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## Creating a culture of participation : Early childhood education and care educators in the face of change

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**Creating a Culture of Participation:  
Early Childhood Education and Care Educators in the Face of Change**

Abstract

This study reports on critical participatory research in an early childhood education and care centre in Finland. The objective was to study which elements are critical in the development and construction of a culture of participation. The data comprise conversations, team meetings and educators' diaries. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The results indicated that a culture of participation requires four elements: (1) a shared understanding of the image of the child, (2) a shared understanding of professional development, (3) leadership, and (4) a shared we-narrative that enables the comprehensive understanding, promotion and maintenance of a culture of participation.

*Keywords:* Child's perspective, Leadership, Professional development, Image of the child, Sense of community

**Introduction**

Developments in childhood studies, ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the growth of the sociocultural approach to learning and interaction (Säljö, 2009) have contributed to research on power relationships between children and adults. These three aspects have also been key factors in changing the traditional view of a child not only as a future member of society but also as an equal agent in contemporary society (Kallio and Häkli, 2013; Lipponen, Kumpulainen and Paananen, 2018; Prout, 2005; Sinclair, 2004). These

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changes have been significant in the development of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) practices globally.

In Finland, the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018) and the Act on Early Childhood Education and Care (540/2018) acknowledge children's active participation and the importance of children's roles in constructing an ECEC culture and learning environments. In order to enhance children's participation, there has been a growing interest in developing a culture of participation. Thus, our main aim is to identify critical factors in the development and construction of a culture of participation in an ECEC setting.

### **Culture of participation**

In an ECEC setting, a culture of participation is about the relationships between educators and children, who must be given the opportunity to influence the community and experience a sense of belonging to a group (Kirby et al., 2003; Jenkins, 2009; Quennerstedt, 2011; Weckström et al., 2017). A culture of participation is a part of a child's perspective activity in which children can participate in the planning and implementation of ECEC activities together with educators (Karlsson, 2013; in press). A culture of participation and a child's perspective activity combine into a relational community-based approach in which all actors play a role in shaping community activities and knowledge (Kirby et al., 2003; Schoenmaker, 2015). Activities and knowledge relate to the place, time, and to other actors (Karlsson, 2004; in press). Collectively generated knowledge creates structures of social interdependence and facilitates educators' commitment to achieving common goals (Granrusten, 2020; Schoenmakers, 2015; Uhl-Bien, 2011). For this reason, self and other are not separable and educators shift their position from "I" to "we" when practices are shaped in the community as a collective orientation (Puroila and Haho, 2017; Uhl-Bien, 2011). In

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order to be part of a culture, participation must be rooted in strong established structures and practices (Sargeant, 2018).

### **Children's participation**

Children's participation can be understood in different ways. At its simplest it is about children's opportunity to participate in action or decision-making (Thomas, 2007). Participation in ECEC is the experience of being listened to and being involved (Kangas, 2016). However, participation also has many other dimensions: being heard, voicing personal views and receiving support are all significant in increasing children's sense of participation. Decision-making requires reciprocity so that children feel they are being listened to, are able to initiate actions, and are respected (Clark, 2005; Weckström et al., 2017).

Children's participation has also been criticized. The criticism is directed towards the idea that through participation, children become responsible for issues they do not understand and for their consequences (James, 2007; Mannion, 2007; Valentine, 2011). On the other hand, excessive protection can potentially prevent children from influencing issues concerning themselves and their own living environments. In a culture of participation, it is essential that educators do not give all the responsibility to children. A culture of participation involves shared activities between children and educators (Jenkins, 2009; Kirby et al., 2003).

From the child's perspective, a culture of participation in ECEC is significant because participation is associated with a sense of being part of the community, being accepted, and the well-being and status of children as being part of a democracy (Emilsson and Johansson, 2009; Juutinen, 2015; Leinonen and Venninen, 2012; Theobald and Kultti, 2012; Webb and Crossouard, 2015). Furthermore, a culture of participation comprises relationships between the members of a community. Educators should support the different ways that children express themselves and

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satisfy their need to be heard and understood (Hohti and Karlsson, 2014; Karlsson, 2004; 2013; Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2006).

Structures and practices in Finnish ECEC centres are deeply entrenched (Kangas, Venninen and Ojala, 2016; Virkki, 2015). This creates challenges in promoting children's participation and including children's initiatives and interests (Kangas and Lastikka, 2019, Kirby, 2020). Furthermore, international research has shown that official documents and law do not automatically guarantee participation in ECEC practices (Connors and Morris, 2015; Kangas, 2016; Sargeant, 2018; Webb, 2015). Educators can be seen as gatekeepers of participation (Karlsson, Weckström and Lastikka, 2018) who either promote or hinder the opportunities for children to participate in planning and implementing activities in ECEC (Kangas, Venninen and Ojala, 2016). It has been noted that after development projects, ECEC practices can easily revert to old practices in which educators plan practices and children are seen as the objects of action (Karlsson, 2012; Nyland, 2009; Venninen et al., 2014). Thus, there is a critical need for further development and research (Kangas, 2016; Quennerstedt, 2010; 2011; Virkki, 2015) and for new structures and practices in order to develop a culture of participation and strengthen children's agency (Kangas, 2016; Kirby, 2020).

