

Developing Children's Participation through Research and Reflective Practices

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Abstract

This paper is based on an early childhood education development project in the Helsinki Metropolitan area Finland. Development in 21 research day care centres was implemented by reflective practices within everyday activities. Therefore this study has both practical and theoretical interests. As an example of reflective practice, we describe and examine the development process for facilitating children's participation during 2009-2011. The data of evolving participation were collected with a survey implemented twice in both 2010 and 2011. Based on the results, children's participation has proceeded in various daily activities. The reflective development of participatory practices has been considered as a common problem solving process, where all participants can use their professional expertise to create better early childhood education for children and with children.

Keywords: reflective practice, children's participation, early childhood education

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Introduction

Our study has both practical and theoretical interests. The main target in our interest is on pedagogical development in Finnish day care centers. Experiments on the development of early childhood education related to the deepening of reflective skills have been conducted both in Finland (e.g. Karila, 2001; Ojala & Venninen, 2011) and internationally (Fenichel, 1991; Gettinger, Stoiber & Lange, 1999). They have usually involved development at a team level, where individuals or work teams have reflected on their work by the help of the researcher. Another goal is to enable closer interaction amongst educators in the field as well as with those in the administration of the relevant organization. These solutions represent an effort to guarantee that the experience and knowledge accumulated during the development work remain in the organization.

In the research design for this paper, we focus on the development of children's participation in certain research day care centers participating in the development project during 2009-2011. In these day care centers the development of participatory practices occurred through the reflective practices process, where educators in these day care groups got deepening understanding and professional expertise about their working practices and chances to facilitate children's participation. Through the research from these research day care centers a definition of small children's participation in educational context was substantiated.

The Context of VKK-Metro

The area of operation of the Development Unit of Early Childhood Education, the VKK-Metro, established in 2007, is the capital city of Helsinki and its three neighboring municipalities. This is an urban operating area and the only metropolitan area in Finland. It constitutes the living environment of one-fifth of all Finnish children under school age (Finnish Child, 2007). We are facing a new demanding context for developing reflective practice among educators in early childhood education, where in 500 day care centers professionals take care of approximately 40,000 children aged one to seven years. In this paper, we focus on the development project of children participation from November 2009 to

October 2011.

Development carried out at each research day care center was supported by a mentor, a director of the day care center and peer groups. Each group has a representative from the individual research day care centers. The University of Helsinki carried out a specific duty to monitoring the progress of the development process in terms of research. Research produced evidences on the progress of the development. The contributions of these supporters have been further considered in our previous research (Venninen, Leinonen, Ojala & Lipponen, 2012).

The collection of information during the development process was designed to bring evidences about enhancing the children's participation. The development process of reflective practice became evident in the group interviews at the start and at the end of the project and in the process follow-up, conducted every two months. In addition to a study on the development process, the university conducts other research related to the children's participation. The research surveys provided a good basis for reflective discussions and evaluations about the progress of children's participation in groups. Results were offered for utilization by research day care centers in workshops.

Characterizing Reflective Practice

The background theory guiding development is the reflective and collegial development of work. One general goal that transcends project periods has been the development of observation and documentation in early childhood education work. The theoretical interest of our study during this period is based on the new definition of children's participation in the early childhood education context through the developmental process of reflective practices.

Even though the term reflective practice is well known and frequently used in behavioral sciences the definition of this term is a challenging task. Some elements of reflective practices are connected with the ideas of Dewey (1933), who spoke about routine action and reflective action. Through reflection an educator reaches competence for thinking consciously about her/his actions for modifying them (Schön, 1983; 1987). Within this context, Pearson and Smith (1985) see that the essential target in reflection is not necessarily to solve problems but to think about actions. This can happen through group events where experiences are shared

with the purpose of developing insights. In this way actors can develop a clearer understanding of the relationships between actions taking place, their intended purposes and difficulties. The aim of our experimental work was to create a shared commitment to develop pedagogical practice through reflective practice.

Reflection of practices is important for early childhood education teachers to understand the meaning of the teaching profession (Lim & Kwom, 2010). Reflection is an important tool in recognizing changing pedagogical practices (e.g. Chi, 2010; Hutton & Smith, 1994). Mezirow (2000) argues that social reflection generates changes in the perspective meaning of the participants. Participants can share experiences, establish interpretations and question different options. In this way, they use the perspectives and experiences of others in defining their own perspective meaning. One recognized characteristic of reflection is the presence of problem-solving (e.g. Hutton and Smith, 1994; Adler, 1991). Changing practices is shown to be possible in early childhood education and making changes also provide a common goal for the group of educators and thus increase child-initiated activities (Lim & Kwom, 2010).

