

Ethical Reflections of Interviewing Young Children: Opportunities and Challenges for Promoting Children's Inclusion and Participation

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Abstract

This qualitative research synthesis aims to describe and identify ethical opportunities and challenges in interviewing young children in early childhood education and to explore interviewing as a means to bring forward children's experiences of participation and inclusion. These objectives have been studied through two different research cases in the Finnish early childhood education and care settings with active learning approach. The identified opportunities were supporting to show emotions, respecting diversity and special needs, enhancing the competence and agency of children, stimulating humor, playfulness and imagination, and generating meaningful encounters and feelings of empowerment. The challenges were building trust, identifying experiences from imaginary stories, listening attentively, responding to difficult life situations of children, and addressing power distribution. The paper highlights the possibilities for promoting children's inclusion and participation through ethically considered interviewing and seeing research process as a chance to give them experiences about competence, involvement and becoming listened to by adults.

Keywords: early childhood education, ethics, qualitative methodology, social learning

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Research on small children's lives has involved a lack of equality between adult and child participants. It is common to study children exclusively through adults' perceptions, treat children as objects of research, and exclude them from the research process (Christensen & James, 2008). Einarsdóttir (2007) argues that earlier research on children was carried out through assessing and observing children's competencies and development. James and James (2012) suggest that if children are not included in the research focusing on their everyday life, it will result in an obfuscation of the relationship between adult and child. Moreover, this approach will make it more challenging to ascertain the diversity and multi-voiced aspects of childhood, as well as individual perceptions and experiences that help children build their understanding of their environment and interactions.

Recently, it has become evident that the present research methodology of early childhood education cannot dismiss the interaction and relationships between researchers and children. The focus has shifted from regarding children as objects (Christensen & James, 2008) to understanding them as social agents who contribute to the reproduction of childhood and society (Corsaro, 2011). This "new sociology" of childhood (Corsaro, 2011; Fattore, Mason & Watson, 2012; Mayall, 2006) has had an important influence on research methods, as it acknowledges children's agency (Mason & Hood 2011), and shifts the perspective from research on children towards researching with children (Christensen & James, 2008).

The development of participatory early childhood research carries with it methodological consequences. If children are regarded as expert informants about their own lives, appropriate strategies need to be developed and employed in order to provide meaningful information on children's perceptions (Tay-Lim & Lim, 2013). Although there has been progress in developing suitable research methods (Crivello, Camfield & Woodhead, 2009; Fattore et al., 2012; Karlsson, 2012), there is still a need for research to explore and develop substantive research ethics, methodologies, and methods towards democracy and participation (Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2015). Clark (2011) has pointed out that the debate has shifted from presenting cases of listening to children's perspectives to recognizing the ethical parameters in research.

Skånfors (2009) stresses the importance of using ethical radar in order to identify children's desires and to observe children's ways of expressing agreements and disagreements. We agree with Skånfors (2009) that the ethical discussion is still

dominated by reflections on informed consent and protection of participants. Therefore, there is an obvious need in research to explore and discuss ethical issues more deeply throughout the research processes. Moreover, the interview method has been criticized for being inadequate in bringing out knowledge on children's experiences (Hohti & Karlsson, 2013). Along with Kuchah and Pinter (2012), who found that interviewing provides access to children's views despite high status and socially imposed power, we see that it is possible through interviewing to gain knowledge on children's perceptions and involve them as active participants if the research process follows certain ethical principles.

Consequently, in this paper, our objective is to describe the ethical issues in early childhood education research when children are perceived as active, competent and knowledgeable agents: We will reflect on the ethical issues, which we regard as ethical chances and challenges by discussing the enabling elements (opportunities) and restricting elements (challenges) for engaging children in ethical research. We focus specifically on the practical process of interviewing young children by asking the following questions:

1. What kind of ethical opportunities can be identified from the interview process with young children?
2. What kind of ethical challenges can be identified from the interview process with young children?
3. How can researcher overcome these challenges in research practices?

