Research Article

Some theoretical issues concerning children's participation in preschools

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Abstract

This paper provides a review of recent theoretical and empirical papers in which the conceptualization of childhood and children in contemporaneity is discussed and exemplified using the concept of children's participation within institutionalized early childhood education context. Children's participation is emphasized as one of the key characteristics of contemporary early childhood education in both theory and policies of child well-being and children's rights, although these two start from very different conceptualizations of childhood and children. An examination of childhood practices reveals a dominance of the perspective of adults, in terms of limited opportunities for children's participation in preschools. The identified discrepancies between theory, policy and practice of childhood indicate a necessity of further research on children's perspectives about their everyday lives in preschools as a starting point for viewing children as competent social actors in the construction and determination of their own lives.

Keywords: children, participation, childhood, institutionalization, decision-making, preschool

Introduction

This paper deals with children's participation within institutionalized early childhood education context (further referred to as 'a preschool') in the light of contemporary conceptualizations of childhood and children, more commonly known as *childhood studies* (James & James, 2004, 2008;Kehily, 2009; Prout & James, 1997; Qvortrup, 2005, 2009). Contemporary childhood, shaped both by global changes and institutionalization of childhood and children, and, at the same time, by advocacy of child well-being, children's rights and their high quality of life, is evidence of an increasing relevance of this topic, on a theoretical and practical level. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to provide insight into relevant theoretical and empirical papers dealing with childhood in contemporaneity as an attempt to resolve the ambiguities in conceptualizations of childhood and children and in practices of childhood in an institutionalized context of preschools.

Theoretical considerations of childhood and children within *childhood studies*

Social construction and social structuring are one of the key notions in contemporary considerations or *new paradigms* of childhood and children. The reviewed literature advocates an interdisciplinary approach to childhood studies and this paper espouses this approach, assuming that it provides multiple views of childhood and children, which reduces discipline-based exclusiveness.

Theorists within childhood studies claim that the current state of knowledge about the historical and cultural conditionality of childhood indicates a variability of conceptualizations and experiences of childhood, i.e. its social construction (James & James, 2008). Along with this change of childhood, they also emphasize childhood continuity. Qvortrup (2009) defines childhood as a socially structured space that is permanent within the structure of all societies, but whose construction changes together withchanging historical and cultural characteristics. "Childhood, as distinct from biological immaturity, is neither a natural nor universal feature of human groups but appears as a specific structural and cultural component of many societies" (Prout & James, 1997, p. 8). However, Woodhead (1999) claims that contextualization does not mean reducing the power of general principles because general principles cannot have power unless they are considered meaningful to particular situations.

The conceptualization of childhood as sociallyconstructed and structured calls for a reconsideration of the role of children in this construction and structuring. Within childhood studies, the idea of the socialization process as a preparation for the status of an adult is challenged, and it is claimed that children are active interpreters of the social world and that during childhood they learn about society and contribute to it with their interpretative reproduction[1] (Corsaro, 2011). In other words, children are active

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[1] Interpretative reproduction "is made up of three types of collective action: (a) children's creative appropriation of information and knowledge from the adult world; (b) children's production and participation in a series of

participants in the "construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live" (Prout & James, 1997, p. 8). Advocates of contemporary conceptualizations of childhood and children (James & James, 2008; Qvortrup, 2009) point out the problem of considering age as a key element in the differentiation between children and adults because then it logically follows that "…'adulthood', and accompanying notions of personhood and citizenship, come not through achievement or competence but through ageing" (James & James, 2008, p. 15). Put differently, they emphasize that the concept of childhood has *traditionally* been defined in opposition to the concept of adulthood. If *traditionally* these notions have been considered as polar opposites, then if the adult is stable and independent, the child is unstable and dependent; similarly, if the adult is a complete human being, the child is an incomplete human becoming (Qvortrup, 2005). In this view, growing up is considered "a linear process towards becoming complete, towards achieving the highest phase of humanness: adulthood. This superiority of adults legitimized the authority of adults over children" (Ten Brinke & Kanters, 2010, p. 7). However, Woodhead (1999), advocating the interdisciplinary approach within childhood studies, reinterprets the conceptualizations of children mentioned above in the context of the theories of developmental psychology. Heargues that it is first important to identify the key features of human growth and maturation as well as fundamental physical, emotional and psychological needs all children have in common. Then it would be possible to deliberate on the ways in which the expression of those needs and the ways they are fulfilled is based on a particular social-cultural context.

