



**Project :** SIGNALS

## **Diverse perspectives of participation**

**Denmark, Greece, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Romania,  
Sweden**

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# **DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES OF PARTICIPATION: Denmark, Greece, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Romania, Sweden**

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## **Introduction**

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

- 1) to listen to children,
- 2) to create opportunities for children to express themselves
- 3) to be influenced by children's statements,
- 4) to let children participate in decisions,
- 5) children and adults take joint decisions.

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

## Theoretical background

### Early education and participation

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

Kindergarten is an optimal period to promote parent school relationships (Ray & Smith, 2010). Involvement of parents in school activities provides information about children accommodation, development and learning. Parent school relationship supports children's outcomes (Christenson, 2004). Children can create stronger relation between home and school when parents become involved in school activities (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Perry, 1999). Positive teacher-children relationships in kindergarten can make the transition in a constructive way; promoting social and emotional well-being of children (Murray et al., 2008; Gultekin & Acar, 2014). Teacher-child relationships in kindergarten ensure trust and emotional security for children. Positive kindergarten teacher-children relationships depend on the relation created between parents and teachers (Walker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2008). Rosenblatt & Peled (2003) claim that for parents to be involved they must have some level of trust in school. Parent education can be a good way to strengthen the relationships between parents and teachers (Cojocaru & Cojocaru, 2011). Parent education eliminates the behaviors that affect the child's development (Mateos, Amorós, Pastor, & Cojocaru, 2013). It is widely recognized that parent involvement contributes to student achievement (Walker, Green, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2006). The participation of parents in the educational process creates stronger perceptions of their ability (Dauber & Epstein, 1993) to help children develop social skills, and offer many opportunities for children in creating their own knowledge (Cojocaru, 2009; Frumos & Munteanu, 2011). Also, parents appreciate teachers who empower them to participate, and offer strategies for helping with student learning (Patrikakou & Weissberg, 2000). For many families their involvement in children's education is imposed by the low income, poverty and limited educational achievement (Walker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2008). The family background can often give family the feeling that they are unprepared to interact effectively with schools (Drummond & Stipek, 2004). However, many low income parents continue to 'make it work' (Weiss et al., 2003). Like parents, teachers may avoid parent's involvement because of their own personal psychological and cultural barriers; fear of being criticized by parents, few strategies to involve parents (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002). Parent-school relationship may be especially beneficial in the early childhood years for promoting early academic and social skills. Relationships are the key element for a good activity of kindergarten. "Relationships are central to human functioning and relational life is intertwined throughout our lives" (Blustein et al., 2004, p. 426). Life is

intersubjectivity constructed because we live in a 'web of relationships' (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). From a social constructionist perspective, language is more than just a way of connecting people. People 'exist' in language. Constructionism focuses on relations and upholds the role of the individual in constructing significant realities. The relational constructionist perspective opens space for creativity, for improvisation, and participation is viewed as a relational way of being and knowing (Reason, 1994). Using a social constructionism perspective (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), parenting is viewed as a cultural practice, socially constructed. An appreciative discourse generates involvement and promotes good relations between family and teachers. The role of educators in kindergarten is to facilitate a learning process, where parents can explore and reflect on how they give meaning to experience, and how this experience may open up new possibilities to relate. The focus is on positive results and to create a framework in which people can feel connected and want to be involved (Grant, Hardy, Oswick, & Putnam, 2004). Creating a culture of participation between kindergarten staff and parents can help to a better inclusion, accommodation and transition of children.

### **School culture and participation**

School culture is a major determinant of school improvement and introduces the role of parent education in constructing a positive school culture. Peterson (2002) claims that understanding and shaping the school culture leads to a success in promoting the learning of teachers and students. To be effective, schools must concentrate on their fundamental mission of teaching and learning, and they must do it for all children. That must be the overarching goal of schools in the twenty-first century (Ravitch, 2000, p. 467). The origins of the use of the term culture to describe life inside schools began with Waller (1932). The author noted that schools have an identity of their own, with complex rituals of personal relationships, a set of folkways, mores, irrational sanctions, and moral codes. Kroeber & Parsons (1958, p. 583) consider culture as "transmitted and created content and patterns of values, ideas, and other symbolic-meaningful systems as factors in the shaping of human behavior and the artifacts produced through behavior". Culture influences the people's social behaviors and interests, and the way they interact with others. Culture has been defined by Schein (1992) as the deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organization, that operate unconsciously, and that define in a basic "taken-for-