The Context of the Study

One theoretical premise, which has had meaningful importance on our understanding of children, is the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), which obligates countries to respect the views of the child. Children's participation is one of the guiding principles in the Convention and requires a clear commitment and effective actions in order to turn into existing reality (Unicef, 2014). We support the view that the responsibility of adult is to be sensitive towards children's development by observing and supporting children's readiness to make decisions on things concerning themselves and the community they live in (Berthelsen, Brownlee & Johansson, 2009; Kangas, 2016). Therefore, children's participation means involving and enabling children

to take part in decision-making processes in their everyday lives (Kangas, Ojala & Venninen, 2015). As agents of research, children are responsible for interpreting the world of adults and in turn, adults are asked to listen to children and express interest in their affairs.

In the Finnish early childhood education, which is the context of this study, children's participation and inclusion are essential elements in implementing early childhood pedagogy. (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016). In Finland, children can attend the Finnish early childhood education from the end of parental leave period, which ends usually when a child is nine or ten months old and it lasts until a child starts basic education at the age of seven. Early childhood education is organized through the EDUCARE approach, which combines care, teaching and education. Generally, the Finnish early childhood education is planned in order to create the foundation for a child's lifelong learning, a balanced growth and development, wellbeing, and health (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016; Ministry of Education and Culture, 2012). In 2014, 63% of 1- to 6-year-olds and almost 100% of 6-year-olds participated in ECE following the national curriculum guidelines. (National Institute for Health and Welfare, 2015)

Theoretical Framework

Our study draws from several theoretical underpinnings, which are sociocultural theory of learning and human development, children as competent social agents, and children as participants. As has been brought forward, contemporary dialogue on early childhood education and curriculum has changed from a developmental-constructivist to sociocultural discourse (Edwards, 2007). In this study, we apply the sociocultural theory to learning and development in which learning is seen as culturally situated and socially communicated (Fleer, 2002; Vygotsky, 1986), and in which children are active participants in their learning and encouraged to engage with others in shared activities (Rogoff, 2007). This paper is grounded with the premise that in order to do research reflexively, researchers need to develop a set of strategic values within which it is possible to establish the required tactics (Christensen & Prout, 2002).

The early childhood education researchers (Berthelsen, 2009; Rogoff, 2007) have stated that children are equal actors with adults, and through their interactive and collaborative relationships learning and development occur in a social context and community shared between children and adults. However, these findings must be established through real interactions with young children in their everyday life, if they are to inform ongoing childhood research. If children are seen as actively contributing to cultural production and change, as well as affected by the societies and cultures of which they are members (Corsaro, 2011), research methodologies must also address the child's social agency and participation as an ethical issue.

This requires discussion about the ethical guidelines behind the research processes, because the essential element to explore children's knowledge is dependent on the relationships children have with researchers, the settings where they participate in research, how children are viewed by researchers, and how they are assessed (Smith, 2011). Existing research (Gallagher, 2009) has demonstrated that ethics cannot be put into effect through following codified sets of principles, which will automatically result in ethically sound research; The focus of current research (Alderson & Morrow, 2011) is on the ongoing nature of ethical considerations and that these considerations must be reflected throughout the entire research process. (Powell, Fitzgerald, Taylor & Graham, 2012)

Einarsdóttir's (2007) research on methodological and ethical challenges revealed that informed consent, access, relationship, confidentiality and protection play a crucial role in research with young children. Other ethical challenges, which have been found essential, are acknowledgement of diversity among and within children, the representativeness of the children engaged in research, and the possible impacts of children's participation in research, as well as children's desire not to participate at various stages of the research process (Dockett, Einarsdóttir & Perry, 2012).

We see children as "social agents" who have competence to influence research and should therefore be invited to join the meaning-making process of research they participate in (Corsaro, 2011; Fattore et al., 2012; Mayall, 2006). We argue that children's competence to participate in active meaning-making about their everyday life with researchers should not be judged by their age or performance in which focus is on children's incompetence and dependence (James & James, 2012), thus underrating their capabilities and not supporting

participation (Lansdown, 2005).

Methodology

This study has employed a qualitative research synthesis (Patton, 2015) approach based on children's interview data in order to describe and identify ethical issues in interviewing young children in early childhood education, as well as to explore interviewing as a means to bring forward children's experiences of participation and inclusion. These objectives have been studied through two different research cases in the Finnish early childhood education and care settings in order to fully illuminate and elaborate emergent findings (Patton, 2015).

The authors of this paper, who both have qualifications to work as early childhood education teachers, have collected the research data. Additionally, they both have experience on working in research projects.

