change the type of his professional training; the child may develop income-generating
8.3.4 Field investigation

Roma people have their own culture, traditions, language and mentality. The children have a completely different education “system”, one that does not involve all our society’s rules. From focus group discussions with the teachers, parents, and children we explored the interaction between children, staff, and parents in order to improve the context of learning and childcare. For example, the teachers note that at the beginning Roma children didn’t want to or couldn’t interact with Romanian children (fact going both ways). For instance, Kindergarten with Normal Program Gămași, from Berevoiesti Arges County, have 52 Roma children and only 8 Romanian children and there were several challenges: they didn’t want to stay next to each other, they didn’t want to share their toys (Roma children – Romanian children and the other way around), they didn’t want to hold hands during activities that required movement from one place to another, they didn’t want to be part of the same team. Similar situations were met also in other kindergartens. Also, teachers recommended that children need more time to play outdoor: “Often children ask me when we can go outside to run, to play in park. We need more teachers to organize outdoor activities or to be present their parents, in group there are 25 children and two teachers can’t watch them all”. FG 1 teachers

8.3.5 Diversity met in kindergartens

In kindergartens there are both Roma children and Romanian children as participants in this type of education system, in the institutions involved in the study. Therefore, from a start the cultural diversity is present and different interactions on levels as language, traditions and mentalities are invoked.

8.3.6 National Curriculum Guidelines

National Curriculum Guidelines for all level in Romania was revised in 2011. From this year we have a new legislation for education. National Curriculum is all coherent educational framework plans and curricula in preschool education. National curriculum focuses on eight key skill areas: 1) communication skills in Romanian and mother tongue, 2) communication skills in foreign languages, 3) skills of mathematics, science and technology, 4) use digital skills information technology, 5) social and civic competences, 6) entrepreneurial skills, 7) skills and awareness of cultural expression, 8) competence of learning to learn. There are plans for curriculum framework guidelines, but each preschool and school should write their own school curriculum guide.

The term cooperation is mentioned 12 times in the curriculum guidelines and interaction 11 times. It is interesting that in the curriculum the term of cooperation is associated with the particular relationship of adults, on the one hand, and the children on the other hand. The curriculum this term is not found associated with the relationships between adults and children “cooperation between responsible adults with the education of children” (p. 7)...and “cooperation between children in the group to accomplish a common task” (p. 50). Cooperation is seen as a way of “developing pro-social behaviors, proactive linked with team spirit, competition, fair
play" (p. 36). Interaction is associated with the relationship between teachers and pupils in the educational process "children and the teacher are in interaction and mutual accommodation, subtle and continuous" (p. 12) with "skills to interact with adults, and interaction skills with children close age, acceptance and respect for diversity" (p. 15).

The term participation is mentioned 6 times. Participation is connected with the involvement of "preschool child in setting goals, selecting content and assessment methods" (p. 9) with "participation of parents in decisions about children's education, their presence in the room during group activities and effective participation in these activities" (p. 13).

The term democracy and democratic is mentioned 1 time. It is mentioned only as one of the aims of education 'to promote democracy, peace, tolerance and development" (p. 6).

8.4 Project implementation

8.4.1 Brief description

Based on transnational project SIGNALS, the national project aims to support parent participation in 13 public kindergartens with high dropout rate, from rural communities for Roma children, 0-6 years, to strengthen the context of learning and childcare. Our previously researches (Holt, 2011) demonstrate that parent positive programs can be an efficient intervention to enhance child participation, improve child-parents relationships, change perspectives and behaviors, etc. Therefore, our national project proposes to develop a local network of parent educators in each kindergarten, to support parents, but also teachers to promote child participation. The central idea of the project is to bring together professionals, parents and children to improve the pedagogical relationship between educational staff and children, and the quality of relationships between the staff team and parents. The principal partner is Kindergarten no. 3 from Iasi, County, but in order to disseminate the activities, 13 rural kindergartens are involve: (1) Berevoiesti (Arges County); (2) Plopeni Sat (Prahova County); (3) Cosula (Botosani County); (4) Bacesti (Vaslui County); (5) Sarulesti (Calarasi County), (6) Tandarei (Ialomita County); (7) Horgesti (Bacau County); (8) Poiana (Dambovita County); (9) Crivina (Giurgiu County); (10) Romanesti (Dambovita County); (11) Savinesti (Neamt County); (12) Zmau (Iasi County); (13) Veresti (Suceava County).

8.4.2 Stages of implementation

1. Selecting the available teachers to participate at one training program focused on positive parenting and participation. After this stage 13 teachers (one from each kindergarten) organized 2 sessions with 10 teachers from each kindergarten, achieving two important subjects: positive approach of child’s behavior and child participation. These courses are based on Appreciative Inquiry perspective, providing information through non-formal methods and techniques, established together with staff kindergartens, and parents.


3. Organizing the courses with parents and teachers

4. Planning and developing Kindergarten Family

5. Monitoring and supervising the parent education courses (online)

6. Evaluation and research the impact of positive parenting program
7. Dissemination and Sustainability

8.4.3 Involvement of Target Group

The direct beneficiaries of activities on project include 130 teachers participated at two sessions (child participation, and positive approach of child’ behavior), 156 roma parents (146 mothers, and 10 fathers), participated at 8 sessions, 156 preschool Roma children 4-6 years (73 girls, and 83 boys), participated together with their parents at “Kindergarten family”, activities which stimulated interactions between parents and children. We mention here that the parents involved have a low social economic status, the basic resources being the social services help. The majority parents don’t have a job, keeping sometimes children home to work, or to beg in order to gain money for family. Also, parents have a minimum level of education, at less 8 grades, and don’t consider the kindergarten participation very important for their children. Regarding the indirect beneficiaries, we address to the entire community of each kindergarten.

8.4.3.1 Teachers’ involvement

Teachers sustain two sessions with 10 teachers in each kindergarten involved, discussing and debating important subjects about child participation, achieving two important subjects: positive approach of child’s behavior and child participation. The teachers were selected after the following criteria: the availability to participate, their professional’s skills, the desire and the interest for participation.

Parents Participation

For parent participation, in each kindergarten teachers sustain 8 sessions with the main subjects: stress management, child-parent communication, child development, child participation in family context, in institutions etc. The role of these types of meetings encourage parents to get involve, to share opinions, suggestions, to improve school participation, and also to help parents to became aware about the importance to participate together with their children, promoting well-being, and learning of their children. The teachers selected the parents with children at highest dropout risk, and also the desire of parents to participate was taken into consideration.

8.4.3.2 Kindergarten Family

This type of activity brings in weekends the parents participants together with their children in order to strengthen the relationships between parents and children, and to improve the kindergarten attendance. In Kindergarten Family parents and children were consulted about what types of activities should be done, what are the needs of children and parents, what should do more teachers in order to help parents and children to participate in kindergartens actions. The role of this activity is to provide a wide variety of learning opportunities and motivating parents to support their children learning.

8.5 Methodology of research

8.5.1 The context of research

To support and to strengthen the parent and child participation we considered
necessarily an intervention including all actors in this ongoing process of participation: parents, children, and teachers, based on the perspectives of participants in need analysis level. Therefore, from each kindergarten was selected and trained one teacher, “first come, first served”, ensuring the HoltIS accreditation. One of the conditions for teachers, in order to obtain the accreditation helpful for professional credits, was the organization of 8 sessions with 10 parents, 2 sessions with 10 teachers, and the involvement in *Kindergarten Family*. For evaluating the impact of program developed in kindergartens only four kindergarten were selected taking into account the distance between Iasi county, and other counties, the relationship between kindergartens and HoltIS team, the desire, the availability, and the schedule of teachers to organization the necessarily meetings with parents, teachers, and children, to participate at the research study.

8.5.2 Goal

The aim of this study is to evaluate the impact of positive parenting program on teachers, parents, and children, after the participation at activities within the project.

8.5.3 Objectives

- Identify the utility and the impact of positive parenting program on participants.
- Exploring how positive parenting program influences the attitudes and the behavior of parents and teachers toward children.

8.5.4 The strategy of research

The study is conducted as an action research study focused on appreciative perspective. Using appreciative inquiry (AI) will be set in a context of reflection for professionals and parents on practices in preschool. The application of AI technology is a form of reconstruction practices and what underlies theory, by reconfiguring language. The purpose of this type of research is to produce social change according to the interests and to the needs of target group. Thus, data collection were gathered through focus groups and interviews in the kindergartens selected to this study.

8.5.5 Data collection

The methodological procedure aimed for data collection in three stages: discussions with parenting teachers in order to clarify the research strategy for focus groups discussions, organize in four kindergartens four focus-groups with parents, and teachers, then were 11 interviews with other teachers, and 8 with parents than those who were participants at focus groups. Also, in two kindergartens were organized meetings with children about their participation on activities.

8.5.6 Ethical considerations

All the participants in focus groups and in individual interviews were asked for consent for taking part to the discussions with the operators and were given assurances that the collected data would be used only for scientific purposes. The focus groups and interviews lasted an average of 60-90 minutes and were recorded on audio. For the participation of
children, parents were asked for the consent, and the verbal agreement of children was obtained.

8.5.7 The selection of participants

The participants were selected by teachers taking into account the following criteria:

Criteria for kindergartens: the availability and the desire of teacher to organize and to develop quality activities with parents, children and teachers (the ability to mobilize the parents, teachers, and children from kindergartens to participate at activities).

Criteria for participants at focus groups and interviews: the participation at courses, the availability to participate at discussions, the schedules of parents, teachers, and operators, the desire and the pleasure of children to get involved.

8.6 Discussion and conclusions

8.6.1 Teachers’ perspectives

8.6.1.1 Collaborating with parents

Teachers bring into discussion the importance of collaboration with Roma parents, and emphasize the importance of social interventions. From their perspective, the program was a good strategy to involve parents in school activities, preventing the risk of dropping out. Also, they emphasize that sessions with parents improves the collaboration between school and parents, arguing that before these activities Roma parents were rarely involved in activities.