granted" fashion an organization's view of itself and its environment" (p. 6). It refers to how people feel about organization, the authority system, and the degree of employee involvement and commitment" (Schein, 2000). Culture includes the shared philosophies, ideologies, values, assumptions, beliefs, expectations, attitudes, and norms that knit a community together" (Owens & Steinhoff, 1989). The culture is meant to describe the character of school as if reflects deep patterns of values, beliefs, and traditions that have been formed over the course of its history. According to Erickson (1987) school culture refers to the way people perceive, think, and feel about things of a school. School culture manifests itself in rituals, customs, stories, and ways of treating each other, and culture's artifacts such as language (Hoy et al., 1991; Stoll, 1999). This invisible, taken-for-granted flow of beliefs and assumptions gives meaning to what people say and do (Lotrean et al., 2014). "These are the heart of school culture, and what makes it so hard to grasp and to change it (Stoll, 1998)". The concept of culture refers to a shared, learned, symbolic system of values, beliefs, attitudes that shapes and influences perceptions and behaviors (Bodley, 1994; Douglas, 1992; Geertz, 1993). Berry et al. (1992) refer to culture as the "shared way of life of a group of people". Hence, as the authors sustained the term culture is borrowed from anthropology (Glisson, 2000; Ouchi & Wilkins, 1985, Reichers & Schnieder, 1990), unlike the school climate is viewed from a psychological perspective (Hoy et al., 1991). Although the terms school culture and school climate are frequently used interchangeably (Freiberg & Shein, 1999; Maslowski, 2006; Owens, 2001; Van Houtte, 2005), school culture is a better framework to study school effectiveness and school improvement (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008) and school climate may more appropriately be thought of as subset of the broader construct of school culture" (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008).

School culture is a multifaceted concept, composed of different dimensions (Devos et al., 2007; Engels et al., 2008; Maslowski, 2001; Kruse & Seashore Louise, 2009). According to Engels et al. (2008) a positive or a "good" school culture is often considered as one in which meaningful staff development and enhanced student learning are practiced. School culture is closely related to the healthy and sustainable development of a school, the development and well-being of the school members (Zhu, Devos & Li, 2011; Gerstein et al., 2014). In a school culture that enables and encourages innovation, the teachers will feel more encourage to experiment in their classrooms and to collaborate with colleagues (Hargreaves, 1995; Gultekin & Acar, 2014). School culture

is "not only the particular patterns of perception and behavior, but also the system of relationships between those relationships" (Prosser, 1999). J. van Maanen (in Cameron & Quinn, 1999, p.17) explained that a major problem in organizations needing to change their cultures is that "no key elements or dimensions have been identified and no common perspectives available to even help the conversation get started. Change doesn't occur because it is difficult to know what to talk about and what to focus on". Many researchers (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Halsall, 1998; Hopkins, 1995; Stoll & Fink, 1996) agree that school culture is a crucial variable in school improvement. Hopkins (1995, p. 85) noted that "unless we address the issue of school culture...there is a little chance that school improvement will be achieved". Examining the construct of „school culture, may hold answer as how we might improve student learning in low-performing schools" (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008).

Parent education may be a link to examine and to improve each dimension of school culture. The parent education can create conditions within schools to sustain the teaching-learning process. Parent education improves the communication within the school, the informal interactions that arise between teachers and involves the parents in the process of the students' learning (Cojocar, 2011). Introducing parent education programmes in schools provides new perspectives for parents, students and teachers. Parent education creates opportunities to find solutions to the problems of teachers, parents and students (lack of communication, low motivation in school, dropout, aggressive behavior, failure and dropout, social maladjustment, parental stress etc. (Cojocar, & Cojocar, 2011). Offering a range of alternatives, teachers can improve their skills, their taken for granted assumptions, the way they feel about their students, conduct their activity and how they feel about their work. The members are often unconscious about these assumptions; seen as "complex set of shared tacit understandings about the nature of things" (Van Houtte & Van Maele, 2011). The assumptions are likely to remain unconscious until someone – a staff member, student or parent challenges them. Parent education offers a reflection on their behavior and "what lies behind it" (Van Houtte & Van Maele, 2011). Hence they will become (more) conscious of the basic assumptions that underlie the interpretations of what they do (Maslowski, 2006, p. 8). Thurstone (1928) declared that "attitudes can be measured", "attitudes being the sum total of a man's inclinations and feelings, prejudice or bias, preconceived notions, ideas, fears, threats, and convictions about any specific topic"

(Thurstone, 1928, p. 531). As noted the authors (Houtte & Van Maele, 2011), "why then the researchers should not be able to bring these unconscious assumptions to the surface by asking the right questions, namely questions that make respondents reflects on what is actually guiding their behavior"? Another advantage to study the school culture allows exploring the coexistence of different subcultures within schools (Stan & Popa, 2014). From the moment there are different groups within the organization (students, teachers, principals) there is a chance that different subcultures will arise (Houtte & Maele, 2011). Parent education allows distinguishing the beliefs of each group, so we can speak about the teacher, the student, and parent cultures. Analyzing the behavior and not only of each group, parent education can intervenes in each dimension of school culture: "professional orientation, organizational structure, quality of the learning environment, student-centered focuses" (Schoen & Teddlie, 2008). Parent education permits reconstructing and reshaping school culture, as an important means to solve the existing problems at the schools, to transform school administration, and offers new challenges of teaching and learning. Parent education involves parents in constructing school culture, and can be an indicator in any dimension noted previously. Creating parental education programmes in schools (Cojocaru, Cojocaru, & Ciuchi, 2012) can be a link to rethink the unwritten rules and traditions, norms, the way people act, how teachers feel about work and their students. Parent education brings together teachers and parents and is based on the students' unique interests and abilities.