Methods

For this paper, we have used two different interviewing methods for young children, the Communicative Approach (Flecha, 2015) and Interview method, a combination of standardized open-ended interview format and interview guide approach (Patton, 2015) for the first case study and the Action Telling method for the second case study.

The Communicative Approach (Flecha, 2015) emphasizes the relevance of including all the voices of all the agents in the research and acknowledges research as an egalitarian dialogue in which researchers contribute with scientific knowledge while social agents contribute with their own knowledge on the reality being analyzed. This kind of dialogue includes the construction of knowledge based on inter-subjectivity and shared reflection between researchers and social agents (CREA, 2012). The used interview method was a combination of standardized open-ended interview format and interview guide approach (Patton, 2015); The same questions were asked in each participating country, but the interview approach allowed individual perspectives and experiences to emerge, therefore building a conversation within a particular subject area and wording questions spontaneously

(Patton, 2015). The aim of the co-operative interview between the researcher and child was to achieve an agreed-upon interpretation of children's reality. One of the project's starting points for the research was that the results are the product of an equal dialogue *with* social agents, not a dialogue *on* them. (CREA, 2012).

The Action Telling method (Cheng et al., 2015) is a method where a child with the help of pictures about everyday social situations describes what he would do in similar situation or how the situation could be solved out. The method is narrative and emphasizes children's own telling and ways to verbalize their daily experiences. Every child had an opportunity to tell a narrative about his experiences considering seven research pictures about key elements of participation. These key elements were founded based on the theoretical framework about young children's participation in Finnish ECE centers by Venninen & Leinonen (2013) and included elements, such as experiences of joy, having needs fulfilled, feeling safety and belonging, practicing independent initiatives, making choices, having chances for responsibility and joint learning.

Data Collection Processes

The research data, which consists of interviews (n=173) with 4-7-year old children, has been collected in two research cases concerning children's participation and inclusion in early childhood education. The ethical considerations, its opportunities and challenges, in the research projects have been documented in the research diaries written by the researchers who participated as the interviewers of children. The research diaries played a significant role in the data collection process: the diaries mediated and helped scaffold our research knowledge (Engin, 2011).

The first case study, which is a small-scale study, was conducted during 2007–2010, and was part of the international INCLUD-ED (Strategies for Inclusion and Social Cohesion in Europe from Education) Project. The general aim of the project was to analyze educational actions contributing to social cohesion, and on the other hand, to understand practices leading to social exclusion (Flecha, 2015; CREA, 2012). In the Finnish context, the focus was on early childhood education, 5- to 7-year-old children, their families, teachers, and other representatives in the community. The aim was to research and develop social and educational interventions in order to reduce inequalities and marginalization, as well as to

identify those strategies, which bring greater educational success and social inclusion and the practices, which do not contribute to success and instead generate more inequalities (Lastikka & Lipponen, 2016; Ojala, Niemelä & Lastikka 2010).

The selected day care center, which was situated in the metropolitan area of Finland, in an area with a significant number of low socio-economical (SES) families. The center had 67 children of which 52% were of immigrant background. The participants were 10 children of immigrant background and 10 children of Finnish background. The interviewees were 5 - 7-year olds and were selected by applying chain sampling (Patton, 2015). Initially the daycare center suggested the most information-rich examples among the children. The research data consists of 10 interviews with children of immigrant background and 10 interviews with children of Finnish background. The interviews lasted 15 to 60 minutes. The interview questions were related to inclusion, community and family involvement/participation, participation in day care (activities, decision making, curriculum planning), learning, diversity, after-school activities, and improvements in the lives of children and families.

The second case study, which applied the Action Telling method, was conducted in spring 2012. The goal of the particular research project was to gain information about how children considered their own chances to participate in learning practices, everyday activities and joint meaning making. Children's conceptions about teachers' role as preventers or supporters were also examined. During the spring 2012, 153 children aged 4 to 6 years were interviewed in early childhood education settings situated in the metropolitan area of Finland.

The research was conducted through individual interviews where, instead of questions, children were presented with a set of pictures about their everyday interaction and activities in the day care center. In each picture there was a child in front and the researcher asked the interviewee to describe what he/she would do if he/she were that child. The interviewee could decide about what would happen next, where would she/he go and with whom to interact. The interviews lasted 25 to 45 minutes including the presentation of the research pictures, the child's telling about each picture and finally the read-through of each narrative to the child and the change for making changes and add new material if the child wanted to. Next, we will discuss the ethical principles of the study in more detail.