An insight into considerations within childhood studies reveals a difference in understandings of childhood and children in certain disciplines. For example, in their rethinking of contemporary childhood, sociologists (Corsaro, 2011; James & James, 2008; Prout & James, 1997; Qvortrup, 2009) build on theories of symbolic interactionism and structuralism, conceptualizing childhood as socially constructed and structured. Psychologists (Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson & Hundeide, 2010; Woodhead, 1999), for their part, reinterpret the understandings about the importance of the social-cultural context in the sense of a "reconstructed developmental paradigm" (Woodhead, 1999, p. 16). What contemporary conceptualizations of childhood and children have in common is their departure from and disregard for the *traditional* understandings of children as immature, vulnerable, incapable beings and childhood as a phase on the way to adulthood. In contemporary conceptualizations, children are considered as social agents who have the capacity to control the direction of their own lives and to participate in changing and reforming their wider society.

Within childhood studies, there are theoretical deliberations on childhood, which include the perspective of adults and the children's perspective. The perspective of

peer cultures; and (c) children's contribution to the reproduction and extension of the adult culture. These activities follow a certain progression: Appropriation enables cultural production, which contributes to reproduction and change." (Corsaro, 2011, p. 43).

adults is considered as an attempt at interpretation, standardization and regulation of children's reality. Sommer, Pramling Samulesson and Hundeide (2010) define children's perspectives as those that „represent children's experiences, perceptions and understanding in their life-world" (ibid,p. vi).Understanding children in terms of their activity, competence and ability raises questions about the dominance of one or the other perspective about childhood. In other words, it is visible that childhood studies advocate the children's perspective, and therefore it is necessary to consider which perspective is dominant in the practice of childhood, the perspective of adults or the children's perspective.

Contemporary practices of childhood

Discussions within childhood studies indicate the importance of gaining insight into the practices of contemporary childhood. This review of literature will direct the focus of the discussion about practices of contemporary childhood to the institutionalization of childhood and children as one of the main characteristics of the reality of childhood in contemporaneity (Babić, 2009; Edwards, 2005; James & James, 2008).

Institutionalization of childhood and children

In order to gain insight into the practices of contemporary childhood, it is necessary to consider the considerations of institutional context of early childhood in the reviewed literature. Institutionalization is considered according to parameters of personhood, agency and participation of children on the one hand, and external regulation, on the other hand.

Babić (2009) claims that contemporary childhood is marked by institutionalization of childhood and children. Institutionalization positions children according to social status, and prescribes educational institutions as the places where children "should be" (Edwards, 2005, p. 4). Zeiher (2009) contextualizes institutionalization as a part of the transition from industrial to late modern society. Näsman (1994) links the stated process to an increasing separation of children into specially designed, separated and protected organized surroundings that are being supervised by experts and that are structured according to age and ability. Similarly, Edwards (2005) connects the process of institutionalization of childhood and children with an increasing subjection of children to specific "normal" phases and courses of educational and social development, and warns that this kind of surveillance and regulation can turn children into "programmes", which require specific measuring and testing (ibid, p. 6). In other words, institutionalization controls and regulates a child's "body and mind with regimes of discipline, learning and development" (ibid, p. 13). Children perceive educational institutions as places where they are under constant control and where their voices are the least respected (Prout, 2000). Being placed into institutions, children are removed from the "everyday world and placed into an artificial world, guided by their needs, where they are in the centre", but separated from the real world, which leads to an

isolationist practice (Fleer, 2003, p. 66). Childhood and children institutionalization is crucial in the (re)production of children's structural dependence and regulation and limitation of their agency.

Alanen (2007) claims that in the political discussions among the EU member states about child well-being and education, the dominant discourse concerns strategies of social investment and expected social gains. The involvement of children in institutions is justified with children's potentials and the importance of investment in learning for life and for the future (Babić, 2009). Fenech and Sumsion (2007) claim that the governments of OECD states are increasingly inclined to view quality education in early childhood as essential to economic and societal goals, especially employment, health and educational outcomes. Because of this, according to Fenech and Sumsion (2007), preschools are under varying and intensive governmental regulation, that is, they are controlled via rules, sanctions, awards and punishments as a means of promoting and maintaining the standard of quality. Similarly, Prout (2000) claims that despite the recognition of children as people with their own rights, there has been an intensification of control, regulation and surveillance of children in the public policy on the ground that they are human capital and a means of controlling the future. This causes social inequalities and leads to intergenerational injustice and institutional disengagement in relation to children (ibid). Woodhead (2006) confirms that an improvement in the quality of life in early childhood is a national and international priority, which is visible through research, political initiatives, program developments and advocacy.

In public and political discourses, there is an increasing interest in early childhood. Such tendencies are especially dominant in transitional times, in which people are observed as capital. Therefore, institutionalization of childhood and children is not observed from the children's perspective but from the perspective of adults (benefits for the adults), which stands in contrast to contemporary conceptualizations of childhood and children.