Effecting long term changes in schools requires changing the attitudes and beliefs of teachers about their professional activity (Dalin, Rolff & Kleekamp, 1993; Fullan, 2001). School improvement can be considered as a process of cultural transformation. Cavanagh (1997) placed school culture within a school improvement context. Understanding and shaping the school culture leads to a success in promoting the learning of teachers and students. Parent education can help understanding better the school culture, aiming to foster changes and improve student academic. Parents influence their children's educational outcomes through modeling behaviors and attitudes. Successful involvement helps parents develop stronger perceptions of their ability to help their children succeed in school (Dauber & Epstein, 1993). Parents feel more satisfied with the quality of their education when they believe that teachers welcome their involvement, empower them to participate, and offer strategies for helping with student learning (Patrikakou & Weissberg, 2000). Benefits to students and

parents create many benefits for teachers. Teachers who invite parent involvement often feel more positively about their teaching ability (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Reed, & Jones, 2002), increase their teacher knowledge of student learning needs, interest and abilities, and encourage parents to offer support for students' schooling. Parent education can be a good approach to strength the relation between home and school, enhances the positive attitudes about schools, support student learning, improves behavior at school, and the abilities of teachers (Cojocaru & Cojocaru, 2011). Therefore, parent education programmes can be a good way in constructing a positive school culture.

### **Survey questions**

The following two questions were asked in all countries are:

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

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

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

In the German project children with special needs and low language competencies were interviewed. They had major problems in understanding the question and expressing examples of participation well. Additionally some parents live

in disadvantaged social and economic backgrounds. The subject “participation” was highly abstract for them. “Participation” when translated into Hungarian needed some explanation as the concept is described by other words in Hungarian, which are closer to “cooperation” and “involvement.”

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

## **Methodology**

Our design of the survey can be viewed as evaluation is aiming to describe qualitative different ways to talk about participation in the involved countries’ ECE. When using qualitative methods in the evaluation recognizes the importance and relevance of subjective information for in-depth understanding of the program. Datta (1994) believes that to reach an understanding of the program, evaluators The qualitative must incorporate all available information in a satisfactory interpretation model that is able to determine the influences of the program (p.59). One of the challenges is the qualitative assessments of the credibility of data; credibility is one of the targets of quantitative or qualitative approaches criticisms in the assessment, arguing that subjective factors alters the interpretation in terms of proving the influence of the program. Qualitative assessments is emphasized how the program affects the status of the beneficiaries and the environment in which it is functioning. The evaluation using qualitative methods aims to identify relevant variables, to collect in-depth

information from participants, taking into account the context in which this trial is conducted and aims to identify interests, intentions, motives, values and explanations participants; It aims to explain the meanings of social reality constructed by participants. Qualitative assessment exceeds the institutional and structural analysis based on objective data by querying the meanings of individual actions or private contexts; therefore, this method provides detailed information on specific intervention possible ways different types of beneficiaries and refines the analysis of contexts in which they could produce the intended change in the program.

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

## Participants in evaluation from the countries involved in SIGNALS

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

### Staff talks about children's participation

When children's participation here is focused it is related to when and how children can be involved and be part of the decision process, and in this way influence preschool.

## **A positive and self-evident perspective that children should be participants in every-day life in preschool**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **There are particular moments or situations in which children can participate**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Frames for children’s participation**

In some of the staff’s expressions focus is on specific situation, like to decide *what* activity to be involved in, or *when* they can decide. Participation of children, stimulating active involvement in solving problems concerning his own life, involves fostering their ability to identify their needs and interests and to satisfy them (Masschelein & Quaghebeur, 2005). This idea is supported by Flekkøy (1999), which argues that babies are capable of at least a "rudimentary expression" with which are heard, even if the "views" or "feelings" are more difficult to understand them. He argues that communication is not only a rudimentary self-expression, but early in the process to make decisions, plan and solve problems. Potential child's ability to participate or very little, is also understood as a reflection of a need, but also as a desire of the child to

express his point of view, to practice conducting an election in interactions with others. Because of this need or desire for power manifested by the child, as called Hart (1992, p. 23) participation is seen as necessary by irrevocable right (Masschelein & Quaghebeur, 2005). Literature participation, based on the idea that there is a general group of capabilities such as self-reflection and self-expression which function or performance of the distinctive features of each individual. From the other perspective, these capabilities are the formulation of perspectives, social and communication skills that allow understanding and interpreting the environment, and build skills to negotiate different meanings (Van Gils, 2001, p. 26) to influence both their own behavior and the behavior of others (Flekkøy, 1999, p. 50), to learn from experience, to practice actively making decisions, identify problems, to reflect and to act as an expert on our lives (Hart, 1992, p. 29; Van Dinter, 1999, p. 48). From this point of view, participation is the instrument by which children achieve and run at maximum performance. The staff also talks about what children can not decide or influence.