“Parents until now weren’t involved in many activities. I think that from now on the things begin to move, because the school got involved more, and perhaps we will get better results...” FG 2 teachers

The involvement of parents brings parents closer to school and it is necessarily in the process of collaboration, teachers-children-parents. Teachers appreciate Kindergarten Family, helpful to bring to school at least some Roma parents. As a result these activities improve the relationships of Roma parents with their children.

“Since we are involved in projects, parents and children relate in bigger groups, they are put together to do activities. I can see now that parents are more receptive and understand better the kindergarten actions. These activities encourage significantly parents to support their children in the participation process”. S4 teacher

8.6.1.2 Learning new practices

The sessions with teachers promoted the active participation concerning child decisions and actions, as well as providing positive non-formal activities. Applying positive techniques help teachers to be calmer, and reduce stress at work.
“I think the biggest gain was the fact that we learned new methods, techniques, specifically for children age. For example even in my group there are too many kids, sometimes being difficult to work. I learned some strategies to involve all the children, and other non-formal activities taking into consideration their interests and needs. The activities are useless, if the teachers don’t involve the kids in attractive activities…Now I am more relaxed knowing how to manage some stressful situations.” FG 4 teachers

“I am new in this kindergarten, but I succeed to know the parents, the children, and I try to involve them together in activities, in a positive way, like I learned at your course. I observe that children are excited when their parents play with them, and help them in kindergarten activities”. S 3 teacher

8.6.1.3 Encouraging children

One of the objectives of the sessions with teachers focused to encourage children to participate in different activities and decisions. The reflection of teachers regarding professional practices helps the participants to have positive behavior, and attitudes toward children. Learning new positive methods to encourage children is also observed through the available of teacher to listen carefully children, and to discover their skills.

“Now I try to work differentially with children, encouraging them to express their opinions. I have more patience with kids, I observe carefully their reactions. In this way I can discover their skills, and I can give parents advices to support children in order to develop their abilities.” FG 3 teachers

“If we are dealing with negative situations, I think the best we can do is to emphasize the positive things and to see the good side. For example, in my kindergarten, we don’t have enough resources, so sometimes we ask parents to sponsor our activities. It can become frustrating, but we try to focus on the appreciation of parents, and the happiness of children. In this way we stimulate children to participate in activities.” S 5 teacher

The relevance of the training aims to encourage teachers to try new ideas, and strategies to involve children. Participating at the organized meetings gives teachers the opportunity to discover new ways to motivate children to participate in kindergarten actions.

“I didn’t know all the strategies that now I apply in my group of children. The children are very different, and spontaneous. As teachers you should always learn methods, games, because children get bored very quickly.” S 7 teacher

8.6.2 Parents perspectives

8.6.2.1 Creating a support group

The purpose of positive parenting is to offer time and space for parents to observe, to act carefully, then they use to do in every day (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1992, p. 10). The opportunity to reflect to their own situations and to put questions in these support meetings helps parents to share experiences and parenting practices (Pfannenstiel & Seltzer, 1985).

“I liked the meetings, especially the topics of sessions. We learned one from each other, we
listened other’s opinions, issues, trying to find solutions together. We are parents, and we need advices. I think it is the first type of activity developed in our community. It should happen more often, and include all the parents, not only a part.” FG 6 parents

8.6.2.2 Communication with children
The communication with children is the most frequent topic brought into discussion by parents. Parents emphasize some changes related to their own availability to listen their children, taking into consideration children’s interests and opinions. Also, parents highlight the importance of parent involvement.

“I learned to listen more my children. Now I listen them, then I start to act. For example, before these courses when my children spoke with me, I looked at TV; I didn’t understand very well their intention and desire. Now I stop the TV, I am listening, and after that I turn on the TV. The parental involvement is very important to ensure an education for children.” FG 8 parents

8.6.3 Children’s own voices about participation

8.6.3.1 Kindergarten environment
Children have different views about participation. They emphasize the presence of their parents in kindergarten. The involvement of parents encouraged the children to express their opinions, to get involve more in activities.

“I liked very much the activities, because my mother was with me at kindergarten, and she played with me. It was funny, and I felt safer.” FG 10 children

The activities developed in Kindergarten Family highlight that outdoor activities are attractive for kids. At the question what was your favored activity the majority of kids liked the outdoor games. These affirmations sustain the suggestion of teachers that kids need more time to spend outside, to consume their energy, to get fresh air.

“The outdoor activities were the most beautiful. We ran, we had competitions, and we played in park. I wish to bring the outside toys in our classes.” FG 11 children

The Kindergarten Family provided an appropriate environment for children to make new friends. Children relate that participating at activities developed in weekends they knew other colleagues, and now they come to kindergarten together.

“The activities were funny, we had activities outdoor, indoor, and my mother was with me. Also, I made new friends. I go to kindergarten, and home with them. Now my mother doesn’t lead me to kindergarten, because I go together with my friends.” F 12 children

Based our observation and children’ voices, we note that now children become closer, and friendly with the children they didn’t want to share toys, facts discovered in the field investigation. Participating together at activities in Kindergarten Family, children understood better the meaning of sharing, and they interact easier with new colleagues.
“I like now to share toys with my friends. It’s funny, because I can play also with their toys. This week we have two new colleagues. I play more with Alex [fictive name] at kindergarten, in park. We share toys, and we borrow them to one another. I trust him that he will bring my toys back tomorrow.” F 9 children

8.7 Dissemination and Sustainability

8.7.1 Dissemination activities

The purpose of disseminating the activities and the results of project is to raise awareness to the large audience about the importance of child participation, but also to strengthen the school attendance among Roma children. The audience takes into consideration the other HoltIS projects with similar topics, using the materials developed in order to ensure visibility and to uptake the project results. This activity provides opportunities to receive feedback, and to discuss experiences. Also, we address to external stakeholders (public institutions, NGOs), and to community, through participating at national and international conferences, organizing debates, providing articles, e.g.:

Presentations:

Publication:

8.7.2 Sustainability part

The project was implemented as a pilot project for developing key-persons in different rural communities. The sustainability is given by teachers who participated at the positive training program, being resources in their communities. The accreditation HoltIS is valid for a certain period of time, and in order for them to continue as trainers, a condition is to organize and to sustain other courses with vulnerable groups periodically. Also, the sustainability part is given by online platform (www.educatieparentala.ro), helpful for monitoring and supervising the parental activities, so that the project can be replicated in other vulnerable people in community or in any other region of the country.
8.8 Partnership exchange experience- European dimension

The partnership exchange was a helpful experience developing and implementing the national project. During this European Experience, even if we met different cultures, we found out useful activities that recommend the other national projects as good practices. The national project is implemented, developed, also considering the others’ ideas, activities from European partnership. This part helps us to have multiple perspective and approaches to adapt the activities and our strategy of implementation within SIGNALS project. For instance, the research questions of Swedish project help us to create the guides for individual interviews and focus group in need analysis, but also in the research part. Also, the Germany SIGNALS project (which aims to involve children and parents in the operations of children’s play care centers, paying particular attention to the design of play areas) could be a great example for us to take in consideration and apply at a certain level for the needs of our area of country. As advantage in such international partnerships, is the overview of another potential future collaboration on similar topics.

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CHAPTER IX

Diversity in initial encounters between children, parents and educators in early childhood education

by Anne Kultti & Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson

The early childhood system in Sweden

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of children</th>
<th>1 year to 6 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regulation and administration of early childhood services</td>
<td>➢ Preschool 1 to 5 years of age ➢ Preschool classes 6 years old, located in primary school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy responsibility at central level</td>
<td>➢ Ministry of Education and Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operational responsibility at local level</td>
<td>The Municipality board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compulsory pre-primary year</td>
<td>No, but majority of children participate in preschool class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School starting age</td>
<td>7 years (primary school)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do national or regional curricula or guidelines exist</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do the curricula include guidelines concerning transitions or continuity</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length and level of initial training of lead staff and assistant staff</td>
<td>3.5 years university education for preschool teachers, 2 years of gymnasium education for nursery-nurses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
9.1 Abstract

In this chapter we present the approach used in the Swedish study within the framework of the SIGNALS project. The approach has an empirical base and is a combined research and development project. The project is built upon consecutive emerging parts: The project started with a questionnaire to educators, continued with a study including observation and talks in two preschool settings, and finished with developmental work. How this approach contributes to developing the practice for understanding democratic participation from the perspectives of children, parents and teachers is discussed.

9.2 Introduction

The purpose of SIGNALS is to support democratic participation and the acceptance of the perspectives of children (see Chapter 1). The project aims to enable parents and professionals to find a joint approach to child development and learning, and to improve the quality of the pedagogical relationship between educational staff and children (aged 1-8), the quality of interaction between the children themselves, and the quality of relationships between the staff team and parents. Further, the project aims to address the issue of seeking the perspectives of children (in this case, toddlers) through exemplary cooperative educational practices (through parents and educators). The objectives of the SIGNALS project that the Swedish study relates are:

Objectives concerning children’s participation:

- To create a learning environment which opens up children’s interactions with teachers, parents and other children – a transitional practice that draws on intersubjectivity and shared intentionality.
- To adopt a democratic and inclusive approach that values diversity – that is, didactics for including diversity.

Objectives concerning parents’ and staff members’ participation:

- To build strong pedagogical relationships with children, based on sensitive responsiveness.
- To establish relationships between parents and staff members based on mutual understanding, trust and cooperation that enable open communication and reciprocal dialogue.
- To co-construct pedagogical knowledge through documentation and the collective evaluation of educational practices (inter-professional/parental reflection).
- To [open up for] redefine educational practices in a democratic and open manner.

