

# SIGNALS

## Second Interim Report from the external evaluator

Prof. Michel Vandebroek  
Göteborg, 3 October 2015

### A timely, diverse, transnational project

As said in the first interim report (February 2015), The SIGNALS project deals with an extremely topical and timely subject: the participation of children and parents in education, being primarily early childhood education (except in the case of Greece, where the project is on primary education). Moreover, the SIGNALS project is unique in addressing this issue in a consortium of very diverse European projects, and in fostering close collaborations between researchers and practitioners in each national project. In so doing, it creates a possible forum of praxis: a dialogue between theory and practice, action and reflection that has great potential of generating new knowledge in this underdeveloped field of participation.

The internal evaluation report (25 June 2015) provides a theoretical framework for the project. It rightly argues for the crucial function of socialisation of kindergarten and relates this to the concepts of play and of participation. The theoretical background explores the related concepts of parent and child participation.

As commented in the first interim report, the concept of participation may have multiple meanings and this paradigmatic multiplicity is also present in the theoretical framings of the interim report. Indeed, the document refers to “classic” English language literature, stressing the importance of parent-professional relations for the benefit of child development and school results (see OECD, 2012 for a good example of this way of viewing participation). Yet, the text also refers to authors that claim that parents need to be educated, as well as social constructionist and poststructural authors that precisely challenge such assumptions as being deficit oriented and inspired by neoliberalism (e.g. Masschelein & Quagebuer, 2005). In so doing, the text is rather eclectic and the advantage of this may be that the diversity of possible paradigms is sketched. However, the diversity is – in our opinion – described rather than analysed, leaving the reader a bit puzzled about what the authors’ stance is on this matter. In my opinion, the text could be reframed as a text on “diverse perspectives on participation” by transforming the present eclecticism in a more “disciplined eclecticism” (Mayall, 2002). This means that one acknowledges that there is not one theory that is above all others and thus a diversity of paradigm may be fruitful, yet, that this diversity is limited by some general guiding principles.

It is a strength of the theoretical background to introduce the concept of school culture, that may represent a common ground for the discussion among and between these different paradigmatic conceptions of socialisation and participation.

In sum, a strong basis is laid out for benefiting from this transnational experience, and the very fact that the project is transnational brings about paradigmatic discussions. Yet the transnational aspect may benefit from deepening the discussion..

## The added value of a European project

The overall impression is that the eclecticism of the background texts reflects the diversity of cultures and paradigms that constitute the group of researchers in this project, maybe also associated with the prevailing discourse in their respective research units or countries. To give but one example, the references to Nordic and Dutch literature stress a rights-based approach (making reference to the CRC and to democratic values) while for instance the references to Romanian literature are more prescriptive to teachers, parents and children. Underlying, there seems to be different conceptualisations of the child and the social meaning of Kindergarten. Some projects, such as the German explicitly wish to give a voice to parents (i.e. in the design of space) while others focus on teaching parenting skills, to name but two significantly different practices. The difference in understanding of the meaning of participation is also visible within one country: while the Hungarian child care project (on transitions) is about reciprocity and this bilateral in essence, the Kindergarten project of Kaposvár University in the same country is about "improving parents' competences" (on book reading) and thus unilateral in approach.

We would argue that this diversity of cultures and assumptions might present the richness of a transnational (and indeed also a transdisciplinary) project. One could, however, also ask the question that is raised in the theoretical background, referring to my compatriots Van 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 reflect on what is actually guiding their behaviour"?

It is beyond doubt that one of the unique features of this project is the common methodology to analyse curricula, to interview children, parents and staff, and to conduct a needs assessment in all participating countries. It might be useful to look at transversal lessons learned from these needs assessments.

The analysis of the narratives of children, staff and parents stress the commonalities between the different countries. In addition to these commonalities and without questioning their importance, one could also think about analysing the fields of tension and the differences (and in so doing, bringing unconscious assumptions to the surface). Some parts of the text begin to do so (e.g. under the heading "Summary about children's participation", page 21-22). Additional analyses of such different accents might shed further light to the issue and deepen the understanding of what is at stake.

The diversity of standpoints is also reflected in the different contributions to the Compendium (see hereafter for a more detailed comment). One might think about the chapters in a next stage referring to each other and in so doing, making maximal use of the transnational exchange. The partners might wish to stress more (or make more clear) what the added value is of the transnational cooperation in this project: what is there to learn from each other, beyond what has been learned in the local project?

