

# Children's participation and rights in early childhood education and care: Guest editorial

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After the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989), children's rights have been an ineradicable part of research focusing on early childhood education and care (ECEC). Children's rights have given a completely new noteworthiness to participation as a human right issue, and over 30 years, it has been established as a self-evident theme in children's daily living. The UNCRC has opened adults' eyes to understand participation and children's position in society from a young age, and children's rights have caused substantial changes in law, practice and policy (Tisdall, 2015).

The aim of this special issue is to compile the current discussion about children's participation and rights in the context of early childhood education. Children's participation and rights invariably constitute a current and simultaneously conventional research topic. The themes were topical when the UNCRC was held, and they could not be more relevant today when issues such as immigration, climate change and the global pandemic are changing the world where children live and where ECEC services operate. Participation and rights are manifested at all levels of ECEC, from micro-level interactions to everyday pedagogical practices and programmes to macro-level practices, such as administration, curriculum development and finally, legislation and policy formulation. At the same time, the manifestation of either participation or rights is not a straightforward process but can be understood as an individual, changing and transient relation between children and environments that either enable or forbid the actualisation of children's participation and rights. Rights can also be contradictory, as the right to

participation and for example, the right to protection, must be realised simultaneously. The rights to participation and protection, together with the right to provision, form the well-known three P's describing the content of the UNCRC (Franklin, 2002). Children's rights comprise a whole, and all P's are needed to realise them (Alderson, 2008). However, this special issue focuses on participation, which has developed as a separate research area under studies of children's rights. The research on children's participation has its own handbook as well (Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2009), which can be regarded as an indicator of its independence in the field of scientific research.

In Finnish legislation regulating ECEC, children's best interest is set as a fundamental starting point for all arrangements and practices in ECEC. The National Core Curriculum for ECEC (Finnish National Agency for Education [EDUFI], 2018) highlights children's rights as among the core values in ECEC. Based on the UNCRC (UN, 1989), children have the right to express themselves, hold opinions and be heard and understood. Children have the right to play and have a sense of belonging to the community in ECEC. At the curriculum level, participation and involvement comprise one of five interconnected transversal competence areas emphasised in daily pedagogy. Active and responsible participation and influence lay the foundation for a democratic and sustainable future (EDUFI, 2018). In ECEC, children plan and evaluate pedagogical activities together with educators, are able to practise skills in relation to participation and making decisions, and have the right to influence their own lives. Even though children's participation has been widely acknowledged as a basic human right to be promoted in practice, there is still room for improvement, as the European Council's (2011) report suggests. Especially, participation rights of younger children need to be guaranteed (Ministry of Justice, 2020).

Although the concepts of participation and children's rights are well-known and widely used in early childhood education research, they can be approached from multiple perspectives. There is also an ongoing discussion about how to define participation, what it means and how it can be theorised (see, e.g., Horgan et al., 2017; Kjörholt, 2011; Thomas, 2007). In this special issue, children's participation and rights are investigated from multiple viewpoints and with a multidisciplinary approach. The articles offer insights into the theme from the perspectives of the social study of childhood, disability studies and social policy analysis, early childhood teacher education, behavioural psychology and special education. With this variety, our fundamental aim is to highlight examples of the current research focusing on the theme, rather than offering a comprehensive overview of all the theoretical, methodological and contextual variations that exist in this research field. We aim to illustrate an all-inclusive definition of either participation or children's rights as concepts. The authors of this special issue have all

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taken different perspectives on participation and/or rights in their papers, conceptualising the key theories in various ways.

This special issue includes six original research articles. In the first article, Elina **Weckström**, Anna-Leena **Lastikka**, Liisa **Karlsson** and Sinikka **Pöllänen** engage in important discussions supporting children's participation in everyday life in early education settings. In their article, children's initiatives and interests form the starting point of the culture of participation, whereas their study's findings present four phases of the project-based practices and the narrative activities formulating the realisation of children's participation at a daily level. They conclude by highlighting the meaning of the reciprocal encounters, hearing the children and sharing the long-lasting processes, together with aiming to provide secure relationships and a sense of belonging in the early education setting.

As is well-established by now, the political nature of children's participation is widely recognised as children having rights to their own opinions and possibilities to influence matters of concern to them. In her conceptual analysis, Elina **Nivala** offers an important insight on participation by stating that its social dimension is equally important, which she approaches from the social pedagogical perspective. Moreover, Nivala addresses the question of children's loneliness in the ECEC context. According to Nivala, supporting children's participation at both social and political levels can create possibilities to prevent children's loneliness.

In the third article, Angela **Jones** and Roderick **Jones** investigate prekindergarten leaders' conceptions of normality during decision-making processes for student (dis)enrolment in the Voluntary Prekindergarten Program (VPK) in Florida, USA. In their paper, Jones and Jones combine the perspectives of critical disability studies and critical policy analysis in showing how leaders' conceptions of (ab)normality and ideas about "a good customer" are involved in (dis)enrolment decision making. Jones and Jones illustrate how the responsibility of choosing services is assigned to children's parents, positioning children as customers and commodities. Considering children's rights and participation, the authors highlight how children's disabling condition might take away their constitutional right to participate in the VPK.

In their multimethod study, Anne **Karhu**, Noora **Heiskanen**<sup>1</sup> and Vesa **Närhi** explore the proactive early intervention programme called Pre-school Wide Positive Behaviour

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<sup>1</sup> Despite acting as an editor of this special issue, Noora Heiskanen did not participate in any way in the anonymous peer-review process of this article.

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Support (PWPBS, referred as ProVaka in Finland). The ProVaka intervention is studied over a year and a half as a pilot project in ECEC units, focusing on the development of children's participation. As presented in the findings, children's participation is described by the educators through three discourses, where children's roles become more acknowledged as active participants in changing the work culture towards supporting children's participation in their daily lives in ECEC.

Eija **Sevon**, Paula **Hautala**, Merja **Hautakangas**, Minna **Ranta**, Olli **Merjovaara**, Marleena **Mustola** and Maarit **Alasuutari** present their findings from the educational project Oiva – Children's rights and participation in early childhood education, pre-school and first grade – during which educational professionals and students alike discussed the promotion of children's participation possibilities and its challenges in ECEC groups. Based on the interviews and the group tasks, children's participation faces several tensions that need to be recognised in order to make participation meaningful among all children.

In the last article of this special issue, Francesca **Zanatta** and Sheila **Long** examine learning and teaching of children's rights in ECEC degree programmes in England and in Ireland. The article consists of the authors' meta-analysis of their previous studies, and they reflect students' and educators' experiences with two academic curricula, particularly from the perspective of children's rights education. They present four thought-provoking pedagogical dilemmas in ECEC degree programmes and conclude their practice-oriented paper by outlining pedagogical principles that could challenge the position of children's rights education and show it as a wider influencer in the field of ECEC.

We hope that this special issue can offer insights to the discussion about children's participation and rights in early childhood education. The articles illustrate the multidimensional and complex nature of these theoretical concepts. We thank all the authors for their valuable contributions to this special issue, as well as the anonymous reviewers who gave their constructive feedback.

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