Exemplary co-operative educational practices in the SIGNALS project in the present study concern (for longer perspective): i) promoting language acquisition from a multilingual perspective: recognizing children’s first language and supporting second language acquisition, and, ii) valuing and encouraging children’s expression through different languages. Success with these ambitions also builds on a deeper cultural understanding and willingness, both from
politicians and from pedagogical leadership and educators.

9.2.1 The Swedish language context in preschool

Every fifth child in preschool has a first language other than Swedish. This has resulted in preschools (and/or communities/municipalities) with a majority of children with a different first language than Swedish, and preschools (and/or communities/municipalities) with a majority of children with Swedish as their first language. A recent survey by the National Agency of Education (2014) further illuminated this situation. The groups for children under 3 years are larger in municipalities with 30% children with another first language than Swedish compared to municipalities with 5% children with another first language than Swedish. At the same time, the percentage of educated preschool teachers is lower in the municipalities with large number of children for whom preschool is the primary arena for learning Swedish. These structural conditions are noteworthy considering the research showing that a) educated teachers and b) communication between teachers and children are the main dimensions of quality in preschool (Sheridan, Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2009; Swedish Agency for Education, 2011). Another actual characteristic of a diverse linguistic and cultural society is the increasing number of recently arrived children. An implication of this is that, more or less, each teacher will be working in groups with a diversity of linguistic and cultural experiences and knowledge. The question of assuring equal and sustained learning opportunities, created from the perspective of children, cannot be overlooked. Children will gain from learning both their first and second language. Equal and sustained learning opportunities may require pedagogical reflections on how both languages can be supported.

The democratic right to participate and influence the learning environment for the youngest children, ages one to three in the Swedish preschool context, is closely related to collaboration between the preschool and the home environments. This collaboration is emphasised in the curriculum that both supports and presumes participation of parents (National Agency for Education, 2011).

“The preschool’s work with children should thus take place in close and confidential co-operation with the home. Parents should have the opportunity within the framework of the national goals to be involved and influence activities in the preschool. A prerequisite for children and parents to have the opportunity of exercising influence is that the preschool is clear about its goals and what its work involves.” (National Agency for Education, 2011, p. 13)

This is the background against which the Swedish study is designed and implemented.

9.3 Aim and approach of the Swedish study

The Swedish study aims to gain knowledge of how educators and parents from diverse linguistic backgrounds talk about, reflect on, and develop participation and influence in preschool to promote children’s participation and learning. More specifically, we focus on how collaboration is introduced during the settling-in period. Settling-in period refers in this case, to the first three days in preschool including introduction and follow-up meeting.
Research questions:

- How do educators invite parents to co-operate?
- What topics do educators and parents bring up in relation to initial collaboration?
- How can the collaboration support democratic participation?

The design of the Swedish study is characterized by an empirical starting point and a combined developmental and research project. The design and implementation are carried out in cooperation between educators and the researchers, resulting in three parts: i) questionnaire; ii) study; and, iii) developmental work.

Part 1 was carried out with educators participating within an in-service course of multilingualism and interculturalism in preschool. In other words, the respondents had explicitly expressed an interest in and/or a need for learning more about the topic. Parts 2 and 3 were carried out in two preschools in part of a larger city with high population of immigrants. Education above upper secondary level education in this area is 20%, which can be compared to other parts of the city where it may be above 50%. More than 20% of people in the area are on long-term social/economic support (Göteborgsbladet, fakta 2014). Life conditions for many families are difficult in this part of the city, which is why early intervention and support beginning in preschool for young children is important, not the least for preventing un-healthy habits and problems later in life.

9.3.1 Part 1. Questionnaire

The Swedish study establishes an empirical starting point through examination of educators’ reflections on participation and collaboration in their practice. These influence the research questions, design and implementation. A questionnaire about participation and influence in multilingual and multicultural settings during the settling-in period for the youngest children with first languages other than Swedish was generated (and also used in the other participating countries in the Signals project, see chapter II by Pramling Samuelsson & Cojocaru). The questionnaire is based on Shier’s (2001) view of participation. Shier presents steps towards how children can become equal participants in early childhood education (ECE). The five steps are: 1) children are listened to; 2) children are supported in expressing their views; 3) children’s views are taken into account; 4) children are involved in decision-making; and, 5) children share power and responsibility for decision-making. The questionnaire aimed to consider the topic of participation and influence from the perspectives of children, teachers and parents. This is illustrated with the questions regarding the perspective of parents:

- Which languages (besides Swedish) do you speak at home with your child?
- How do you want to describe settling in to preschool from your experience, e.g., how long did the settling-in process take place?
• According to the curriculum, cooperation between home and preschool is important for the child’s participation and development in preschool. In what ways do you want to cooperate during settling-in? What is most important for you?
• What are the conditions for staff being able to listen to your wishes during settling-in?
• Did you experience the opportunity to express your wishes during settling-in? Did you get any support, like an interpreter, if you asked for it?
• In what ways was your perspective taken into consideration?
• In what tasks or decisions were you involved during settling-in?
• In what situations, during the settling in, were joint decisions made between yourself and the staff?

The questionnaire was answered by nine parents and nine educators. A content analysis conducted was characterized by the following themes: a) meaning, b) frames, c) children’s perspectives, d) information, e) means for communication, and f) interpreter.

9.3.2 What does settling-in mean to the respondents?
Settling-in refers to the period when a child first begins preschool. The most common variants are a three-day settling-in and a two-week settling-in. The tradition has been two weeks, but the three-day model has become more and more common. The respondents indicated that the planned settling-in time was flexible. Yet, no one described settling-in in terms of process. What brings about the flexibility is implicit. One respondent mentioned “individual adjustment” made for a child when needed. Support for settling-in, in the form of an interpreter from the native language unit, occurred in some cases.

The responses indicate that the settling-in time is very important both for getting to know the child and making contact with parents. The period also provides an opportunity for parents to get to know the preschool environment. However, the teachers describe that it is the ‘new’ child who is in focus during the settling-in period (participating in the activities during the three days) and the parents in the meetings before and after the three-day period. That is, the respondents seem to distinguish between settling-in of the child and information for the parents rather than learning to know each other through the different contexts and tools the organisation of the settling-in period offers (c.f. parents view of information below).

9.3.3 Frames for influence and participation
The respondents agree on the importance of children’s and parents’ influence and participation. Play, time spent in preschool, diet and sleeping routines appeared as uniform areas where children’s/parents’ influence is evident. One parent expressed appreciation for the opportunity to decide whether the child should learn Swedish traditions or not.

Influence of time spent in preschool, diet and sleeping routines seem somewhat contradictory in relation to the responded teachers’ views of routine situations as something children / parents cannot have influence on. Routine situations as fixed activities seem to be an accepted fact.
Rather, parents and children try to adapt to the routines. This is stated explicitly (i.e., "children will adapt to..."), but also implicitly in such areas as parents’ lack of / limited language skills in Swedish make it difficult to provide information about the routines in preschool. In situations where parents and staff have different opinions about a routine activity, such as being outdoors, the solution expressed (by the educators) is to explain the reason for the activity to the parents. In other words, the attitude toward routine situations as fixed may explain children’s and parents’ level of influence and participation.

9.3.4 Children’s perspectives

Smooth transitions (such as home-preschool and change of preschool unit) are expressed by some of the respondents as a way to reflect the child’s perspective (for more information about children’s perspectives, see Pramling Samuelsson & Hundeide, 2010). Children’s language background, or knowledge and experience of languages in addition to the Swedish language, is invisible in the answers\(^1\). For example, children have influence over what books to read and songs to sing. Yet, no one notices use (and/or choice) of language in these activities as something children have influence on. Reasons for this view are interesting to ponder, as well as how these relate to knowledge and attitudes of educators.

9.3.5 Information

Informing parents is described (by the teachers) as an important part of the collaboration. Collaboration regards ‘one-way information’ and/or dialogue. Information is conveyed orally and in written text. In some cases, teachers expressed that they use simple linguistic formulations in Swedish or the parents’ first language as a tool for information. So-called important information is shared both verbally and in written form. This regards information related to illness and closing dates/times for the preschool (for in-service education and other staff meetings). One can note that no one mentions curriculum when it comes to informing the parents.

It is interesting how observation rather than information was noticed by some of the parents. They emphasized the importance and benefits of experiencing various activities through participation during the settling-in. For example, one parent mentioned how experiencing activities was possible during “the three-day settling-in” when parents stayed in preschool with their child for three whole days. The knowledge of the activities is used later to talk with the child at home about their day in preschool. This shows how opportunities of staying in preschool create a shared topic for communication between parents and these young children. In addition, observation and participation in the activities can be interpreted as a way to be informed, but also a way to get to know each other, something that written or spoken information may not lead to.

9.3.6 Use of means for communication other than Swedish

Observation as an information channel is highlighted even in the responses of educators. Educators observe what children are doing during different activities. However, how this

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\(^1\) Linguistic background is pointed out in the parts of the questionnaire that concern participation and influence from the perspective of staff and parents.
information is used to increase opportunities for participation and influence is not noted in the answers. In addition, interpretation of non-verbal actions is mentioned as important when the participants (children, parents, educators) do not share a language. Only some of the teachers mentioned that they learn words in the children’s first language in order to communicate with them.

9.3.7 Interpreter as a resource for participation and influence

The respondents use the word interpreter regularly in their answers. None of the preschools seem to lack access to an interpreter during settling-in. However, interpreters were used relatively infrequently in the practice. The following reasons for using/not using were given:

i. Interpreter is necessary for so-called important discussions. However, no one defines what discussions are important (e.g., ‘important information’ above regarding illness and closing times).

ii. Interpreter is needed for educators to be able to respond to parents’ wishes.

iii. The use of an interpreter is up to the parents.

iv. The use of interpreter relates to parents’ linguistic skills. This is expressed in terms of being skilled in Swedish (and there is therefore no need for an interpreter).

v. Parents’ distrust of an interpreter.

Other resources for the initial contact between children, parents and staff are multilingual staff, children, and family members or (other) caregivers. Use of an interpreter does not seem to occur after the period of settling-in.