One example is that several projects aim at deliverables that relate to pre- and in service training, yet there is not (yet?) an exchange about the materials or modules of these trainings. Another example is that different needs assessments included an analysis of official texts and curricula. Why not add a comparative thematic analysis of these curricula, as there is growing international interest in such an endeavour, especially also in the light of the European Quality Framework and the upcoming attempt to identify indicators of quality on the European level. One could think of such an analysis being quite informative for national representatives taking part in an Open Method of Coordination at the EU level.

In sum, we believe the project has great potential, yet to use its full potential, the transnational dimension may be broadened and deepened.

## Promising local projects

The different draft chapters of the Compendium give more insight in the paradigmatic choices made, the methodologies used and the results of the local projects.

The German project is quite unique in how it unfolds from a very concrete participatory project (parents and children collaborating with professionals in designing the pedagogical environment). Making the participation so concrete (and indeed material) allowed to deeply influence beliefs and attitudes through genuine engagement and resulted in changes in decision-making processes. This project-oriented strategy offers an interesting example of how concrete practice and reflection upon practice (praxis) enables to draw sustainable and transferable conclusions, that may be leverages and implemented on a higher level, as is shown in the subsequent curriculum changes that are implemented by the German team.

A particular strength of the Swedish project is that it is unique, together with the Romanian project in explicitly addressing issues of diversity and/or social cohesion. While the Swedish project does so from an explicit rights-based approach, cherishing the value of democratic participation, in relation to its national curriculum, the Romanian project is rather inclined to parent education, assuming that parents lack some basic pedagogical skills. Rather than a rights-based vision, it seems to hold a more deficit oriented vision.

Some projects (e.g. Hungary) rightly stress the delicate period of settling in and have elaborated on this crucial transitional period in which relations are shaped. Their strength is undoubtedly to have documented the reciprocity that can emerge in these relations, given support and possibilities for reflection to the teams. Next to this period of transition from the home to ECEC, the Icelandic project adds another delicate transition: from ECEC to the primary school. Here also, the relation between research and practice has developed enabling practices that may serve as examples for others. There seems also to be difference in understandings of participation within the Hungarian project. While the child care project is rather about bi-directionality, the Kindergarten project seems to go more in a direction that could be framed as the pedagogicalisation of parents. Regarding the Kaposvár University it may strike as odd that the focus is on parenting competences, while it are not the parents, but the teachers' voices that are being heard. There is a high risk of shaping judgemental attitudes in those projects that aim at teaching parents without hearing them. This seems also to be the case in the Romanian project (although we miss concrete texts about the project to have a clear opinion on this).

The Danish project is an equally eloquent example of how action and reflection are mutually enriching and lead to innovative practices. Here, a particular strength is how this innovation is related to theoretical deepening, and it is interesting how the child-child interactions are in the picture and the group of children is considered as a separate point in the pedagogical rectangle (raising the inevitable question why the group of parents is not, see below). The text could be strengthened by a clearer rationale of why health was chosen as a subject and what the relevance of this choice in practice may be.

The Greek chapter is quite different in nature, as it is about primary school and not about early childhood education. It also seems to present a different approach of what participation may mean, as the concept is used for different forms of play-based learning or experiential learning in primary school. It is interesting to notice how this change of didactics entails changes in the pupil-teacher relation, the parent-child relation and eventually also potential changes in the teacher-parent relation. There is a strong focus on communication and

language, yet it is unclear what approach of multilingualism is considered (the authors may wish to specify that they only reached Greek children as they worked in a monolingual environment). There is an interesting difference in rationality of participation to be noted between the Greek and Hungarian (and the Swedish and Icelandic for that matter) chapter: while the Greek project seems to favour the relations between school and parent in order to influence the parent, the Nordic ones seem to assume a more reciprocal influence.

This may point at the need for an editorial function to streamline the compendium and coordinate some transversal conclusions. These conclusions may discuss what has been learned throughout the transnational experience, beyond the local projects. From the different project descriptions on the website as well as from the compendium, it is clear that there are interesting methodological lessons to be learned, e.g. on the methodologies of relating research with practice; how in-service coaching influences practice; and on the method of action-reflection in action-research projects that are eventually embedded in sustainable curricula). There are also transversal lessons to be learned regarding the understandings of participation and diversity by comparing the national curricula for instance.