Research Ethics

The ethical principles of the researches were informed to both teachers and children of the participating day care center groups, and all the participants and their families were given written information of the study and a consent form. Especially in the first case study in which there were children of immigrant background, the information letter and consent form were translated. Additionally, a possibility to have an interpreter in the interview situation was offered. Voluntariness, confidentiality, and anonymity were stressed to the participants during the research process. Furthermore, every child's individuality and interests were taken into account.

One of the ethical principles was that the choice to participate (or not) was always made by the child and the teachers could not force any child to take part in. The researcher asked from each child if they would like to participate in an interview. If the answer was negative, no reason was asked and the child could return back to the class. For example, one 4,5-year-old girl in the second case study decided not to participate in the interview. However, the next day she wanted to participate willingly in the interview and explained: "*Yesterday we had an ongoing princess play with costumes.*" 12 children in total refused to participate in the research. These children have not counted in the total amount of participants.

A key ethical principle was that in the beginning of the interview, the researcher asked if the child agreed the interview to be recorded in the first case study and written down with the laptop in the second case study. Some of the children were interested in the recording machine or the laptop and asked questions about the machine and wanted to look it closer, which was allowed.

The final ethical principle in the second case study required that the written narratives were also read aloud, so that the interviewee could make changes. This was found to be important for the children. Especially five- and six-year-old girls asked the researcher to read aloud their narratives several times and to make corrections. This was connected to another ethical principle: we allowed the children to print their narratives and pictures in order to create an experience of ownership for the children. After printing, the researcher asked if she could keep the copy of the child's story in her computer, which was agreed upon by all the children. If the children had not agreed, the copy of the narrative would have been deleted.

Data Analysis

This paper was conducted in an ongoing triangulation process between the authors. The writing process of this paper was rather long; The idea of reflecting ethical challenges in research related to children's participation and inclusion was discussed already in 2012 after the collection of the second data set.

The first phase of analysis was based on an inductive content analysis in order to identify meanings and consistencies through patterns, themes and categories (Patton, 2015). The research data was read through and challenging issues as "meanings" considering ethical questions were identified. In the second phase, these meanings were considered through an abductive approach. An abductive approach is described as an attempt "to compare alongside...to show side by side" (Kováč & Spens, 2005) and can be viewed through intuition or as a kind of a systematized creativity to create "new" knowledge in research process (Andreewsky & Bourcier, 2000) through several cycles of interaction between researchers, theory and data using the benefits from both inductive and deductive approach (Kováč & Spens, 2005). In an inductive approach, data about the researched phenomenon guide the analysis process, while in a deductive approach, the analysis is theoretically derived (Hyde, 2000), whereas in abductive analysis, the key element is the interaction between the theory and the data to acquire new knowledge about the phenomenon. The researcher creates a framework of different theories together with the data in a creative process of "theory matching". (Kováč & Spens, 2005). In this research, the abductive approach was adopted to create new knowledge on children's participation concerning ethical challenges, social knowledge, their roles and interactions with the researcher, and finally with society at large. Through the abductive content analysis, researchers first identified challenges and then discussed and evaluated these challenges based on the theoretical background they established during shared meetings.

The research triangulation was conducted to ensure that the analysis was based on valid understanding and previous knowledge (Golafshani, 2003), as well as to test consistency (Patton, 2015). In the triangulation process, two different data collection processes, know-how of two researchers and the use of multiple theoretical perspectives were used. This triangulation played an important role in offering deeper understanding in analyzing the data and in finding emergent themes of the phenomenon.

The triangulation between the researchers was essential in the abductive analysis cycle and through it the understanding about researchers' chances to support children's participation in challenging ethical situations was created, interpreted and reproduced through several cycles (see figure 1).