Participation in institutionalized early childhood context

In this part of the paper, a review of relevant research on children's participation in preschools is presented in an attempt to provide insight into practices of contemporary childhood. The concept of children's participation can be viewed as a way of relating the conceptualizations of childhood and children within childhood studies and the institutionalized context in which childhood and children are placed. In the reviewed literature, children's participation is considered in the context of policies of child well-being and children's rights(international agreements and declarations), such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), an "international rallying point for child advocacy"(Prout, 2005, p. 31), and in the context of childhood studies. In this paper, children's participation is considered in terms of children's possibility to make decisions and influence their everyday lives in preschools.

Many authors (Sheridan, 2001a, 2001b; Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001; Shier, 2001; Wiltz & Klein, 2001) ground their empirical research of children's participation in the children's rights movement, specifically, the child's right to participation in decision-making, as stated in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).All member states are obliged to ensure that all children capable of forming their own views about things that concern them have the right to express them freely and that those views be taken into consideration according to the age and maturity of the child. Similarly, Sheridan and Pramling Samuelsson (2001) state that in preschools all children have the right to influence and take responsibility for their surroundings as well as for their own learning process, i.e. all children have a right to participation and engagement. They justify the right to participation by stating that it increases the child's motivation for learning and becoming an active member of society (Berthelsen & Brownlee, 2005; Sheridan, 2001a, 2001b; Sheridan & Pramling Samuelsson, 2001; Shier, 2001).

Review of research groundedin these assumptions bases the notion of participation on Hart's[2] (1992) and later on, Shier's (2001) model of participation. His model consists of five levels: children are listened to; children are supported in expressing their views; children's views are being taken into consideration; children are included in the process of decision-making; children share power and responsibility for decision-making. Each of these levels is observed through three stages of commitment: openings, opportunities, obligations). The opening stage refers to a preschool teacher, who is willing to work at a certain level, i.e. who makes a personal commitment to work in a certain way, the stage of opportunities is the one in which the needs are met (means, skills, knowledge, developing new approaches), that will enable the preschool teacher or the institution to work at a certain level in practice (ibid). The last stage is commitment, in which the work of a preschool teacher at a certain level becomes the agreed upon rule of an institution or setting; preschool teachers are obliged to work in a certain way, and it is "built in the system" (ibid, p. 110).The author proposes that in order to avoid forcing children to participate in decision-making, preschool teachers should weigh the risks and benefits, and look for areas in which it is appropriate for children to share power and responsibility. Also, other benefits of children's participation are service provision, a

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[2] The first "typology" of the notion of participation is the so-called "ladder of participation" (Hart, 1992, p. 8). The ladder consist of eight rungs; the first three comprising a model Hart (1992) calls non-participation, and the next five rungs comprise a model of participation: manipulation (adult-guided activities, children do as they are told, without understanding the purpose of the activity); decoration (adult-guided activities, children understand the purpose, but do not participate in planning); tokenism/symbolism (adult-guided activities, children are consulted, but have little possibilities for feedback); assigned, but informed (adult-guided activities, children understand the purpose, decision-making process and have a role); consulted and informed (adult-guided activities, children are consulted and informed about how their contribution is going to be used and about the outcomes of adults' decisions); adult initiated, shared decisions with children (adult-guided activities, decision-making is shared with children); child-initiated and directed (child-guided activities, little adult contribution); child-initiated, shared decisions with adults (child-guided activities, decision-making is divided between children and adults, participating as equal partners). Based on Hart's (1992) typology of participation, Shier (2001) offers a new "model" of participation through interaction between adults and children. The intent of this model was not to replace Hart's typology, but to serve as a tool for researching various aspects of the process of participation (Shier, 2001). The difference between these two authors is that Shier (2001) excluded rungs of Hart's (1992) non-participation, and his model consists only of the "five levels of participation" (Shier, 2001, p. 110).

greater sense of ownership, belonging, self-respect, empathy, responsibility and a preparation for democratic participation and for becoming citizens. The aim of Sheridan and Pramling Samuelsson's(2001) research was to gain insight into children's understandings of participation and influence in a preschool. After interviewing thirty-five five-year-olds, the authors divided children's understandings into five qualitatively different categories: doing what you want, allow or forbid, exercise power, make up/invent, doing what most want (ibid). It was concluded that children have limited possibilities of decision-making and that they primarily decide on self-initiated activities and play, and muchless about the organization, routines, contents and teacher-initiated activities. Wiltz and Klein (2001) observed and interviewed four-year-olds in eight preschools in an attempt to gain insight into children's perspectives about their own experiences in preschool. Of these eight preschools, four were "low quality" and four were "high quality", as measured using ECERS[3]and CPI[4] (ibid, p. 214). The results indicated that in the "low quality" preschools, children were involved in frontal teacher-led activities, while in the "high-quality" preschools, children's active participation was encouraged and they had more opportunities to choose materials and activities.