Finally, there were two chapters (without authors' names or affiliations) that are of a completely different nature: *The positive approach* and *Child participation, guide for teachers*. These chapters are entirely different in style, in content and in political position than the other manuscripts.

The first one holds a rather explicit deficit approach on parents, which seems at odds with the rest of the text pleading for a positive and empathic approach to children.

The second is explicit in its political stance for an education system that favours entrepreneurial children in a meritocratic and capitalist society, which seems a bit displaced, considering the recent political evolutions in Europe as well as at odds with some references used (i.e. Masschelein) and the other chapters of the Compendium. Overall the Gothenburg meeting agreed that these chapters were misplaced.

## Some final remarks

Despite the richness of the different local projects, some aspects seem a bit underdeveloped from my perspective. First it is to be noticed that some projects explicitly address issues of diversity in an era that Europe cannot deny its rapidly increasing diversity as well as growing inequalities and more specifically address language and cultural diversity (Sweden and Romania) and children with special needs (Germany). In the other projects this is not the case (or not visible). The renewed ET 2020 framework from the European Commission rightly stresses the role of the educational system in fostering inclusion and social cohesion.

In relation to the latter (social cohesion) it is also to be noticed that the focus is on teacher-child interactions, parent-child interactions and teacher-parent interactions. Parent-parent interactions and the role of ECEC in these have largely remained out of sight.

Recent research for the DG Education and Culture of the European Commission (Dumcius et al, 2014) has documented the crucial importance of transitions, as all transitions seem to play a central role in inequality and early school leaving. It is therefore an asset that two chapters deal with this. However, it is a pity that neither of them explicitly addresses issues of diversity and inequality, despite their rights-based approach.

Another remark relates to gender. Overall the texts speak about parents, but there is increasing criticism in international literature regarding the use of the gender-neutral term *parent*, when in reality it are mostly women (mothers) who are involved. The consistent use of the term parent in many texts, makes it rather impossible to assess to what extent mothers as well as fathers were reached.

Lastly, some projects are quite explicit about their deliverables (e.g. Germany), others (e.g. Greece and Hungary) are more vague intentions and still others (e.g. Romania) are difficult to understand.

## Recommendations

In my opinion the SIGNALS project has great potential and in order to maximize this potential, I would recommend three priorities for the last months of the project:

### 1. Enhancing the European, transnational dimension

There are several aspects in which this project may make a unique contribution that are not sufficiently highlighted. Examples may include

- a comparative analysis of curricula and policy texts (as done in the needs assessments) on their diverse conceptualisations of participation
- a mutual exchange of training modules and didactics, considering several projects are developing these as deliverables
- a relation to European founding texts, such as the European Quality Framework or the ET 2020 strategy.

### 2. A more explicit mention of gender and diversity

It is not always clear to what extent cultural, social and gender diversity have been touched upon in the different local projects and what transnational lessons can be learned in this respect.

### 3. A clearer position on participation

While the project started with some key concepts (as enumerated in a powerpoint from the Reykjavik meeting) and a text (now called "Internal evaluation") on this has been produced, this remains quite eclectic. As a result, it is not clear what position the project as a whole takes on issues as reciprocity, democracy, respect diversity, etc. We are not pleading for one global conceptualisation, but for "disciplining" the present eclecticism, by taking a more analytic, rather than a merely descriptive approach. This could for instance be done in a separate chapter of the Compendium.

European Commission. (2015). *Draft 2015 joint report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the Strategic Framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020). New priorities for European cooperation in education and training*. Brussels: European Commission.

Masschelein, J., & Quaghebeur, K. (2005). Participation for better or for worse? *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 39(1), 51-65.

Mayall, B. (2002). *Towards a Sociology of Childhood: Thinking from Children's Lives*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2012). *Starting Strong III. A quality toolbox for early childhood education and care*. Paris: O.E.C.D.

Dumcius, R.; Peeters, J.; Hayes, N.; Van Landeghem, G. *et al.* (2014). *Study on the effective use of early childhood education in preventing early school leaving*. Brussels: European Commission DG Education and Culture.