The triangulation process

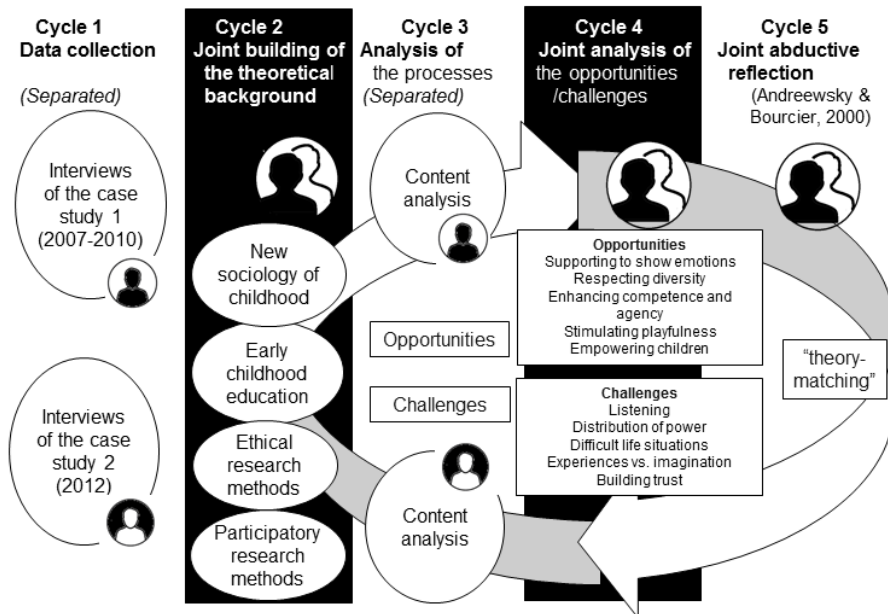


Figure 1. The triangulation process

In figure 1, the research process through triangulation based on the abductive content analysis, is explained. The identified phases of the process were independent data collection processes, the joint building of theoretical background, the analysis process of both data collection processes separately, the joint analysis process of identified opportunities and challenges, and the abductive reflection of theories and findings.

Findings

Through the analysis, five enabling elements (opportunities) and five restricting elements

(challenges) for engaging children in ethical research emerged. Each theme is explained in greater details in the following sections. Through the identified challenges, we identified effective research practices necessary to overcome these challenges.

Identified Opportunities

Supporting to show emotions. It was found that the Action Telling method supported children to talk about their emotions and feelings. Children talked about both positive and negative emotions and they talked freely about everyday feelings they had in the day care center. Additionally, the verbalization of emotions emerged from all children's telling.

The girl can join with the others in a play and is happy...she seems happy.

They should put the toys in order and go for a snack, but the girl is still angry.

Respecting diversity and special needs. One of the premises of this study was community involvement, which embrace diversity (Watkins, 2007). In the case study interviews, this was implemented through different components, which were (1) including vulnerable groups (young children, immigrant children, children with special needs) in the research, (2) asking questions, which tried to find out the exclusionary and inclusionary dimensions in the day care and the community, and (3) creating a respectful, encouraging and warm research environment and build relationships that embrace diversity. The third component was found to be very important for the researcher when interviewing the children; it was of great significance that the researcher treated everyone with respect and acknowledged that every child had his own knowledge, talents and abilities, which the researcher encouraged the children to show. The researcher asked the children about their strengths, learning and abilities, and almost all children found these:

I've been praised of eating always everything even though there is bad food, and that I concentrate too well, and that's why it takes time.

When I was small, I couldn't speak any.. Finnish.. I've learnt here, in kindergarten.

Children with special education needs were included in the research. Their parents as

well as the children themselves seemed to be enthusiastic about the fact that a researcher wanted to listen to their stories as well. The day care center personnel made extra accommodations so that children with special needs in communication skills or emotional and behavioral disorders could also participate. For these children, special arrangements (such as extra time, more peaceful environment, telling/showing with pictures and sign language etc.) were made in co-operation between the staff and the researcher.

Enhancing children's competence and agency. Through these interviews children were encouraged to bring forward their competencies. Many children emphasized how the child in the picture they were telling about could solve challenging situations. About one third of the participants (47/147) decided that the child did not need teachers' help for solving things out in most of their narratives (a teacher was not mentioned at least four out of seven narratives).

This girl can't decide what to do...would she draw, paint..or...no, yes, she can make the decision!

They want to play with those toys that are on the shelf. The stool is needed, of course! She can use it: first you put the stool at right place, then you climb on it and after that you can take toys.

