

# SIGNALS Interim Report from the external evaluator

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## Introduction: a timely and well-designed project

The SIGNALS project deals with an extremely topical and timely subject: the participation of children and parents in early childhood education and care (further ECEC). There is an overwhelming international consensus, that children should be actively involved in the curricula of ECEC (Bennett, 2005; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006, 2012; Pramling Samuelson, Sheridan, & Williams, 2006). Children's participation is also an important aspect of the U.N. International Convention on the Rights of the child as well as in European policy documents on the role of education in facilitating an inclusive society (Council of the European Union, 2009; European Commission, 2011).

There is an equally large consensus that parents are entitled to participate in ECEC (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006, 2012). However, a recent EU-wide study showed that the pre-service training of ECEC professionals lacks attention for the parent-staff relations and future professionals are ill prepared to establish such relations, especially in contexts of diversity (Urban, Vandebroek, Lazzari, Peeters, & Van Laere, 2011).

The SIGNALS project is unique in addressing this issue in a consortium of both very diverse European projects, and in fostering close collaborations between researchers and practitioners in each national project. In so doing, it creates a forum of praxis: a dialogue between theory and practice, action and reflection (Freire, 1970) that has the potential of generating new knowledge in this underdeveloped field of participation.

The building stones of the SIGNAL project are the local projects, that – in most cases – can be understood as action-research projects or action-research-training projects and it has been demonstrated that this method offers unique possibilities for change and for generating new insights (Pirard & Barbier, 2012). The design of the SIGNALS project therefore offers the possibility of not only reflecting on “doing things right”, but also on “doing the right things” (Vandebroek, Coussée, & Bradt, 2010), or as Kunneman (2005) puts it: to develop a normative professionalism.

In sum, the value of the SIGNALS project is not just in the change that might be generated in each of the local projects, but is also in the meta-knowledge that might be generated in the confrontation between the local projects. In that sense, successful projects (i.e. projects that initiated change) are as relevant as less successful projects (i.e. that did not meet the local aims) insofar as they can form a basis of reflection that generates new knowledge on how and why to realise parent involvement in diverse contexts. It is my impression that the transnational meetings, as well as the confrontation of the data generated in the interviews, highly contribute to this.

## Participation: a term with multiple meanings

A quick overview of the different local projects, as well as the initial inspirational document (Fischer & Schneider, 2014) clearly indicate that participation may have quite different, if not opposing, meanings. The work of Rogoff et al. (e.g. 2005) and others has undeniably demonstrated that participation of children is essential for their development and learning.

Although some pitfalls of putting children's participation on a pedestal have been documented (Vandenbroeck & Bouverne-De Bie, 2006) we may assume that there is a general consensus on the values of children's participation. This is less obvious for the participation of parents. Some examples illustrate this.

The Swedish national curriculum explicitly stresses the reciprocity of participation, demanding that parents have an influence in the daily practice of ECEC:

*"The guardian is responsible for their child's upbringing and development. The preschool should supplement the home by creating the best possible preconditions for ensuring that each child's development is rich and varied. The preschool's work with children should thus take place in close and confidential co-operation with the home. Parents should have the opportunity within the framework of the national goals to be involved and influence activities in the preschool"* (Skolverket, 2011, p. 13)

While the Swedish curriculum leaves it to the individual ECEC services *how* to realise this aim, the Danish curriculum is more prescriptive and demands that participation takes the format of a board:

*"The manager of the day-care facility shall include the parent board in the preparation, evaluation and follow-up of the pedagogical curriculum. (...) Day-care facility employees shall be represented on the parent board. (...) The parent board of a day-care centre shall lay down the principles for the work of the day-care centre and for applying the budget framework of the day-care centre within the objectives and framework determined by the local council. (...) The parent board has a right of nomination and right to participate in the appointment of the manager of local-authority and independent day-care centres and of local-authority childminding. (...) The parent board has a right of nomination in connection with the hiring of employees"* (Christensen, 2007, p. 4-6).

In contrast, the English Statutory Framework primarily stresses the uni-directional information of parents by the staff:

*"When a child is aged between two and three, practitioners must review their progress, and provide parents and/or carers with a short written summary of their child's development in the prime areas"* (Department for Education, 2012, p. 10).