*Staff decides rules in preschool (SW).*

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

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

*The program of activities is determined by staff (RO)*

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

*There are frames for participation that the adults decide (SW)*

*Daily schedule is set up by staff but within the time allowed for different activities children are free to choose what to do and when. (HU)*

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

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

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

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

## **Parents about children's participation in preschool**

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

### **Perspective of staffs' engagement in children's participation**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Children decide what play offer they accept (GE)*

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

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

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

### **Children's involvement in play as participation**

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

*Participation is to have someone to play with (SW)*

*There is a lot of free play (DK)*

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

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

### **Participation as helping someone with something**

Participation is seen as an alternative to traditional education focuses on what the child can do, the potential that it has and how it can be used and developed. From this perspective, the child is seen as a human being who has potential and specific skills

and also who has specific needs and interests. Capacities, skills and abilities of the child are essential elements of the potential that it has and that helps to identify and meet their own needs and interests, without external intervention and without the presence of adults to raise her needs and interests. The perspective that places adult greatly influences the child participation process. Focusing on problems and disability, does nothing but reinforce them, while focusing on strengths and capabilities generate positive experiences of participation, encourage repeat this process and amplify the expected results (Cojocaru, 2005).

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

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

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

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

### **Children’s own voices about participation**

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

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

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

*What we have for breakfast (GE).*

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

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

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

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

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

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

*"I can decide who my friends are" (kindergarten child, HU)*

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

*"I'm in control when I play"... "I choose where I play – arts, block building"... "I choose what I draw" (Iceland)*

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

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

## **Summary about Children's participation**

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

Staff from some countries (SW, GE, IL, DK) also see children's participation as a *self-evident perspective*: children have to be viewed as individuals just like adults. However not all countries have reflected children's participation as the most fundamental perspective. Nevertheless some more countries (GR, RO) describe children's participation as something which happens in *particular moments*, where staff gives children space for their involvement. Yet some countries (RO, IL, SW) also agree in

the fact, that there are some borders for children's participation and own decisions. However at the same time they call for more influence of children.

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

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

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

### **Staff talks about parents' participation**

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Cooperation with parents as a question of ownership (DK)*

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

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

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

### **Particular moment of parents' participation**

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

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

*They take part in celebrations and events (GR)*

*They contribute financially to school supplies (GR)*

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

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

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

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

*But there are also other activities for cooperation with parents.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Parents should have an active role and come with suggestions!

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

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

### **To inform parents for cooperation or the opposite**

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

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

*Inform and advice parents on aims (GE)*

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

*Install different forms of parental information (GE)*

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

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

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

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

### **A Parent Committee or Board**

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

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

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

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

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

*None else, than the Danish staff, gives expressions of that they could become better in participation with parents.*

### **Parents about their own participation in preschool**

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

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

*In most cases, staff is authoritarian with children, and with parents, also. Often try to impose their views, saying that so are the rules and must be respected. Consider that they are professionals and do very well their job ... are more flexible when they organized extra-curricular activities.*

*Maybe that is why we feel that our opinion counts, when we discuss about these activities (RO)*

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

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

### **Parents participation in particular situations or tasks**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Danish parents also reflect about how they could involve more parents in cooperation!

### **Summary about parent’s participation**

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

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

## Conclusions

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

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

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

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

Studies show that the natural resource wasted and misused in the civilized world are children. With so many wonderful ideas, so much energy and idealism unlimited power to impose their point of view is infinite (Clark, 2005). Children's ideas, opinions, and their influence are worthy of being considered (Prout & James, 1997; Mayall, 2002). In the family and school it is important for parents and educators to discover early on the strengths of children and provide them the opportunity to showcase them. The evolution of social context requires a change of perspective from which the child is treated. At the macro level, since the late 1980s have increasingly highlighted the many voices of academics, politicians and the general public who support promoting participation in educational practices for children, citizens, students, parents and teachers. For the first time in history, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, treating the child as a person with rights rather than as a person on whom parents to exercise protection. This new perspective has effects not only on children but also on those who care for his upbringing and education. Therefore, adults are the ones who need to shape attitudes towards children, so as to ensure their legal rights (Males, Kusevic, & Siranoviv, 2014).



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