It was also found that most of the children were exercising their agency in interviews by e.g. asking questions, singing, drawing, counting, and choosing the topics that most interested them. They also made comments and remarks, which were unexpected and initially appeared disconnected from the researcher's perspective. However, upon further discussion, it became clear that these comments were actually important to the children and when further discussed, were closely linked to the children's everyday life. In the following example the child describes how she actively solves the situation of not having anyone to play with:

Researcher: Do you always have some friend to play with?

Child: Hmm. Guess what? When I'm always outside or somewhere, I never ask that can you play with me, I just like crawl, I'm some animal, so I crawl there and say nothing and then they just automatically take me to play with them, if I don't have friend anymore.

Stimulating humor, playfulness and imagination. The interviews were also full of humor, playfulness and imagination: e.g. the questions “How your family could participate in the kindergarten?” and “How would you persuade your parents to come and participate?” were found funny by children and they came up with amusing ideas, such as: “If they would go there, I could leave them there in peace and let them sleep all day” and “If they wouldn’t like to come, I’ll phone them, I’ve got my own cell phone, I phone them and I offer them ice cream straight from the kitchen.”

Empowering children. Through the research questions it was possible to empower children in the research situation. The research questions, which were designed by the coordinator of the project in the first case study, initially presented an obstacle to studying the perspectives of young children and finding out the experiences they encountered in their everyday life. The duty of the researcher was to modify the questions so that they would correspond to the ages of children. For example, the original question, which was related to transformation during the project, was considered too abstract for the 5- to 7-year-old children: “In what ways do you feel that you have changed since you started participating the project?” To make the question more concrete and related to children’s everyday life, the questions were rewritten so they would begin with learning and then would allow the child to reflect on the child’s improvement since the beginning of the child’s kindergarten year: “What have you learnt from teachers or from your friends in kindergarten? In which things are you better now than when you started the kindergarten?”

Furthermore, for most of the children, it appeared that interviews brought about a sense of empowerment; by encouraging children to tell about their lives, listening to them, noticing children’s actions of agency and respecting differences, resulted in long, in-depth and personal descriptions, conversations and reflections on the children’s lives. The researchers who did not know the children were surprised to find that the children trusted the researchers with such intimate stories. Most of the children enjoyed telling how good they were in something, which seemed to give positive feelings of empowerment:

Child: Because, I’ve got really good hearing, I have super good hearing, I heard when I got vaccination, I heard all the peeps, those which I needed not to hear and from that it was found that I have super good hearing, so I hear all, even sounds like this. (The child makes a small sound)

Identified challenges

Building trust. Building trust between a child and a researcher, as well as creating a warm and encouraging environment were found to be essential in completely significant longer interviews. If the child seemed to be nervous, the researcher initiated a discussion or suggested a play activity. Most of these children were willing to start the interview. However, for seven of the children, the challenge remained unsolved: Children didn't want to tell their conceptions and mainly described the pictures. Some of them later explained to their teachers that they did not know "the right answers," so it seemed they understood the research situation as a testing, rather than as an opportunity to express their experiences. There were children who remained totally silent during the research, and after some time the researcher asked if they wanted to leave from the situation.

There were also a few interviews in which there were no signs of visible empowerment or identification of meaningful encounter; the researcher felt that the children experienced the interview situation as somewhat unpleasant and frightening despite that the researcher's focus was on creating a supportive and warm research rapport. These children answered the questions by nodding or saying "No" or "Yes," and avoided eye contact. In these cases, it would have been perhaps more useful to have an accompanying friend to make the children feel more safe with an unfamiliar researcher.

Identifying a difference between real experiences and imagination. Another challenge was to identify the difference between children's experiences and imagination. For ethical reasons, the researchers decided never to doubt the child's telling and they promised to write down only what the children said.—Children were happy with the narratives they had told, so the researcher did not find it necessary to manipulate the children into telling also the "truer narratives" of their everyday activities in the day care center. However, in one class, two boys returned to see the researcher next day and asked her to delete the stories they had told. They explained that they felt that they did not tell the truth and invented things in their stories. These fantasy stories were later removed from the data set, but the challenge remained for the researchers to understand children's perspectives in these stories.

Responding to difficult life situations of children. Another challenging feature of interviewing children was when some of the children shared their difficult life situations, which involved e.g. unemployment, death, experiences of prison, bullying, lack of money etc. The questions of how to respond and what to say were revolving in mind of the researcher; the first reaction was sorrow and empathy towards children, which was shown by compassionate signs and words. However, the way the children talked about the experiences, changed the mindset of the researchers: it seemed that the children were not in general troubled about these situations, which appeared demanding for the researcher, but communicated the information without being upset, sometimes also with positive insight and humor:

Researcher: What about your mom, do you tell her what you've done?