Different characteristics can be detected in the nature of reflection, depending on the depth of the level where the participant moves when reviewing the issue. Such levels include the technical listing of activities, the description of activities, analytic examination of activities, and reflection on the bases for activities (Ojala & Venninen, 2011). Studies have also revealed that the depth of reflection varies even during the same discussion, and at the individual level. According to Ojala & Venninen (2011) reflection is a phenomenon that is molded dynamically during discussions, when participants move at varying reflection levels, even during the same discussion. During the development process, we have obtained information, based on research, on how educators at the research day care centers adopted reflective development.

Facilitating the Participation of Children

During 2009-2011 the focus of the developmental process in the VKK-Metro-project has been to increase children's participation in day-care centers, basis for this has been both the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989) and the Act of The Child Welfare in Finland (2007). A large amount of research on pre-school aged children's participation has been done

in Finland (see Hujala, 2008; Leinonen & Venninen, 2012) and internationally (see Bae 2009; Emilson & Folkesson, 2006; Smith, 2002).

As pointed out by Smith (2002), even young children are competent in understanding their experiences and indeed, they are very capable of expressing themselves. Children's capacity to formulate and express views, and take part in decision-making is highly dependent on the context, and especially the extent to which adults can support and facilitate children's participation. With the research of children's participation, the issue of how to support children's participation is important. Child-initiated activities are part of participation, where educators' role is to facilitate participation and support and build environment open for child-initiated activities (Ahn & Kim, 2009).

In this study, children's participation is seen as a common activity of interpreting the world with adults who respect and listen to children and are interested in their affairs. Participation is seen as including the right to enjoy self-responsibility and self-empowerment through growing up. Participation is experienced with adults in a secure environment where children's needs are taken into account. (Venninen, Leinonen & Ojala, 2010). Supporting children's participation is a process of development where educators in groups as well as the whole early childhood education system in municipal levels should be involved and commitment in. In the following we describe our research, which is based on reflection regarding supporting children's participation.

Methodology

We started with a pilot-survey, collecting early childhood educator's views on participation by using a self-report questionnaire targeted in the teams of the 21 pilot day care centers (N=82 teams) in the Helsinki Metropolitan area. Through twelve qualitative questions we asked participants to describe, what kind of issues they connect to the "children's participation". For example the pilot-survey contained questions: "In recent years, we have developed working practices in the following way, which enable children's participation in our group". As answers we got next quotations: "We have asked children with us when we arranged the common room facilities in our group.", "Children take part in party ideas (e.g.

the Spring Festival, Mother's Day) with adults “ and “We ask about children's opinions, what they like and what they do not like, and why.” With the aid of these quotations, we defined the next quantitative variables to the final survey questionnaire: “Choices to act in and change physical environment”. “Children take part in designing activities” and one qualitative question: “What kind of initiative suggestions coming from children, do you take into account in your group?” Through the pilot results of practices in the field and through the theories (explained above in the literature review) about children's participation, we designed our survey questionnaire. The Finnish curriculum of early childhood education with pedagogical planning was also taken account.

The study was conducted among teams, because teams plan and carry out the daily practices in day care centers. Opening a discussion about the practitioners' own conceptions can also help promote the reflective approach, therefore the participants of the development project answered to survey by teams. To gain data about the enhancement of children's participation the same questionnaire was distributed in May 2010 and again in May 2011 (N=74 teams).

The most important part of the data, considering this paper, is the three qualitative questions of the final questionnaire: 1. Describe the situation in which the child's participation is clearly visible. 2. What kind of initiative suggestions coming from children, do you take into account in your group? 3. Please describe the activities in your group, which the children have innovated by themselves.

In addition, we considered several (9) quantitative variables to describe the development of certain areas of children's participation in groups. These variables were specific questions within the questionnaire topics. In this article, we are focusing on topics of children's activities and participation; activities which children themselves have been developing in their group as well as adult's role as a facilitator for participation (see figures 1 and 2). Participants evaluated participatory practices in their group in Likerts-scale. The alternatives for variables were ‘5, Always’, ‘4, Often’, ‘3, Sometimes’, ‘2, Rarely’ and ‘1, Never’.