In sum, two themes of participation and involvement were highlighted in the questionnaire regarding: a) observation (of children by teachers and of the settling-in by the parents) as a tool for gaining knowledge and collaborating; and, b) reflection on routine activities from the perspectives of educators, parents and children. These themes are a starting point for designing the next part of the study.

9.3.8 Part 2. Qualitative case study

A research and developmental project in two preschools with a majority of children and parents with multicultural experiences was created. We contacted two preschools where the staff had experience with culturally and linguistically diverse groups of children (see above). The study was conducted in a setting (unit/group) in each preschool where there were toddlers participating in preschool for the first time. The group of participants included three mothers and their children (three boys) and nine female educators. Two of the mothers used two or more languages other than Swedish in their everyday life. One of them did not speak Swedish. All three mothers used other language(s) than Swedish in communication with their child. Majority of the educators had also Swedish as their second language.

Firstly, we observed conversation between the actors in formal meetings and during preschool activities. Observation of formal organisation of discussion between teachers and parents included an introduction meeting and two following-up meetings. Observation of activities and informal conversations occurred during the first three days.

Secondly, two focus-group conversations in each preschool setting were arranged. These conversations were based on literature focusing on conditions for (second) language use and learning in preschool (Kultti, 2014). The teachers were asked to read some chapters and pick up
some of the questions connected to the chapters, for each meeting (the data is analysed elsewhere).

The findings concerned encounters between teachers and parents as information and/or dialogue (this is a common finding even in Part 1), and whether this was clear to the teachers (analysed in Kultti & Pramling Samuelsson, manuscript A; manuscript B). A directed content analysis conducted in the study shows that the concept of collaboration is rather contradictory. Collaboration is expressed in terms of information passed from teachers to parents. The encounters such as introductory meetings and informal talks are described as an arena for dialogue by the educators. Yet, the observed talks characterised information from preschool to (immigrant) parents/families. Further, parents were not expected to have context-relevant experience to share with the educators. Yet, parents are acknowledged as the experts in knowing their children. Parents were also expected to be ‘active participants’ during the settling-in. In the analysis of the activities, active participation becomes primarily a question of parents (and children) fitting into the setting.

In the study, two interpretations of the findings are discussed (Kultti & Pramling Samuelsson, manuscript A). These are: a) the educators as responsible for the collaboration; and, b) collaboration through information rather than dialogue. A question raised in the discussion is how to create innovative ways of taking the child’s perspective on becoming a member of the new language and educational contexts.

View of language learning and collaboration shared by the teachers in the formal and informal talks are based on a) practical experiences of working in a so-called multicultural preschool, b) personal experiences of moving to and living in Sweden as an adult/parent, and/or c) communication in one’s second language (Kultti & Pramling Samuelsson, manuscript B). This implies that the competence needed for collaboration between individuals with diversity of linguistic backgrounds is a question to be raised in preschool teacher education. Preschool teacher education needs to foster awareness of the lack of professionalism related to collaboration in ECE contexts with diverse backgrounds of actors. Knowledge needed cannot be based only on personal experiences.

The second part of the study was completed by organising a meeting with the educators, discussing these preliminary findings and presenting the third and last part of the project emerging from the findings.

9.3.9 Part 3. Developmental work

The last part of the study, developmental work, included five activities/task for educators as emerging areas of development. The activities had the following focus and approach:

1. Moving from information to dialogue in parent-teacher collaboration. A method used for this is to arrange a talk with a parent (with different cultural/language background than one’s own) on different topics and to include a reflection. The topics to choose from concern personal experiences (such as education and profession; language and identity; leaving the country of origin; child-rearing) and ECE (learning, development, and care; traditions; settling-in; participation and influence).

2. Children’s perspectives on language use in and outside preschool. A method used for this is to include the child in a playful activity. The activity will serve as a framework
Anne Kultti & Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson

for talking with children about their experiences of using the languages. Reflection on the activity aims to make visible the dialogue – ways to create it and the content of it.

3. A review of materials offered and used in ECE from an intercultural perspective. A method used for this is to analyse the books used in the own ECE practice from a perspective of second language learners, language learning, and diverse cultural experiences. Findings are reflected upon together with children and with colleagues.

4. Creating a multilingual learning activity. The aim is to use and reflect on what it means for children and their learning if they can use both their first and second languages for sense making in a reading activity. A method used for this is a reading activity with some children and a teacher who share two languages in common. A story is chosen. The story is read and discussed using the two languages. In other words, the children are offered the opportunity to create meaning for words even in a second language. This approach aims to support learning of first and second languages, as well as increasing meta-linguistic knowledge.

5. After conducting some of these activities individually, the teachers are asked to focus on developing the organisation (for example, their own practice) in collaboration with their colleagues. A method used for this is written argumentation, including both individual and institutional/societal perspective, on multilingual and intercultural issues in ECE. The argumentation based on research aims to present and reflect on activities performed in the setting and how these can be developed.

The activities/tasks are carried out in the two settings participating in the study, but also by participants in a national in-service course on multilingualism and multiculturalism in preschool. During the Signals-project, approximately 80 teachers have carried out the activities.

This part of the study is a work in progress and will be published in peer-reviewed journals and a book, but also in popular scientific publications for use in preschool teacher education.

9.4 Contributions to the project

When taken together, the study including three integrated parts shows how views and opinions expressed concerning the collaboration are contradictory. In addition, collaboration and communication are based on the individual educators’ knowledge, values, and attitudes. The study supports the finding of Tobin, Arzubiaga and Adair (2013), stating that strategies for working with recently immigrated children and their families need to be emphasized in preschool teacher education.

The present study contributes to the research in the field showing a need for knowledge of collaboration in relation to contemporary, multilingual societies. Another contribution relates to practice, with knowledge of how to reflect and develop the processes of settling-in and collaboration through increased use of diverse communicative resources, such as observation of and participation in preschool activities, pictures and first language of the participants (instead
of only spoken and/or written information in the second language). This is a way to increase understanding of individual children’s lives and cultural backgrounds, and reflections on practice and learning theory, which are some of the goals of the SIGNALS project. Considering the approach as a developmental project supports the participating educators in dialogues with parents and in creating children’s opportunities for language use and learning as related to the goal of the project, addressing children as agents of their learning.

The approach can be viewed in light of Nordic didactics, where teaching is a question of “pointing something out for someone” (Pramling & Pramling Samuelsson, 2011, p 4; Doverborg, Pramling & Pramling Samuelsson, 2013). This means that the main focus for teaching children, as well as the educators’ in-service training, is to make them aware of language and how it can contribute to richness in education as well as for children’s future development of skills in both languages. It can also signal attitudes and values about the child’s home culture and what is worth knowing in Swedish society. The didactics also include pedagogical reflections on daily practice that, in this case, may contribute to working for equity and social justice for all children in preschool. Language and communication has a double task here – as content and a means. It means that children learn about what is focused on in the communication but they also learn to communicate. The same goes for the educators (Pramling Samuelsson, Wallerstedt & Pramling, 2014). In this case, we as researchers have taken the same approach in the study that we believe educators should take with parents and children.

Participation is a key aspect for all involved in the Swedish case, at the same time as we studied participation. The approach relates to the work in our ECE research group at the university. The group has a long tradition of praxis-oriented research, which means that we work with the teachers to stage what we want to study. This approach differs from action research, where the teachers themselves formulate their problems to study. The research questions are formulated by and with the researcher, and these are closely related to teachers’ work with children. The research questions include the context, why the approach can be viewed as contextualized (Wineager & Valsiner, 1992). Then, the researchers observe what is happening in interactions and give the teachers feedback, often by showing them part of a video and discussing the content. Teachers also read literature related to the topic at hand. As researchers, we are interested in children’s knowledge formation. But as a consequence of the approach, teachers often become very skilful since they become aware of their own way of thinking and handling different situations which may previously have been taken for granted (Pramling Samuelsson & Pramling, 2013).

### 9.4.1 Educational benefits of the Signals project and the Swedish study

The project has been informed of in several contexts through lectures, in-service courses, in a preschool teacher program at a university, as well as on the municipal and regional levels. The findings are a central part of in-service education focusing on multilingualism and interculturality in preschool. The activities developed within the project can be used in preschool teacher education and by individual teachers/preschools.
9.4.2 Added European values

To be part of an European project is by itself a challenge and reward, so also in this project. The reward is that one learns how diverse Europe is and how similar topics can be solved in so many different ways. We have in the present project seen how participation means many different things and get also consequences for every-day life in ECE. This provides the project with both richness and with challenges since we have been struggling with finding joint perspectives, which we may not reach totally in the end. But making developmental work in practice with parents, teachers and children have helped us in the process when different topics have been discussed along the project process, not the least by having the possibilities to listen to the involved teachers when we had meeting in various countries. The presentations by teachers and by researcher have contributed to a richer view of the topic at hand.
CHAPTER IX: DIVERSITY IN INITIAL ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN CHILDREN, PARENTS AND EDUCATORS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis.