Theorists within the field of childhood studies (James & James, 2004; Mayall, 2001; Woodhead, 1998; 2010) consider the formulation of the concept of children's participation in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) itself contextualized into dominant concepts of Western society because the Convention refers to the "universal, free-standing, individual child; a child on a certain developmental path" (Mayall, 2001, p. 245). It is suggested that childhood be reconceptualized by departing from "developmentalism", idealization and depolitization of childhood and by refraining from labelling children as incompetent, unstable, unreliable and emotional (ibid). In a similar vein, Woodhead (2010, xxii) claims that participation (as conceptualized in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)) is not about "adults 'allowing' children to offer their perspectives, according to adults' view of their 'evolving capacities', their 'age and maturity' or their 'best interests'". He emphasizes that participation also involves children's challenging of adults' assumptions about when they can participate and about what issues. He concludes that in order to develop fully the potential for children's participation, it is necessary to surpass concepts like *listening to children* and *giving children a say*, i.e. surpass the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Burr (2002) agrees with this view, and further claims that the notion of participation based on these assumptions is vaguely determined, and regulated by political agenda, in which children are *invisible*.

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[3]ECERS or Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (Harms, Clifford, as cited in Wiltz, Klein, 2001; Sheridan, Pramling Samuelsson, 2001; Sheridan, 2001a; Sheridan, 2001b) is an instrument of global assessment of thirty seven items concerning the setting and everyday activities of early childhood education institutions. Each item is rated on a scale from 1 = inadequate to 7 = excellent.

[4]CPI or Classroom Practices Inventory Scale (Hyson, Hirsh-Pasek, Rescorla, as cited in Wiltz, Klein, 2001) is an assessment instrument, which contains 26 items of degrees of developmentally appropriate practice, inappropriate curricular emphasis and emotional climate of groups that are rated using the Likert scale (from 1 = not at all like this classroom, to 5 = very much like this classroom).

Mayall (2001) attempted to gain insight into children's understandings of the societal status of childhood, motherhood, fatherhood and to learn something their everyday lives. After interviewing fifty-seven nine-year-olds, the author notes that children accept their low status in relation to adults and consider the role of adults as that of teaching children moral standards. The children who participated in the research also feel that adults do not trust them, level false accusation at them and do not respect them (ibid). They point to interdependence and reciprocity of relations within their families and with other children as central values, and believe that they are entitled to participate in decision-making, but that teachers "almost never" respect that (ibid, p. 255). Based on these results, Mayall (2001) concludes that if children's participation is viewed through the lens of childhood studies, it is necessary to consider the participation of that group in the construction of social order, policy and practices. Another conclusion was that the traditional protective and socializing role of adults, and children's acceptance of a marginalized position, indicates the dominance of the perspective of adults, which naturally makes children's participation and initiative-taking in social relations difficult. Tizard and Hughes (as cited in Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, & Bell, 2002) compared language experiences of thirty four-year-olds at home and in preschool. The results indicated that conversational exchanges at home were "rich" and that they encouraged children's active participation, while the conversational exchanges in the preschool setting were "impoverished" (teachers ask a series of questions without "fostering" the conversations) (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002, p. 98). This, as the authors conclude, leads to the teacher's underestimation of the abilities of many preschool children.

This review of research grounded in contemporary conceptualizations of childhood and children as well as research grounded in policies of child well-being and children's rights indicates that the practices of early childhood education are at variance with the theoretical foundations or policies. Despite different understandings of childhood and children, both theory and policy emphasize children's ability and right to participation, respectively. However, practices of contemporary childhood are characterized by regulation and instrumentalization of childhood, and marginalization of children.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, contemporary conceptualizations of childhood and children were considered on a theoretical and practical level using the notion of children's participation. Within childhood studies, childhood is viewed as socially constructed and structured, and children as active social participants in everyday life. Policies of child well-being and children's rights grant children *the right to participation* but, at the same time, they do not perceive it as the child's inherent ability and thus leave it up to adults to decide when it is *appropriate* for children to exercise this right. This reflects the difference between the way childhood and childrenare conceptualized within policies and in theory. The former represent the perspective of adults and render children are vulnerable, in need of protection, immature, incapable; the latter represents the

children's perspective and sees children as agentic "beings and becomings" (Lee, 2001, 5).

An examination of childhood practices reveals that despite contemporary understandings of childhood and children, childhood practices are in fact institutionalized, regulated, and focused on the future. This is the perspective of adults and it is visible in childhood practice, in terms of limited opportunities for children's participation in preschools.

The identified discrepancies between theory, policy and practice of childhood and the current global political and economic changes indicate the necessity of further research on children's perspectives about their everyday lives as a starting point for viewing children as beings and becomings capable of making independent choices, as opposed to the dominant instrumentalization and marginalization of childhood and children.

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