While in the Scandinavian countries, participation is to a large extent aiming at influencing ECEC practice, in England it primarily focuses on influencing the home situation:

*"The key person must seek to engage and support parents and/or carers in guiding their child's development at home. They should also help families engage with more specialist support if appropriate"* (Department of Education, 2012)

The divergent opinions on what is at stake when discussing parent participation are also clear when looking at subsequent OECD publications. In the Starting Strong 2 report, democratic concerns were at the heart of the rhetoric on parent participation, that was defined as *"a two-way process of knowledge and information flowing freely both ways"*. In the Starting Strong 3 report, participation of parents has been instrumentalised, stating that *"Parents and communities should be regarded as partners working towards the same goal. Home learning environments and neighbourhood matter for healthy child development and learning."*

The initial text of the SIGNALS project (Fischer & Schneider, 2014) clearly illustrates this double view, as it states on participation that

- “It is a key notion in education that refers to different educational subjects and themes; key notion in the quality debate in the sense that participation is a prerequisite for personal education and development
- It is a key notion in democracy or democratic education; therefore it is a higher goal in education.”

While the first notion refers to participation as a *means* or a prerequisite, of which the benefits lie outside of the participation process, the second notion of democracy refers to participation as meaningful in itself. Several authors have warned against the instrumentalisation of participation, especially when participation needs to serve goals that are not negotiated in participative ways (Rupin, 2014; Vandenbroeck, Roets, & Roose, 2012; Wenger, 1998).

The second notion refers to democratic values, and as such it is less feasible to frame participation as a specific method. Participation then is factual, it is what happens every day and is to be considered as what constitutes citizenship and belonging (Biesta, 2011; Lawy & Biesta, 2006). Needless to say that while these diverging conceptualisations of participation have each a value in itself they are in tension with each other.

The conceptualisation of participation as a means to achieve other goals (e.g. child development, better home learning environments) may more easily lead to a methodical approach and *conditionality*: parents (and children for that matter) are supposed to be equipped with specific capacities to be able to participate. As one of the SIGNAL reports rightly states:

*“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.”*

The conceptualisation of participation as inherent to relational citizenship is unconditional in nature as it starts from the premise that it is not possible not to participate.

In sum, different practices and insights can be generated along diverging understandings, including (yet not limited to)

- participation as a right or as a duty
- participation as a format (e.g. a meeting) or as a daily practice that is inevitable
- participation as information or as a dialogue (uni- or bi-directional)

## A diversity of practices, practices in diversity

The different local actions, realised in the SIGNALS project, illustrate the divergent meanings of parent participation. Some examples:

- The German project is an interesting example of co-construction between children, parents, professionals, and experts, in which bi-directionality is essential. As they are working together towards the re-design of space, there is a clear commitment to realise a common project in a limited timeframe.
- The Danish project is strong and knowledgeable in involving children. It seems to aim at changing food habits (of parents) and therefore the participation of children and adults in the project bear more informational characteristics. While there

- could be an implicit desire in the staff to change parents, it is not clear to what extent this aim is shared by all participants (including parents and children).
- The Greek project goes beyond children's participation and fosters real cooperation among children. Parents' perspectives on their children's and their own participation are investigated through focus groups before and after the project. During the project the influence of the class in the home environment seems more obvious than the reciprocal influence.
  - The Hungarian project consists of two projects. The first seems to foster bidirectionality as an important aspect of the transition between the home and the child care centre. The second project aims at enhancing emerging literacy and thus seems to foster a more instrumental and unidirectional approach of parents.
  - The Romanian project seems to explicitly focus on parent training and, as a consequence, has a more uni-directional approach, wishing to see behavioural changes in parents.
  - The Swedish project is explicitly bi-directional, asking critical questions about what this means in contexts of diversity.
  - The Icelandic project seems to combine uni- and bi-directionality as it clearly negotiated with parents and local communities about the very topic of participation and then frames participation in specific methods (i.e. meetings).