## CHAPTER X

### Involving the voices of children and parents in the transition from preschool to primary school:
A case study in an Icelandic preschool

by Arna H. Jónsdóttir, Lena Valgarðsdóttir, Johanna Einarsdottir

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### The early childhood system in Iceland

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of children</th>
<th>About 1 to 5 years old</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Regulation and administration of early childhood services | • Preschools (playschools), 1 to 5 years old  
• Schools for children from 2 to 9 years old  
• Schools from 1 to 15 years old |
| Policy responsibility at central level | Ministry of Education, Science and Culture |
| Operational responsibility at local level | Offices within the municipalities |
| Compulsory pre-primary year | 6 years |
| School starting age | 6 years |
| Do national or regional curricula or guidelines exist | Yes |
| Do the curricula include guidelines concerning transitions or continuity | Yes |
| Length and level of initial training of lead staff and assistant staff | 5 years university education for preschool teachers (M.Ed. degree) |
10.1 Abstract

In the Icelandic project, an action research was carried out in one preschool, in cooperation with the compulsory schools in the neighborhood. The timeframe for the project was September 2014 to August 2015. The focus was on transition between the school levels and cooperation of staff, children and parents. The aim of the project was to make the transition phase in children’s lives as positive and educating as possible and create continuity between the two school levels. The emphasis was on well-being, participation and learning. The number of children that took part was 15, their parents and two educators. The children went to five visits to three schools and one leisure center, they prepared questions for the visits and their experience was put on paper by mind-mapping in the wake of the visits. In discussing the mind-mapping, parents, children and educators focused on ways to connect the school levels based on the children’s perspectives and what the children found important. In the beginning and the end of the project focus group interviews were carried out with all participants. In the end they all said that they had learned a lot, the parents were more decisive about the process and what it should include, the educators thought that this group of children was better prepared the other groups, and the children were more confident and knew what to expect in the compulsory school. The cooperation of the schools will be developed next school year.

10.2 Introduction

SIGNALS is the abbreviation of the Comenius project (Strengthening Activity-Oriented Interaction and Growth in the Early Years and in Transition) funded by the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Union. Seven partners participate in the project, mainly universities, from Germany, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Romania, Sweden and Iceland. The projects are different between countries and they choose a variety of ways to implement them.

The Icelandic SIGNALS project was carried out as an action research project in a small preschool in Reykjavik, Iceland, located near the city centre but also close to nature. The preschool’s emphasis has been based on The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), and it has a history of cooperation between educators and parents. There are only two classrooms in the preschool, and children start attending when they are about two years of age and finish at the age of six when they transfer to compulsory school. The timeframe for the project was September 2014 to August 2015.

This chapter describes the background of the SIGNALS project in the preschool and how the national project was chosen. The project was based on SIGNALS’s main goals: to acknowledge children as competent agents of their learning; to strengthen mutual understanding among children, parents, and staff; to improve interaction and participation among these groups; and to generate a common democratic learning experience.

Since one of the main concepts in the SIGNALS project was participation, the Icelandic group wanted to involve all participants in the preschool in the process of choosing the theme of the project. The group hoped to find a mutual interest among teachers, parents, and children and design a project that all participants were interested in, thus strengthening the democratic forum of the preschool as is stressed in the Icelandic national curriculum guide for preschools (2012):

The preschool should be a democratic forum and learning community where personnel, parents and children are active participants and influence decisions concerning the
CHAPTER X: INVOLVING THE VOICES OF CHILDREN AND PARENTS IN THE TRANSITION FROM PRESCHOOL TO PRIMARY SCHOOL: A CASE STUDY IN AN ICELANDIC PRESCHOOL

Further, the national curriculum guidelines emphasize that the practices of the preschool should stimulate the cooperation of the children, personnel, parents, and local community (p. 33) and that preschool practices should be based on “equality, diversity, shared responsibility, solidarity, and acceptance of different views” (p. 35). The need analysis at the beginning of the project was carried out with these guidelines from the Icelandic national curriculum in mind. The focus of the project was to work on collaboration among the oldest preschool children, their parents, and the educators on the transition from preschool to primary school.

10.2.1 Context

The national curriculum guidelines for all school levels in Iceland were revised in 2011. One of the novelties of these curricula is a common chapter in which six pillars that are to form the essence of the educational policy and create continuity in the educational system are introduced. The pillars are: literacy, sustainability, health and welfare, democracy and human rights, equality, and creativity. The part of the document that all levels have in common is 28 pages long, and the preschool part is 27 pages. On the basis of the curriculum guidelines, each preschool should write its own school curriculum guide.

The term cooperation is mentioned 28 times in the curriculum guidelines and interaction, four times. Cooperation refers to cooperation inside the preschool as well as with parties outside the school. Cooperation among children is stressed as well as cooperation with parents. The main guidelines stress that educators, parents, and children should be active participants and should influence decisions concerning the preschool. Further, the practices of the preschool should stimulate the cooperation of the children, personnel, parents, and the local community (p. 33). The guidelines also emphasize that preschool practices should be based on “equality, diversity, shared responsibility, solidarity, and acceptance of different views” (p. 35). The term participation is mentioned 10 times in the guidelines. Often it is connected with democracy and opportunities to participate in a democratic society. Another emphasis is that parent’s views should be listened to and their influence encouraged (p. 49). Further, the preschool curriculum should be written with participation from parents and children in mind, and evaluation of the preschool should be based on the participation and cooperation of educators, parents, and children (p. 52).

The terms democracy and democratic are frequently used in the curriculum guidelines, 23 times. Preschool is seen as a place where democratic values and practices from society are emphasized (p. 35).

10.3 Transition from preschool to primary school

The Icelandic National Curriculum Guidelines for both preschools and compulsory schools state that the two school levels should form guidelines and cooperate in the transition of children from preschool to compulsory schools. While in preschool, the children should have an opportunity to get acquainted with the compulsory schools’ activities. When the children are in their first year of compulsory school, they should be able to keep their connection with the
preschool. During these two years, the last year of preschool and the first year of compulsory school, the children’s education and activities should be connected through the two schools (The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Preschools, 2011; The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools: General Section, 2011). The curriculum guides suggest that the cooperation should be guided by the welfare and interests of the children. A successful cooperation thus has positive effects on the children’s well-being. Furthermore, parents gain a better understanding of the preschool’s curriculum and activities, and teachers gain information about the children and their interests and experiences. In this process, the children’s perspectives are meant to be the priority.

Research has shown that children’s transition to primary schools often has implications for their learning and development, both at the time of the transition and in the long term (Eckert et al., 2008; Entwisle & Alexander, 1998; Margetts, 2009). Children’s positive start to primary school has been linked to better outcomes for them as students, including improved academic achievement and social competence. Early in their school years, students’ identities and positions as learners are affirmed, influencing both their experiences with and expectations of school. As a result, children who encounter academic and social difficulties in earlier school years are likely to continue encountering problems throughout both their school years and their adult lives. Children’s experiences in the earlier years of schooling may set them on learning trajectories that affect their entire academic careers (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2001). A review of the literature addressing transitions at school indicates that collaboration and good relationships are at the core of children’s successful advancement from one school level to another (Dockett, 2014; Mashburn & Pianta, 2006; Perry, Dockett, & Petriwskyj, 2014; Peters, 2010). For children in particular, friendships, peer relationships, and relationships with teachers are pivotal, and respectful, reciprocal relationships between the adults involved in children’s education are also key factors in their successful transitions in school.

10.3.1 Cooperation among parents, preschool teachers, and children

Research on the participation of children, parents, and educators in preschool is scarce. On the other hand, many research findings reveal that a meaningful partnership of educators and parents in preschools is important for the well-being and learning of the children (Epstein, 1995; Knopf and Swick, 2007; Weiss, Caspe, and Lopes, 2008). The results of good cooperation or partnership between parents and educators are that children feel better while in preschool and that their education is of better quality.

When explaining the partnership of educators and parents, Rodd (2006) argues that educators recognize that they have both shared and complementary goals with the parents. Both parties are experts but bring a different kind of expertise to the table; they share accountability, and their relationships are nonhierarchical and collaborative. They act as a team in achieving the centre’s mission and objectives.

Research has revealed that it has been difficult to establish such partnerships between parents and educators in preschools (Epstein, 1992; Lawson, 2003), and Icelandic preschools are no exception. Prior to the establishment of parents’ councils in Icelandic preschools, participation of Icelandic parents as partners was rare and mostly involved participation in events and meetings organized by the preschool. Collaboration has been mostly informal, taking place in conversations at the beginning and the end of the day and through yearly formal interviews between staff and parents (Garðarsdóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2007; Hreinsdóttir,
CHAPTER X: INVOLVING THE VOICES OF CHILDREN AND PARENTS IN THE TRANSITION FROM PRESCHOOL TO PRIMARY SCHOOL: A CASE STUDY IN AN ICELANDIC PRESCHOOL

2009). Nevertheless, parents seem to be content with their children’s preschools, especially with regard to the children’s well-being, and are satisfied with their informal daily interaction and communication with the staff about how the children are welcomed in the morning (Björgvinsson, Svavarsdóttir, and Gestsdóttir, 2009; Jónsdóttir, 2005; Reykjavíkurborg & Leikskólasvið, 2009). Further, they do not seem to be enthusiastic about participating in decision making or the preschool’s activities (Einarsdóttir, 2010).

The time factor is also noticeable when it comes to the parents’ roles and participation within the preschool; it is seen as a hindrance both by preschool teachers and parents (Einarsdóttir, 2010; Garðarsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2007; Hreinsdóttir, 2009). Einarsdóttir (2010) argues that Icelandic parents are under pressure and perceive conflict between their roles as parents and employees. Therefore, for a partnership with parents to occur, it is important that preschools develop collaboration methods that suit young parents participating in the labour market.

10.3.2 Need Analysis

At the beginning of the project (September 2014), focus-group interviews were carried out with the oldest preschool children, their parents, and the teachers in separate groups. The aim was to design an action research project. Participation was an important concept and a guiding light when choosing a project. The plan was to gather information about parent, child, and teacher ideas and interests and choose the project based on this information. All these interviews were carried out in the preschool’s dining room.

10.3.3 Interviews with parents

There were nine parents total who took part in the focus groups, eight mothers and one father. The parents were interviewed in three subgroups. They all had Icelandic backgrounds and their ages varied from 28 to 40. During the previous school year, when the children were four to five years old, the preschool teachers and parents had been working on a project about democracy in education. While talking to the parents, it was obvious that their main focus was still on the previous project, and their answers were in accordance. It was difficult to get the parents to focus on a different topic. However, when they were asked directly about cooperation between compulsory schools and preschools, they expressed interest. The parents clearly wanted more cooperation between the schools than there had been in the past. They were certain that more cooperation would benefit the preschool, the compulsory school, and the children. They mentioned that the children would benefit from more frequent visits to the compulsory schools. A project that aimed at connecting the school levels was thus of interest. However, some parents were not optimistic about the willingness of the compulsory schools to participate.