Child: Well, sometimes. To dad. He's there in prison.

Researcher: Ok.

Child: Or he's got own house, so he can phone us.

Researcher: So, yes. Can you visit there?

Child: Yes, we visited, we've been there one night.

Researcher: Ok, how was it?

Child: Real cool, we got two bags of candies.

Listening. Listening presented an additional challenge to the interview process. in interviewing was concerned with listening. The fact that the researchers genuinely wanted to know children's opinions and experiences was stressed verbally to the children: in the beginning of each interview, children were told that the researchers did not know the answers to the questions and that they were there to learn what the children did in the day care center and what they thought about the center's activities. The researchers also stressed that the children could always pose questions to the researchers. However, during the process, it was found that listening attentively and being genuinely interested in everything the children discussed, was challenging: it required that the researchers were constantly attentive, kept eye contact and made supporting signs and positive feedback, such as nodding, smiling, or saying "I understand", "I see", "OK" etc. For the researchers, it was sometimes difficult to be silent and not to comment. This was the case especially with the children, who seemed to be shy and timid: the challenge was to give time to these children

to answer and think.

Addressing the distribution of power. During the research process, the distribution of power appeared to be demanding. It was regarded very important that the researchers brought forward that they did not know the answers, but that the children were the experts. Furthermore, taking into account the fact that the children shared personal events and facts, the researchers wanted also to share their own life experiences, e.g. by telling personal things. However, power distributions were not always simple. In the following excerpt, one can see that the researcher did not fully comprehend the importance of the Lego, which was forgotten:

Researcher: Yes, well, what do you think about your kindergarten group?

Child: Well, at least I like those Legos, because there are some great Legos, except the most I like my own Legos, because those are much nicer.

Researcher: The Legos at home?

Child: I forgot that Lego by the computer. One of my Legos.

Researcher: It doesn't matter for sure, it will certainly stay there. Well, hmm, what else do you like?

By saying, "It doesn't matter for sure", the researcher, although not deliberately, dismissed the child's concern about his forgotten Lego, and could have passed a message for the child that his feelings are not relevant for the researcher. Fortunately, it seems that the above example did not affect the research relationship, but instead presented a challenging ethical moment, which had to be taken into consideration. Therefore, the challenge was to stay constantly alert to power relations and to critically review the researchers' own actions and expressions in order to realize ethical consequences for the researchers' relationship with the children in the study.

Discussion

In this paper, we have examined what kind of ethical opportunities and challenges can be identified from the interview process with young children. The opportunities identified

were supporting to show emotions, respecting diversity and special needs, enhancing the competence and agency of children, stimulating humor, playfulness and imagination, and generating meaningful encounters and feelings of empowerment. The found challenges were building trust, identifying experiences from imaginary stories, responding to difficult life situations of children, listening attentively, and addressing power distribution. After reflecting on these challenges, we identified ethical research practices, which helped to overcome these challenges.

In general, it was discovered that during the two research processes, interviews gave chances to meaningful encounters and positive feelings of empowerment (e.g., Kretz, 2014; Einarsdóttir, 2007). Appropriate questions, genuine listening and interest, support and equal relationships in which diversities and competences were respected, helped to create a meaningful interview encounter for the researchers as well as for the children. The meanings and significance of these encounters were not asked, but it was possible to see from children's signs, expressions or gestures if interview had induced positive outcomes. Naturally the meanings varied; there were as many truths and constructions as there were children, not to mention the researchers.

Promoting children's participation is a key concept in today's discourse, which forms a significant paradigm shift for the educational sciences (Vandenbroeck & Bouverne-De Bie, 2006). Participation is also closely linked to the concept of inclusion: When finding solutions to social exclusion, children's conceptions are important to take into account (Davis & Hill, 2008). However, participatory and inclusive research is not without ethical challenges and pitfalls; recently the discourse has shifted from the viewpoint of repeating the importance of participation and showing how children can take part in the identification of ethical parameters (Clark, 2011).