The participants of the research consisted of the staffs of 21 municipal day care centers in four municipalities in the Helsinki area. The staff roughly represented the entire day care staff in the Helsinki Metropolitan area, total of 74 teams responded to the survey. These teams consisted of 227 professionals who took care of 1,273 children (Table 1). The adult – child

ratio defined by law is one pedagogue per four under three-year-old children, or seven three-to-seven-year-old children. (OECD, 2006).

Table 1. *Participant Teams*

Number of team members	N of teams	Qualification of team members			Total employees	Number of children (Mean)	Children per adult
		teacher	childminder	other			
2	8	6	10	0	16	13.8	6.9
3	45	44	76	3	135	18.8	6.3
4	14	21	24	11	56	17.5	4.4
5	7	6	19	7	37	21.7	4.3
<i>total</i>	74	77	129	21	227	18.26	5.6

Both the qualitative and quantitative results were analyzed by characteristic methods.

The qualitative data was descriptive about how children's experiences of participation were visible to teachers and how they felt about acting supportive towards children's initiatives, hearing children's voice and getting to know children's perspective. The content analysis of the qualitative data was done inductively from the data. We classified the data thematically and coded it into easily interpretable parts. In this first phase of analysis some descriptions were only wordlist, where educators listed what children had made, like in the next example: "*Desire book, desire gymnastic exercises, desire singing.*" Some descriptions went further on by describing the situation, educator's and child's role like in the next example:

"In the group of under three years, playing is determined of the objects of children's interests (for example, the children want to dance (it becomes evident by children's signs and expressions). Teacher makes it possible by music and instruments. Children are eager because of responding to their wishes. The attention, support and guide of teachers are the requirements of succeeding."

Secondly, the meanings were grouped into the classes through the type of their features. In this phase, the theoretical background was used for grouping the different forms of reflection or participation. Thirdly, the classes were then further conceptualized into the main categories for getting a general view of the phenomenon. When we re-examined in formed classes, we

also quantified the mentions inside them. Thus, we gained a picture of how often the respondents brought out certain information.

Analysis for the quantitative data was done by comparing the means and examining the distributions of variables. The reliabilities of nine variables were examined with Cronbach's alpha which were .756 (for the first measurement in 2010 it was .606 and for the second in 2011 .645). The significance for the means in two different measurements was explored with correlations between pairs and paired samples t-test. The significance of correlations was smaller than 0.01 with five pairs and smaller than 0.6 in three pairs; in one pair the sig. of correlation was .246. The significance of the paired t-test varied between .006 and .175 (see figures 1. and 2.). The statistical significance was excellent only in those five pairs (< 0.01) and average on the others, but in this type of natural study the development method could not be tested in laboratory circumstances and the development of participation analyzed by qualitative methods became visible also through the change of means.

Results

In the next sections, we first focus on the progression of reflection during the development process. After that, we concentrate on defining and describing the characteristics of children's participation.

Developing Children's Participation through Reflection

At the beginning of the project, many teams in the research day care centers discussed participation at a practical level. Through the discussions with the mentors or in the peer groups, the issues changed and got larger perspective. Next we are presenting some quotations as examples about the reflective levels presented before (Ojala & Venninen, 2011). The following quotation illustrates the answers, which did not contain reflection or contained it only a bit. When dealing the issue educators stayed on the practical and slight level. The team has no need to focus on the larger perspective.

'Fine direction for the development of practices. We're trying to look forward together to strengthen children's participation!' (2010) (technical listing)

The following quotation illustrates the representation about activities, but it does not focus on the deeper level of reflection.

'The different educational principles. Others believe that, for example, all food should be eaten, and if you do not eat everything, you cannot have bread. There are also a lot of adult-centered activities...' (2010) (the description of activities)

In the following quotation, reflection has moved on the deeper level because of dealing activities with the objectives posited for them.

'In the group aged 2-3 years, we often see the expressions of their own will, through which the toddlers test what is allowed and what is not. It is a challenge to create safe limits and at the same time express myself positively and treat the child in a respectful way.' (2011) (analytic examination of activities)

In the following quotation, reflection still deepens. The team members focus on their meaning perspectives (see Mezirow, 2000)

'It's difficult to change our own way of thinking: in the haste and daily routines we cannot think about the daily schedule through the children's perspective. We should listen more to the children and act on their terms. We have too rigid an internal model in our heads.' (2011) (reflection on the basis for activities)

The Development of the Children's Opportunities for Participation

Developing children's participation was seen as a holistic learning pathway towards communal day care life, where every child and every adult have their own place to act and where personal experiences and ways to participate are respected. During two-year development process the educators have recognized that developing children's participation is not a matter of will, but that new practices require training, evaluation and continuous

changes.