10.3.4 Interviews with children

Fifteen children aged five and six, born in 2009, participated in the study. There were
seven girls and eight boys. The children were divided into two groups during the interviews. The backgrounds of thirteen children were Icelandic. One boy had a mother from Kosovo, and one girl had a Spanish mother. Thirteen of the children had an older sibling in compulsory schools. The children were asked about their parents’ participation in the preschool and what they wanted their parents to do in the preschool. The children all agreed that they wanted their parents to participate in the preschool’s activities. They wanted their parents to take part in everyday activities such as having breakfast together at the preschool, doing arts together, and playing. Thus, parental participation was appreciated in preschool. Not long before, one of the parents had performed a magic show. The children talked about it and wanted their parents to participate in such ways. The children also mentioned that they wanted their parents to participate in special events that the preschool organized. When the children were asked about themes or topics for the project, they clearly stated that they wanted their parents to play with them at preschool. Later the children were asked informally if they were interested in a project about cooperation with the compulsory schools; most of them said they were.

10.3.5 Interviews with preschool teachers

The educators, all women educated as preschool teachers, participated in the focus-group interviews, except one who was abroad. They all had Icelandic backgrounds, and their ages ranged from thirty-eight to fifty-nine. Like the parents, the preschool teachers were focused on the previous project about democracy in the preschool. That project had had a big impact on the teachers’ views of the children and cooperation between parents and teachers. It was obvious that the teachers were content with the project about democracy and wanted to continue working in that vein. However, they did not have clear ideas about how a continuation of that theme should proceed. When they were asked about cooperation with the compulsory schools in the neighbourhood, involving parents and children, all agreed on how important it was to emphasize the transition from preschool to compulsory school. There had not been much cooperation between the two schools, and the teachers, both in the preschool and compulsory schools, wanted more cooperation. Attempts had been made, but for some reason they had always fallen through.

10.3.6 Conclusion

Mutual interests among parents, teachers, and children were hard to determine from the interviews. The idea of using need analysis to find the mutual choices of parents, children, and teachers was better in theory than in practice. In the end, the researchers suggested the theme of transitioning from preschool to compulsory school with the participation of children, educators, and parents. The cooperation had not been very efficient between the preschool and compulsory schools in the past, and educators, children, and parents were enthusiastic to participate in a project with that theme. Thus, the choice was based on what was lacking in the preschool and what the educators wanted to improve. When the topic of cooperation between preschool and compulsory schools was suggested, all parties agreed and were interested. The teachers thought that the SIGNALS project would be a good continuation of their previous work on democracy and were enthusiastic to try once more to improve the cooperation with the compulsory schools in the neighbourhood; the parents were also positive. Most of the children were excited about the topic. Starting compulsory school is a big step in children’s lives, and
most of the children seemed keen on participating in a project connected to the school, although some had not thought much about starting compulsory school.

10.3.7 Action Research

The aim of the study was to encourage collaboration among children, parents and educators during the children’s transition to compulsory school. For this purpose, an action research project was planned. In action research, the researcher herself works in the field and simultaneously conducts research and gathers data throughout the study period. While the research is taking place, the participating educators get the opportunity to evaluate their work immediately. Thus, the teachers who participate focus on developing and improving their own practices. Action research also has the aim to empower teachers, support them in transforming and rethinking their own practices, and look critically at educational practices in general (Einarsdottir, 2012; Kemmis, 2006, 2010; Yelland, Lee, O’Rourke, & Harrison, 2008).

The first step of our action research was to choose the theme. Next, the educators implemented new methods. During the research period, every action was documented and evaluated. Questions like these were frequently asked: How did that approach work out? What was positive, and what needs to be done differently? What could I have done differently? A need analysis was carried out in the beginning with the aim of gathering information from the children, parents, and educators to choose a theme or project for the action research. As the involving parties did not bring up suggestions for a project, the researchers suggested the focus of cooperation on the transition period between the preschool and compulsory schools in the neighbourhood. The research question formed in the process of the need analysis interviews was: How can preschool teachers, children, and parents create collaboratively a positive and educational transition and continuity from pre- to primary schools, based on the children’s initiatives?

In the next section, the implementation of the research will be described. It was mainly carried out by one of the researchers/preschool teacher (Lena) on the SIGNALS team, who teaches the oldest preschool children.

10.4 Implementation

The emphasis was on children’s well-being, participation, and learning during transition to school. In the past, the cooperation between the school levels in Iceland had been characterised by visits from the preschool to the compulsory school in order for the children to get to know the school. In this project, the aim was to develop new methods of cooperation that embraced the dialogues among relevant actors in the process. In the project, the focus was on the journey the children went through. Their voices and opinions guided the project and were in the spotlight during the process. Parents, children, and educators focused on ways to connect the school levels based on the children’s perspectives and what the children found important. The discussions among teachers and parents were meant to encourage new ways of collaboration between school levels based on the children’s overall well-being.

As the children’s ideas and enthusiasm were meant to lead the project, the adults only made rough plans for the process. The fifteen participating children would be transferred to
three compulsory schools. The teachers used the method of mind mapping to document the experience and learning the children gained during the visits to these three schools. Their mind mapping was based on the children’s questions and interests. The mind-mapping sheets were up on a wall in the classroom so that the children could continually review them and discuss them with educators and parents. Additionally, the children drew pictures and made personal mind maps, and invited their parents to coffee and discussions one morning.

The following sections explain mainly how the mind mapping was performed and describe the visits to the compulsory schools and a leisure centre.

10.4.1 Mind - mapping: The children’s first ideas about compulsory school

In the beginning, the children were split into two subgroups. Before each visit to the compulsory schools, the preschool teacher/researcher (Lena) sat down with each group and talked about the children’s ideas concerning the school, asking questions such as: What do you know about the school? What did they want to know? What did they want to do there? The children’s ideas were documented using the mind-mapping approach. Every idea was written down and discussed so that the children were able to see their ideas being documented and connected to other ideas.

The first time they sat down and did mind-mapping, the children talked about what they would study in compulsory school, like reading and writing, and they mentioned practical matters such as what to bring there. They knew they had to bring a snack and that certain utilities should be in their backpacks. They assumed that they would play less, meet their older siblings, and go to a leisure centre in another building (Figure 1). They did not talk much about play or the social part of being in compulsory school, but when they were asked what they wanted to know about the school, they were curious about those things.

Figure 1: Mind mapping: The children’s initial ideas about compulsory school
10.4.2 Compulsory school visits

The children went to three different compulsory schools in the neighbourhood. In the past, the children had only visited the school they individually would be attending in the fall. We wanted to discuss the transition as a group and so the children could ascertain the differences between the schools. Also, we thought that it would benefit the children to see different types of schools and to see where their friends were heading. The three different compulsory schools were located within walking distance of the preschool. The group visited one school two times as this school is in the same neighbourhood as the preschool (school A). They visited the other two schools (B and C) once each.

The first visit was to school A, which seven children from the group would attend in the fall. The children met the first graders, some of whom they had known when they were in the same preschool the year before. They played together and investigated the classroom on their own. They were free to look around and play with anything they found. The researchers/preschool teacher’s took pictures of the things they found interesting and other things that might be useful later on.

The children had prepared some questions, and the teachers and compulsory school children answered them as best they could:

- Do we go out playing?
- Where do you play?
- Will we have some power and influence?
- Do we sometimes go on the bus?
- Are we supposed to listen to the teacher?
- Do you learn something?
- Will we have something to eat?
- Do we write in books?
- What do the teachers know?
- Do we paint or color in school?
- Do we go out twice a day?
- When do we go out to play?
- Is it okay to steal from others?

Some of the children showed anxiety before the first visit, and they did not want to even go in into the school. The teacher/researcher (Lena) wondered how she could help these children cope with the anxiety. The compulsory school is huge and seemed to be threatening to the children. During their discussion, the idea of comparing the pre- and compulsory schools to find some things that were similar came up. Lena thought that this idea would help the children appreciate the similarities so that they might not be as afraid. So they began to categorize the pictures that were taken in the schools into what was similar and what was different (Figure 2).
Figure 2. Mind mapping: What was similar between the preschool and compulsory school and what was different?

The second visit was to the leisure centre, attached to school A. As usual, a map was made beforehand of what the children already knew. Many children had older siblings at the school and had been there with their parents to pick them up. They already knew a lot about the school and were excited to go. They were prepared with certain questions to ask, such as: Do they learn something in the leisure centre? Do they participate in sport training? The teacher wondered if the children would behave well. During the visit, the children’s questions were answered, and they were able to look around. At last they were allowed to play for a while. The children liked the visit and were fascinated about it for a period of time afterwards. Among other activities, they drew pictures of what they thought was interesting and fun and reflected on what was similar and different between the leisure center and the preschool. The children commented on the similarities in the leisure center and the preschool. They thought that the art workshop, a rug, the stools, and the rules were similar. However, the toys were different, and in the leisure center there was an aquarium and a room with cards and games (Figure 3).
The third visit was to school B (Figure 4). Before the visit, the children who would be attending this school, about the half of them, were curious to know if this school would be similar to school A. They wondered if there would be a looking glass and if they could paint, go swimming, and go out on breaks. The teacher from the first grade met and welcomed the children. She talked to each child individually and asked each which school he or she was going to. Then the teacher read a story to the children. The first-grade children in the class sat at their tables and ate their snacks, while the preschool children were invited to sit on a rug so they could see the pictures in the book. Afterwards, the assistant principle showed the preschool children around the school building. They were curious about the school but were surprised that they would not be able to play like in the first visit. It turned out that this difference was just what the children needed to see to sense the bigger picture. They talked about how they were able to see the whole school, not just the first-grade classroom. The children learned that a compulsory school is much more than just one classroom where they are supposed to sit and learn. It has a canteen, dining room, and gym.
The fourth visit was to school C. Only one of the children was going to attend the school. He had an older sibling in the school. During the visit, the children were able to see the whole school again and even went to meet that older sibling. Again, the children were interested and started to compare the three schools. Afterwards, the children played in the school yard.