It should be clear that this enumeration has no judgemental intentions whatsoever. On the contrary, this diversity needs to be considered as a particular strength and a richness of the SIGNALS project, as it will enable the confrontation of experiences that can enhance new knowledge and reflexive insights.

It is to be noted that some projects explicitly address the socio-economic and cultural (or ethnic if one wishes so) diversity. Considering the changing demographics in the EU and the concern for inclusion and social cohesion (Council of the European Union, 2009), it becomes increasingly important to consider participation in contexts of diversity, not to say in contexts of superdiversity (Vertovec, 2007). The Swedish and Romanian projects explicitly address this issue, while the Hungarian implicitly does so. The other projects may benefit from being more explicit in how diversity of families' backgrounds plays a role in their practice and in the reflections upon their practice.

## The distance between rhetoric and practice

In the present state of affairs, it appeared that in several projects, there is a substantial difference in the rhetoric of staff, cherishing the idea of participation, and what is actually realised in daily practice. This distance is not to be considered as a downside of the project, as it offers unique learning opportunities to understand why this is the case. In a yet unpublished working paper, inspired by Spivak (1988), the ethnographic researcher on ECEC, Tobin (2009) sheds some light on why parent participation in contexts of diversity is far from obvious:

- *Unfamiliarity with the task and conversational conventions of engaging in discussion with teachers.*
- *Discomfort in the school setting (sometimes due to bad memories from their own student days).*
- *Language barriers (which produces in immigrant parents not just an inability to express oneself but also frustration that the version of oneself one is expressing when*

*speaking a second language will come across as unsophisticated, banal, or even stupid).*

*- A lack of trust and fearfulness that expressing complaints or even making suggestions may provoke negative reactions from school staff directed at them or their children. This can lead to the belief that speaking out can be a trap and that it is safer to say nothing.*

*- Fatalism (“Nothing I can say to teachers will make a difference so why try?”)*

*- Parents’ social isolation and economic stress (which make it difficult for them to attend meetings and to form alliances with other immigrant parents when they do). Most immigrant parents do not come to school as members of a coherent pre-existing group (they often come to school not knowing the other parents with children in the same class on more than a nodding basis). And they often live in communities that provide few opportunities to find common cause with other immigrants or to get to know non-immigrants.*

*- A tendency (stronger among some immigrant communities than others) to show deference to teachers and to the host society, even when one does not agree.*

In addition, the lively discussions during the intermediary meeting in Budapest (3-4 February 2015) generated additional knowledge and insights on these issues:

- Power relations inevitably play an important role and preschool teachers “own the place” as it is their working place

- Parents may have very different understandings of participation than teachers have. While teachers often wish to ask parents’ opinions on curricular matters (“education”), parents may consider this as the expertise of the teachers and consequently they may wish to be more involved in extra-curricular matters (i.e. “care”).

- Staff may have a deficit view on parents and may have (be it subconscious) attitudes that consider parents as less competent

- Staff may consider that children are sufficiently participating when they are actively involved in play.

## Concluding remarks

Half way in the SIGNALS process, it is clear that this is a very timely and promising project. The diversity of the local projects reflects the conceptual and paradigmatic diversity in the participation literature. In addition it explicitly addresses the distance between rhetoric and practice and the combination of these two conditions offers unique opportunities to go beyond the present state of the art insights on participation. It is clear that the transnational meetings highly contribute to this reflection.

The actors in the SIGNALS project may wish to think of additional possibilities to enhance the critical reflection that results from the confrontation of these differences. There are of course manifold possibilities to do so including documenting concretely what the implicit paradigms are that underpin the local projects; thematic analyses of the rich qualitative material gathered in the interviews; critical peer reviews of each others’ contributions to the compendium, thematic discussion groups through the Internet in-between meetings; ...

I am convinced that this project has a great potential in generating crucial insights in the topical theme of parent and child participation. In order to maximise its impact, partners might be more explicit in how they address the societal diversity and what lessons can be learned (both from success and from the lack of change), in terms of social cohesion. As for now, the

focus is on the relation between staff and parents. However crucial this is, undoubtedly additional lessons can also be learned on the relation *among* children, as well as *among* parents.

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