As a result of the analysis of data, we found characteristics of children's participation in early childhood education. The results show that children's participation in day care centers could be summed up in eight items highlighted by the participants. This shows several ways of how the participants of this survey have described the participation of children and its development within the early childhood education practices.

Basic requirements for participatory practices. Educators brought out several qualitative responses considering children's needs in early childhood education practices. For example, listening children's voice was emphasized. The next quotation illustrates how adults take up the baton of giving children's voice to be heard.

'We have respected the children in our group, making their perspectives known about many issues. We have brought children's opinions to the meetings of our work community.' (2011)

Another part of participation was children's competence to make independent initiatives and be self-reliable. In the next quotation, an adult does not offer instant help and gives child an opportunity to practice independency and through that the competence of participation.

'Adults easily do things on behalf of the child; we have to let children try and try. Adults should not prevent failures. For the child, the process comes first; it is possible to learn by doing.' (2010)

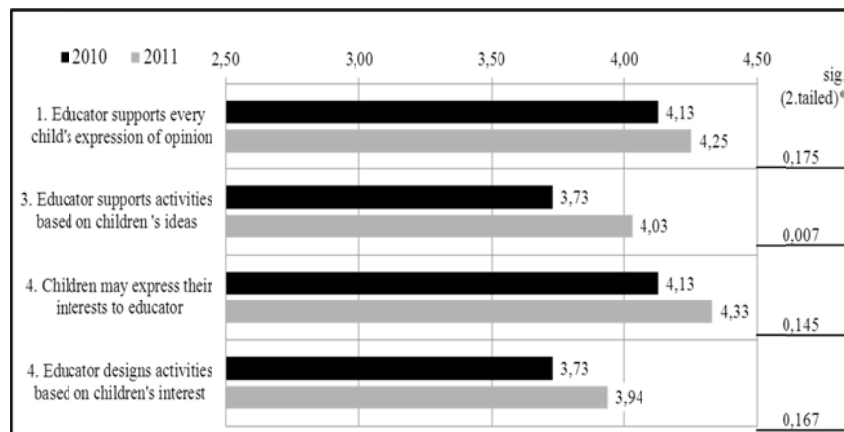
Increasing the possibilities for children to participate in everyday activities requires that professionals engage in and concentrate on interaction. When interacting with children, they can inspire them and help them to commit to different activities. (See for example: Kirby & Gibbs, 2006.) Therefore participation is considered also learning experiences together with educators as in the next quotation.

'The portfolio for following children's development: An educator work together with one child. Child evaluates his/her development and working and chooses his/her own achievements to the portfolio' (2010)

It is important for evolving participation that educators can learn to focus on children's perspectives (Emilson & Folkkeson, 2006). The next example illustrates how, within a year, the professionals have learned to spontaneously adapt their pedagogic activities and adopting the children's perspective on the basis of children's suggestions.

'Children took the adult's chair on wheels; they slid over each other and hung on to the adult's legs. The adult saw the young children's need for physical activity and proposed using the vehicles for physical education....Previously, when adults was offered the children belly boards to play with, they were not enthusiastic. Now, they were highly motivated and experimented with the boards for a long time.' (2011)

Supporting children's participation was also questioned using different quantitative variables. In figure 1 there is variables showing the changes concerning on supporting children's participation. Like the figure shows educators supporting performance have been improved in every level during the year. Educators both collected more information from children and supported children's ideas in groups. Educators' interest about children's perspective and their needs were already considered high among professionals in the first survey, but a small improvement had occurred during the year. Chances to express interests to educators were also considered evolving. Educators also designed activities based on children's interests more often.



*) Paired t-test value for significance

Figure 1. The Development of Participatory Needs

Based on both qualitative and quantitative results, the children's participation has improved in every factor. As a summary, children's participation is defined through the first three items of basic requirements of participation:

- * Children's participation grows when their needs are fulfilled.
- * Participation is also independent initiatives, which children need time to practice.
- * Children are provided with safety and care, but also opportunities to learn.

Supporting children's active competence. According to qualitative analysis, participation is based also on a support to children's active competence. The new methods and reflection of practices were important when participatory practices were developed.

Another important issue was children's chance to experience influence. The next quotation illustrates educators being ready to bend their own plans for honoring children's desires.