This study has moved us toward identifying the particularly important ethical elements of interviewing young children in order to support the inclusive participation of children in early childhood education. It has also resulted in understanding the interview process in order to bring forward children's experiences and perceptions on their everyday life in early childhood education settings.

First, the ethical way of conducting research in which children are involved in research and considered competent actors and participants, requires more time and resources for the

data production process. In our opinion, the data production process should be viewed not only as an information gathering but as a chance to interact with young children and give them experiences about competence, involvement and becoming listened by adults (see also e.g., Samuelsson et al., 2015). In the Finnish context, it is stated that "In studying children and young people one must respect their own opinion if they are mature enough to form an opinion" (National Advisory Board on Research Ethics, 2009), which is important to take into account also with young children.

Here we want to bring forward the issue of research questions, which we consider both a methodological but also a question of ethics. We see that a researcher needs to clarify the research questions through reflective, repetitive and dialogical processes that are leading ethical and theoretical positions (Agee, 2009). The perspective of seeing children as active and competent participants, who act autonomously yet are interdependent on others, has inevitable consequences: the active, competent child and the researcher are results of the actions in which the child, the researcher, the institutional setting and the material are carried out. (Samuelsson et al., 2015; Einarsdóttir, 2010; Berthelsen, 2009). Our results indicate that when a child is considered a competent agent who interprets and reproduces the ongoing research process together with the researcher, there must be strong ethical values behind research methodologies and aims.

Secondly, we argue that in order to promote children's participation and inclusion, the key ethical guideline is the quality and nature of the partnership between the child and researcher, which is consistent with previous research (Berthelsen, Brownlee & Johansson, 2009; Lansdown, 2011). A research partnership is characterized by different elements, such as genuine listening and interest, trust, respect and support. We share the idea of Roger Hart (1992) that children's participation does not mean that adults need to be replaced but adults need to listen, support, guide and know when not to speak. The idea is to consider what a child can achieve in collaboration with other children and with supportive adults. As a researcher, it is crucial to keep in mind the necessity of seeing oneself as a co-inquirer together with the children (Fattore et al., 2012), and as Karlsson (2012) stresses, to be open to children's messages in order to capture children's own knowledge.

Creating this trustful and confidential relationship is also an important prerequisite for children to show emotions (Kyrönlampi-Kylmänen & Määttä, 2011) and to share difficult

life situations. Our study indicated that although a researcher may have designed or modified the research tools and possess socially imposed power (Kuchah & Pinter, 2012), it is still possible to reach an equal relationship in which children want to share their experiences. The challenge for a researcher is to create a research environment in which children feel trust and in which “right answers” do not exist. Furthermore, imagination, humor and positivity emerged from the interviews in this study (Alcock, 2005; Karlsson, 2012). In this research, the process with discussions and playful moments helped contribute to a greater understanding about children’s daily experiences and their points of views regarding social and cultural environments, than did direct question-answer-sets or passive observations in previous research frameworks. Thus, we argue that children’s playfulness with humor and imagination should be considered when designing the research methodologies and methods.

In particular, the Action Telling method allowed researcher to understand the way children create meanings in their lives as narratives (Clandinin & Connely, 2000) as well as to describe and explain important aspects of children’s perceptions (Squire, Andrews & Tamboukou, 2008). The method in the first case study was not a typical interview in a strict sense, but instead included many questions, which had to be asked in order to be similar with other participating countries in the project. In the future, it might be helpful to stress more the narrative method in which listening and reciprocity are important (Karlsson, 2012) when interviewing young children. However, it needs to be remembered that participatory methods are no less problematic or ethically ambiguous, as Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) argue. In the future, more critical reflection, especially the use of children’s rights perspective in promoting ethical research, requires further research (Powell et al., 2012).

Furthermore, we support the view that children’s participation should be inclusive, avoid existing patterns of discrimination, and encourage opportunities for marginalized children to be involved. Children should not be seen as a homogenous group, and participation needs to provide equal chances to participate without any discrimination because of age, gender, ethnicity, family, culture, geographical location, language, religion, ability, or financial situation (Lansdown, 2011; United Nations, 1989). Thus, the important question in research is to consider who is included and vice versa, who is excluded (Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2015). We conclude that the ethical values behind the research

methodology can be considered as "sine qua non" condition for the process of making research, which aims to empower children's agency and participation. Indeed, it is a value without which the research process could not exist.

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