The fifth visit was to school A for the second time. The children were more self-assertive now, and the anxiety of the first visit was almost gone. They remembered the first visit well and were still talking about how they wanted to see the whole school building. The teacher had other plans but changed them to accommodate the children’s wishes. First, they did a school project. They were given books with a few exercises in them that were comparable to ones they would get in first grade. The children were interested and started working right away, but most of the children stopped after a while and wanted to get moving. So, they got a tour around the building and noted that even though the schools were different from each other, they had many of the same things. The children had the chance to meet their siblings, which they enjoyed.

**10.4.3 The children’s experiences and thoughts about the visits – what did they learn?**

During the visits, the researcher/preschool teacher (Lena) took pictures of the things that the children were interested in and what they saw. After each visit, the pictures were printed out and looked at. The children then categorized them into two categories: What was similar to the preschool and what was different. They looked at the pictures and reflected on them after each visit, and again in the last mind-mapping session (Figure 5). One similarity, in the children’s opinion, was that one child got attention each day (child or star of the week). Others were that they did assignments about their families, the classrooms had the alphabet was on the wall, each child had a compartment, the classes read the same stories, the children had magnifying glasses, there was a whiteboard in both places, he schools recycled and the classrooms had some similar blocks. What was not alike were the headphones, desks, blocks, shelves with teaching materials, and paper towels.

After a while, the children started to notice that there were more pictures in the
“similar” category than in the “different” category. One child said, “Look! There are more similarities than differences!” The other children agreed. It was almost like there was a sigh of relief when the children noticed that, and the children who had been nervous about the visits gained more confidence later on because of this observation. In the middle of the project, one of the mind maps turned out to be a compliment map. The children would say positive things about their peers: what they admired and what they thought each other’s strengths were.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 5. Mind mapping: Commonality between the preschool and the compulsory schools**

### 10.4.4 Parents’ participation

As the daily interaction about what the children deemed important in the preschool progressed, the parents became involved in discussions about everyday life in the preschool. The teachers and parents made time to discuss this aspect of the project at the beginning or at the end of the day. In those conversations, both parents and educators discovered information about the children. The educators were able to share information about the project to the parents in those everyday conversations. Also, the parents were able to take a look at the mind mapping since the maps were hanging on the walls of the preschool. The parents supported the project in their discussions with the children at home.

At the end of the school year, the children’s families were invited to join the children in an afternoon snack. The children were excited and wanted to show their parents around. At this event, the families had a good opportunity to join the children in conversations based on the mind maps. Around the same time, the parents and the children were invited to have a conversation with the preschool teachers in a special meeting. The topic of the meeting was what information the children wanted the compulsory school to get about them (the preschool...
is obligated to give the compulsory school information about the children’s education, health, special needs, etc.). Afterwards, the parents joined their children in a visit to the compulsory school.

10.5 Project Evaluation

At the end of the project (June - August 2015), the parents, children, and preschool teachers evaluated the project. Again, interviews were carried out in focus groups; children were interviewed in June and the preschool teachers and parents in August. The interviews with the children took place in the preschool’s art workshop. There were 14 children as one boy had left the preschool during the year. The parents were interviewed in the dining room of another preschool. There were six altogether, two males and four females. Two were the same as before, and four were new participants. The preschool teachers interviewed were the two who had worked most with the oldest children.

10.5.1 Interviews with the parents

At the end of the research period, the parents had more to say about the topic, transition from preschool to compulsory school, than they had during previous interviews. This change was understandable since they had gone through the project with their children and had more experience on the topic than they had before. Many of the parents were following their first child to compulsory school.

The parents were pleased that this topic had been chosen and appreciated what had been done, but they wanted even more cooperation between the preschool and compulsory school. Their suggestions involved more visits, even during Fall Semester, and they wanted the children to participate more in compulsory-school activities before they started at their schools. Also, there was the suggestion that one preschool teacher join the children on their first days of compulsory school. The parents’ suggestions were all aimed at making the transition for their children, and themselves, easier and more successful. They thought that the “jump” between the two schools was too large, both for the children and the parents. The children went from playing a large part of the day to sitting a large part of the day at tables. The parents were used to having the preschool teachers with the children all day and getting a great deal of information from the teachers regarding their children. They all agreed that the compulsory school should be informed in detail about each child and how the child stood academically and socially.

One of the compulsory schools invited the parents to join their children in a visit to the school. The parents and the children were in different rooms during the visit. The parents got practical information about the school while the children worked on compulsory-school-related projects. All of the parents were happy about the visit, but some of them wanted to spend more time with their children before they were separated. The parents got answers to many of their questions, and the children became more confident about compulsory school. The parents talked about how their children were proud of themselves afterwards and were looking forward to starting compulsory school. In their opinion, these school visits was the most important part of their children’s journey. Some of the parents talked about how they wanted the Department of School and Leisure in Reykjavik to be more involved in the transition between the two school levels. For instance, they felt that the council should have guidelines about how often the
children should visit the compulsory schools before attending them and how transition activities should have more similarities between schools.

10.5.2 Interviews with the children

At the end of the project, the children had a lot to say about compulsory school. They were more knowledgeable about the next step in their lives. There were things they looked forward to and other things they were anxious about. When talking about compulsory school, they mentioned the subjects related to arts and movement, and they talked about practical things. The children looked forward to new challenges such as learning how to swim. Some of the children didn’t know they would learn how to swim in compulsory school, and during one of the visits, some of the children were happy to see a gym. During this evaluation, one of the girls said that her cousin was learning how to play an instrument at the compulsory school, and she was looking forward to that. The other children agreed with her and had different ideas about which instruments they wanted to learn to play.

There were two practical things at the compulsory schools that the children talked about throughout the project, so it was no surprise that they mentioned them during the evaluation. On the first visit to a compulsory school, the children noticed that the desks had signs with the names of the children on them. The children asked about the signs and learned that each child had an assigned desk and his or her name was on that desk. The children were in awe and looked forward to having assigned desks with their own names on them. The other practical matter that the children were enthusiastic about was the fact that the compulsory school children could use headsets. The purpose of the headsets was to help children to focus and not to be distracted by the environment. In the interviews with the parents, one of them said that he also used headsets at home to concentrate while studying. The son of that parent was the first one to spot the headsets and was so enthusiastic that most of the other children started to feel the same way. The things that the children were anxious about had to do with academics. When asked what they did not look forward to doing at compulsory school, most of them said “sitting still,” and one child added that taking tests was frightening.

10.5.3 Interviews with the teachers

When evaluating the project, the preschool teachers felt that this group of children was more prepared to start school than the groups before. They felt that the children knew more about what would be expected of them at compulsory school and were more confident and motivated. At the beginning of the project, some of the children were nervous about going to visit the compulsory schools, and they did not want to go. But after a while, the children were more confident, and all of the children wanted to go on all the visits. Even though they visited some schools that they would not attend in the fall, it still seemed to be meaningful for the children to visit all the schools. They often talked about the differences between the schools. At the end of the project, it turned out that one of the children would attend a school in a different town. The preschool teachers were convinced that this boy’s experience of visiting different types of compulsory schools would be beneficial to him during his transition. He had learned
that compulsory schools are different but that there are similarities to them all.

During the project, the children made mind maps and reported their ideas and experiences, which were documented and made visible to them. The mind maps were put on a big poster and placed on the wall in the classroom. The children were able to look at it at any time they liked, and they did frequently. They talked to each other about the differences between the preschool and the compulsory schools and how their compulsory school was different from their friends’ schools, etc. The children seemed to be evaluating their compulsory schools and what would be expected in this next step in their lives.

The project was, in a way, built around the visits to the compulsory schools. As said before, some of the children were nervous at first and didn’t want to go. The preschool teachers always managed to persuade the children to go by promising to hold their hands the entire time. After a while, none of the children needed to hold the teachers’ hands, and they were so confident that they asked if they could see the things that they wanted to see. The teachers supported the children in their investigations, and the children saw how their voices were heard at the compulsory schools. The parents’ part was to engage in their children’s experiences, get full information during the whole process, discuss their thoughts with the educators and other parents, and get involved in the project based on their individual child’s enthusiasm, opinions, and ideas.

10.6 Conclusions

In an evaluation of the ideology and process of the action research, it can be asserted that the emphases were indeed in accordance with the Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Preschools (2011), and the SIGNALS main concepts, which focus on cooperation, participation, and democracy. The preschool educators decided to let the interests of the children lead the way along with their enthusiasm, while involving their parents in the transition process by using the children’s voices. The children’s well-being was seen as important and an attempt was made to try and reduce their anxiety during the transition period by listening to their ideas about changes in the process.

Previous research findings have indicated that it can be difficult to establish a real partnership between preschool educators and parents (Epstein, 1992; Lawson, 2003). In the preschool where the action research took place, there was a culture of cooperation and perhaps therefore the parents were more eager to participate. They showed interest in the transition process and had much stronger opinions during the final interviews about how the transition between school levels should be embedded when compared to before the implementation. Review of the literature that addresses transitions to compulsory school indicates that collaboration and good relationships are at the core of children’s successful transition from one school level to another (Dockett, 2014; Mashburn & Pianta, 2006; Perry, Dockett, & Petriwskyj, 2014; Peters, 2010). In this small-scale action research, the focus was placed upon these issues. Hopefully, this focus will strengthen the partnership of children, parents, and educators during the transition period from preschool to compulsory schools in the chosen neighborhoods.