'We had picked a responsible nurse for one little boy. Nevertheless, when the boy came on the first day, he chose a different nurse and sat next to her. We let this happen. Little by little, we gained confidence and a happy boy.'(2011)

Participation in the planning process and change to making choices, which were considered important part of children's participation brings forward also the responsibility. One-third of the qualitative responses dealt with children's opportunities to make different choices at the day care center.

The number of responses describing children's participation in planning and decision-making rose by three per cent within a year (10.5 % → 13.4 %).

For small children the learning of taking responsibility and taking part in decision making is a long process.

These few quotations describe how in participant groups children are taking part in decision making and how the growing responsibility creates also involvement and motivation.

'We are discussing with children daily, children's skills for expressing themselves and their courage to choose their activities during this year have developed. The children get excited of the plays they have innovated – the building and the elaboration of the plays of their own are significant and rousing to the

children. Indeed, the activities planned by educators, are modified by children's proposals.' (2010)

'Children can suggest where to do the outdoor exercises (yard, playground, forest, etc.)' (2011)

Often participants described the shared experiences and the growing understanding about children and educators constructing together the world. Issues from outside the day care center have an effect on children's plays like in the next quotation.

'During the swine flu, a laboratory was created in the atelier, where "vaccinations" were given. Soon the play developed as taking blood samples, hearing and vision control, lice checks and other medical measurement familiar to children. All the needed signs, with texts and illustrations children made for themselves and adults helped to get material needed. The laboratory worked out for months and finally it turned to be a coloring laboratory, where the beautiful shades of colors were created with accurate measurements.'(2010)

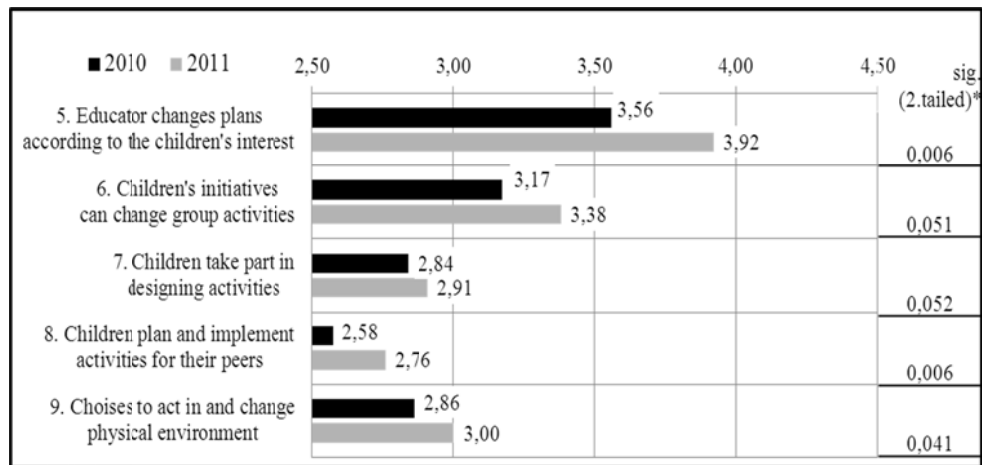
Children's small groups for example were mentioned as a new participatory method for listening to children and supporting their participation. Quantitative analysis shows that new practice become more frequent.

The score was already high in 2010, when 64 % of the teams used them "often" and 35 % "always". The number of "always" responses in the issue of using small groups in practice rose 12 % during the year, though 1.5 % of the teams reduced the use of small groups from "often" to "sometimes".

Participatory practices for supporting children's chances to influence and take part in the decision-making process (in Figure 2) have been developed in groups.

In variables on supporting children's activities and interests by exploiting them in activity design, participation had increased. However, children's opportunities to take part in the design process of activities or changes to change their environment were high, but also they have been improved during the year.

Children are granted opportunities to plan and implement activities into their peers and themselves more often.



*) Paired t-test value for significance

Figure 2. The Development of Children's Chances to Influence

Based on both qualitative and quantitative results, the children's participation has improved also within issues of developing opportunities of shared activities. As a summary children's participation is defined through the next three items of active and competent child:

- * Children can experience that the courage to express oneself makes positive effects themselves and others.
- * Participation is also making choices, taking responsibility, and taking part in decision-making.
- * Children are part of home, peer culture, society and current events, sometimes scary and unpleasant ones and need adults to help them understand the world.

Participatory experiences. The final characteristics of participation considered the importance of participatory experiences for the individual child. It was based on qualitative data analysis. One-fifth of the respondents concerning the qualitative responses in the later inquiry (2011) highlighted the expression of joy and communality in the children's voices. In the former inquiry (2010) the number of responses was three percent lower (17.3 % → 20 %). In the open ended-responses many of the teams represented the role of adults as facilitator of children's participation. Through the next quotation, it become evident the need of children to have fun with the adults.

‘From the time they arrive in the morning our children have a clear idea of what they want to start doing, with whom and where. The children's cheerful enthusiasm is apparent.’ (2011)

The staffs have organized time for play and the children's spontaneous activities. Descriptions of adults concentrating on the children (listening and being present) in open-ended responses had increased about 10 %. One-fifth of the respondents considered professionals' presence and interaction an essential part of children's participation. This was a five per cent increase from the 2010 inquiry (16.6 % → 20.7 %).

‘E.g., we observe the children's play and pay attention to the matters which they are interested in, we take in to account their wishes.’ (2011)

Development in day care centers has been positive. The monitored results indicate that the process of development has sensitized professionals to support children's comprehensive participation; it has not restricted the focus on specific applications alone. Children's participation at the research day care centers has been incorporated into everyday activities. Developing children's participation requires reviewing and reflecting on the values, attitudes and rules of professionals. In many cases, adults are also required to consciously reduce control in order to give space to the children's views and initiatives in everyday life.

As a summary of this qualitative analysis children's participation as a personal experience is defined through the final two items:

- * Children have the right to enjoy themselves with others who enjoy their company.
- * Children have a right to be educated and cared for by adults who respect and listen them and are interested and involved in the children's world

Discussion

Our research produced documentary material that supports the use of pedagogical reflection when developing early childhood education in a Finnish context. We have noticed

that it is challenging to transmit research results to educators in the field and that it demands many kinds of support (Ojala & Venninen, 2011).

Reflective deliberation is utilized in the project, in both in order to develop individual educators' awareness of the influence on their own actions to the participation of children, and to share experiences as well as design and implement the development of operations. As the reflective understanding deepens, the educators will also develop their pedagogical observation that can be used to further develop the participation. Through reflection, the individual educators as well as the day care center communities learned to focus in child perspectives and during the development process the participants got experiences of shared perspectives as enhancers of participation. For strong participation, the adoption of child perspective is essential (Emilsson & Folkesson, 2006).

During this project, we have also noted that learning reflection is a slow process. Exposing oneself to reflection requires confidence in one's own skills and opportunities for learning more. Brookfield (1995) speaks of a 'critical friend,' who can help one to reflect by posing honest questions in a constructive way. This could be a good starting point for practicing reflection together (Lim & Kwom, 2010). By encouraging our participants to use teamwork, our aim was to encourage them to develop and understand more the importance of reflective practice. In our study, we found that participants moved backwards and forwards between the reflection levels. Reflection was a dynamic process of team members reflecting on their work together. This kind of social reflection has been founded to create a change of perspectives (Mezirow, 2000). During the development process participants also could reflect believes about children's participation and to create common understanding about facilitating children's participation. When the participants represented various work communities and municipalities with their background organizations, discussions in the peer groups often evolved and became multi-nuanced and rewarding.

During the action process reflective practices at the project VKK-Metro have stabilized. New practices and ideas from the research are widely distributed to practitioners in the early childhood education field. The cooperative development of early childhood education among four municipalities and the University of Helsinki requires the long-term practices. The issue of children's participation has also been considered an important part of early childhood education, both at the level of administration and the field work. Increasing awareness of

children's perspective as well as quality of pedagogic where children's are listened to and their views have been taken account to have emerged in the network of day care centers. Developing children's participation requires support to individual child's independent initiatives, but also children's active competence in group. Facilitating child-initiated activities as suggested by Ahn & Kim (2009) was seen only a part of supporting children's participation. Viewing participation as a multidimensional issue, where child-initiated activities and shared activities between children and teachers could be improved jointly, comes possible with reflective practices. Reflective development educators' of this kind had opportunities to share participation and become the participant agents themselves.

The results showed the importance of participatory experiences where joy and comprehensive participation as whole are important items. The right for participation also includes the responsibility about others wellbeing. Therefore participation is never ready, but the ongoing process where educators can develop their professionalism together. In shared activities also children can take part in planning, implementing and evaluating practices with educators (Leinonen & Venninen, 2012). The reflective development of participatory practices has been considered as a common problem solving process, where all participants can use their professional expertise to create better early childhood education for children and with children.

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