For the future, it has been decided that the preschool children’s visit to the compulsory school will start sooner in the school year. A date has already been set. The first graders in the compulsory school will also visit the preschool and cooperation will not only be taken care of by the preschool teachers, but also of teachers at both school levels. The parents wished for more continuity in their children’s education and that could be a motive for a common project in the near future.
10.6.1 European added value

When organizing and working on the Icelandic research project the European team met several times, discussed and reflected on the projects, criticized them and thus added to their value. That procedure was extremely useful. Relevant concept that linked the projects together were discussed and it was interesting and informative to follow the development of the projects in the other countries, their implementation, hindrances, and strengths.
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Lög um leikskóla nr. 90/2008
Reflections on the projects in seven EU countries

by Ingrid Pramling Samuelsson, Anne Kultti & Michel Vandenbroeck

11.1 Abstract

In this last chapter of the compendium we try to summarize some main points of the very extended seven different country projects. It then became obvious how timely participation projects are in a European context where it is stated in various documents that parents should be more involved in their children’s every-day life in ECE. There are clear distinctions about the topic of participation in the different countries, but all have worked hard to influence teachers and parents for giving children a chance to be a subject in and become participants in the pedagogical setting. And we as researchers have learnt a lot from being involved in a two-year dialogue, where we over and over again had to argue and reflect about our own practice.

11.2 Introduction

Participation is one of the most used words today in relation to children and education. With the UN Convention of the Right of the Child (1989) children’s participation came on the agenda in Early Childhood Education and in research about children (Tisdall, 2015). In the process of implementation of the UNCRC in laws as well as in practice, there is a struggle for what it means. Starting with the Oxford Dictionary (2014) the definition is ‘the action of taking part in something’. While Hart (1992, p.5), who is one of the key-persons trying to make sense of UNCRC, defines it as “the process of sharing decisions which affect one’s life and the life of community in which one lives.” But maybe the person who has been most known is Shier (2001) who’s five steps of pathways to participation clearly begins with listening to children to finally at the last step be an equal partner with children, including conditions for participation and responsibilities. One can claim that today, after 26 years of attempts to implement UNCRC, it is fairly well agreed that participation for children includes rights to be part of and be involved in decisions that affect themselves. Participation is not only important and timely for practice, but also in research has children’s own participation been a large topic (see further Tisdall, 2015).
When it comes to participation of parents in early childhood education, disagreement on what it means also prevails. On one side of the spectrum, we find arguments for parental participation as a civic right, because parents need to be heard when decisions about their children are made (Moss, 2007). The OECD’s second Starting Strong report for instance, argues for participation as “a two-way process of knowledge and information flowing freely both ways” (OECD, 2006). This reciprocal and democratic stance is also reflected in some early childhood education curricula, such as the Swedish one, stating “The preschool’s work with children should thus take place in close and confidential co-operation with the home. Parents should have the opportunity within the framework of the national goals to be involved and influence activities in the preschool” (National Agency of Education, 2011). In contrast, the third Starting Strong report (OECD, 2011) points out: “Parents and communities should be regarded as partners working towards the same goal. Home learning environments and neighborhood matter for healthy child development and learning”. In doing so, the participation of parents is not so much a democratic right, but rather a duty and instrument to goals that have been decided upon by the educational provision. This more unilateral approach is also prevalent in some early childhood curricula (e.g. DfE, 2012).

In sum, it is clear that participation may have several meanings, including a democratic principle and a right and a means to achieve other goals (and a duty to take responsibilities).

### 11.3 The European framework for ECE

Recently, a working group with representatives of all EU countries, elaborated – under the auspices of the European Commission – a proposal for key principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2014). The European Quality Framework proposes five main strands of quality: accessibility; quality of the workforce; curriculum; monitoring and evaluation; and governance and funding. The document further states that in all member States, there are transversal issues that are fundamental to the development and maintenance of high quality ECEC. These include a clear image and voice of the child. The EQF clearly states that curricula need to explicitly value the active participation of children. It further argues that the recognition of parents as the most important partners and thus the recognition that parent involvement and respect for (social, socio-economic, cultural and religious) diversity is essential. The document states: “To make this involvement a reality, ECEC services should be designed in partnership with families and be based on trust and mutual respect.”. Consequently, encouraging participation, strengthening social inclusion and embracing diversity are considered as essential quality criteria for ECEC.

With this said, we will now look at the seven European countries participation in the SIGNALS project and what are the similarities and differences in what has been carried out in the countries. First we will give some reference to the European state of art in the field of ECEC and joint efforts in our project.
11.4 Staff, parents and children’s talk about participation in the beginning of the project

In the beginning of the project, before intervention was made in all participating countries we carried out interviews with staff, parents and children. In this early analyses (see chapter II), it became obvious that there are both strong believes as well as legal status in participation since children have rights like adults, they should always be listened to and their views should be taken into account, while other voices limit children’s right to specific situations or tasks. These two different conceptions can be found both within the group of staff and parents. There are however slight differences in taking a self-evident perspective of children’s rights that become more visible in quotes from Iceland, Germany and Sweden, in Denmark, Greece and Romania it was more common with talking about participation at specific situations, but also in Denmark as more formal members of the board for parents. When it comes to children’s expressions, they never state that it is self-evident that they always should be listened to. But the opposite, that there are certain situations where they can decide themselves, like in play or mealtime - what kind of food they want to eat.

11.5 Critical reflections of the projects a as whole

It the analyses of the different countries reports it became obvious that there are both strong positive results of the projects and lack of a common perspective of participation. Let us here point to some of these aspects, first the positive results:

11.5.1 Strength of the project

All countries have an ambition to improve the quality of some aspects of their ECE program. However, they differ in what this means and how this entails different understandings of participation. Some local project focus clearly on local collaboration with parents and children (e.g. in Germany), others aim at social inclusion and/or social cohesion, in line with the recommendation of the EQF (e.g. Sweden and Romania), yet where the Swedish project stresses how provision can learn from parents, the Romanian project focuses on what parents can learn from the provision. The particular contribution of the Hungarian project is the focus on the transition from home to preschool in early childhood, as it is well known that this forms the basis of a mutual and trustful relation.

11.5.2 Various interpretations of the project

The title of the SIGNALS project comprises a number of notions. One of these is transition, which is interpreted in different ways in the various studies. Specifically, Iceland focuses on the transition between preschool and primary school. In an obvious way they both are giving children possibilities to visit primary school and talk about the coming transition to school. Hungary and Sweden focus in the transition for the youngest age groups, transition from home to become a preschool child. Hungary do this by letting parents and teachers answer a questionnaire that make their different perspectives visible, but that by itself also gives parents a feeling of being involved - someone want to know what they think. In the Swedish study, there is both a general questionnaire for getting to explore the idea of transition to preschool for children with other first language than Swedish before the actual study: observation and discussion, took place in preschool.
In the other four participating countries, transition seems to have been interpreted as a transition of ways to work with children, that is, to improve practice – something that also Iceland, Hungary and Sweden deal with. So there are two ways of talking about transition and transition for a new way of working for staff respectively for children to take a leap from one cultural experience to another.

11.5.3 What is it the various countries projects want to improve and in what way is this done?

The study conducted in Denmark focuses on health education and makes up four various thematic categories, also including the roles of the teachers, which are presented for the staff to reflect about and take a standpoint of what their perspectives are. This mode of raising the teacher’s awareness of didactics and their own role has an implicit, but not explicit, view of participation of children and their possibilities to practice their rights of decision making. This means that the teachers are in focus!

The Icelandic model for improvement is to focus children’s experiences of school and let the children lead the development of the cooperation between pre- and primary school, by letting their questions be a main point of the process, both before visiting school and while they were in school afterwards. Children and their perspectives are central in the Icelandic model.

In Greece, the model for practiced improvements focus on cooperation and interaction between children by planning ten thematic units that children have to work on in small groups. This looks like as the improvement is from traditional individualised teaching to group work. But not only children’s learnt to work together, teachers also realised that it was not more time consuming with group work.

Germany has a very special approach and conditions for their model. They worked concretely with re-designing children’s environment both indoor and outdoor. A model that is both concrete and real, but also involve all staff, parents and children, but not the least includes a lot of extra money that no one else have had for their project.

The Swedish model for improvement is both research (finding out more general about the topic at hand), observing and talking to staff, parents and children during the three days of settling in. The results of these three days observations, and the development work with teachers, when they read a book and discussed with us researchers, lead to a number of task that we suggested teachers to make with children and parents to become better able to raise their awareness and work with these children with other first language than Swedish, which is a large challenge in Sweden today.

Romania’s model is focussing on teachers and parents by first developing a program for parents, that then is discussed in a number of work-shops with parents. Focus here is on Roma parents and children that seem to be viewed as a very large problem in Romania, as they appear to be very different than the Romanian children, as it is formulated in their country report.

Finally Hungary has two projects, one where they struggle to get parents involved in their
children’s preschool experiences, and another study focussing on emergent literacy from the perspectives of the preschool teachers, and how they can better convince parents how important reading to children is. The staff had very prejudiced views of parents’ attitudes to reading, but after a number of work-shops with parents their attitude changed.

### 11.6 Perceptions in the end

In the end of the project, each country was asked to reflect on participation in the European project and value of the collaboration. The reflections are added in each chapter in this compendium. Taken together, each country has benefitted from the collaboration through dialogues between the partners in several manners. Firstly, within the project, each country had a possibility to shape the national study. Yet, the studies related to the common concepts, which expanded the studies. The studies became a part of a larger wholeness. Secondly, the collaboration contributed with new insight in the seven national education systems but also reflections concerning the own cultural education context from ‘an outsider’ perspective, that is what is often taken for granted. Thirdly, participation and collaboration as the key concepts in each of the national studies also guided the collaboration between the participating countries. The collaboration opened up for ‘thinking together’. Fourth, insight of diversity in the education systems in the seven European countries and ways of handling concepts of participation and collaboration, for example in everyday life in early childhood education, has appeared through the collaboration.
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