## Changing pedagogical practices

In ECEC settings, educators have their own viewpoints and values that shape the image of the child (Lämsä et al., 2017). These can be different from the image of the child described in official ECEC documents and in law. Mere education or knowledge gained in training is not sufficient to achieve change: coaching and personal experiences of working with new reciprocal methods are crucial (Neuman and Cunningham, 2009). Knowledge of the official guidelines that guide practices promotes the educators' practices that are stipulated in these

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documents (Wustmann Seiler and Simoni, 2012). It is important that an ECEC culture is consistent across all practices and that educators are committed to it (Connors, 2016).

Dialogue between educators is necessary when introducing new shared practices with children (Buber, 2003; Isaacs, 2001). A change process is more sustainable when it is based on appreciation and is continuously fed by collaborative and dialogical practices (Schoenmakers, 2015). Thus, reciprocal dialogue between educators is a crucial element in a culture of participation and working methods that enhance children's perspectives. It has been noted that dialogue involves co-operative learning with respect and with acknowledgement of one's own ignorance, as well as reflection (Freire, 2018). Professional development and the will of individuals to change their own beliefs need "cracks" in thinking (Malinen, 2000). This will help change educators' perceptions and actions (Malinen, 2000; see also Muis and Duffy, 2013).

Vecchi (2010) proposed that dialogue between educators and reflections on their work is an important way of processing pedagogy at a deeper level. Furthermore, Ojala and Venninen (2011) reported that changing pedagogical practices require reflection. They divided the professional reflection of an ECEC educator into four levels of activities: technical listing, description, analytic examination, and reflections on the foundations. Reflection is assessing one's own premises in order to direct new ways of acting and evaluating problem-solving strategies (Mezirow, 1990). Because learning to reflect is a slow and dynamic process, it is important to encourage educators to use teamwork and to develop a deeper understanding of the importance of reflective practices (Brookfield, 2017).

## Methods

In this study, we report on qualitative critical participatory research (CPR) (James, Milenkiewicz and Bucknam, 2008; Patton, 2015) in the context of a newly established private ECEC centre in Finland. Our research is based on emancipatory knowledge and reality (Chambers,

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2006). We hold a critical view of traditional ECEC structures and through our research seek to establish more equitable and appropriate structures for ECEC by sharing power between children and educators (see also Huttunen, 2009). CPR is relevant to community-based research in which the objective is to improve the professional development of educators through critical reflection and action (James et al., 2008; Patton, 2015). In our study, we aim to use CPR to develop a dynamic process of personal and professional development (James et al., 2008).

### **Research context**

The ECEC centre was selected for CPR through purposeful intensity sampling (Patton, 1990). The leader of the ECEC centre and all educators were interested in starting CPR in order to promote a culture of participation. The research was conducted over 2.5 years (2015–2017). During the research process, a total of two leaders and 19 educators (13 child carers and six teachers) worked at the ECEC centre. At the start of the research, the educators were working together for the first time. The first leader worked at the ECEC centre for the first two years. After two years, a new leader was appointed to the ECEC centre.

Consent for the research was received from all stakeholders, including the municipality and the university. All educators who worked at the ECEC centre familiarised themselves beforehand via an information letter on the development project and the related research. The information letter explained the background to the research, the use of research data and the rights of the research subjects. Each educator was asked to provide their separate written consent to participate in the study. They were also informed that they had the right to decide to use of their own research documents and to refuse to participate or withdraw from the research at any time. The educators were also aware that refusing to participate or withdrawing from the research would not adversely affect their employment or standing in the work community. The children's parents also received an information letter that included information on the development project and

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the related research, and they agreed to their children's participation in the study. An ethical review was not required because the study did not require the use of any sensitive or harmful data (TENK, 2019).

The entire work community was inspired by the idea of developing a culture of participation, so this became a shared objective. The development of a culture of participation required collective decision-making, engagement and innovation. When everyone was involved in the development of a culture of participation and the will to change came from an inner desire, the outcomes differed qualitatively and were more meaningful to the participants (see also Ospina and Foldy, 2010; Takanen, 2013). The first leader of the ECEC centre was also one of the researchers and her role was to act as a facilitator of research by asking questions and recording the conversations and observations. Because she worked as both a leader and an educator in the group of children, her role was not to act as a traditionally director. Typical to relational orientation, her leadership was built in process together with all members of the work community, children and parents (see Colmer, Waniganayake and Field, 2014; Granrusten, 2020; Mäntyjärvi and Puroila, 2019; Uhl-Bien, 2011). This kind of perspective does not restrict leadership to hierarchical positions or roles (Uhl-Bien, 2011). Instead, the first leader had the opportunity to view a culture of participation from within while also remaining continuously aware of her dual role as a leader and a researcher, and the resulting limitations (Xerri, 2018).

## **Data collection**

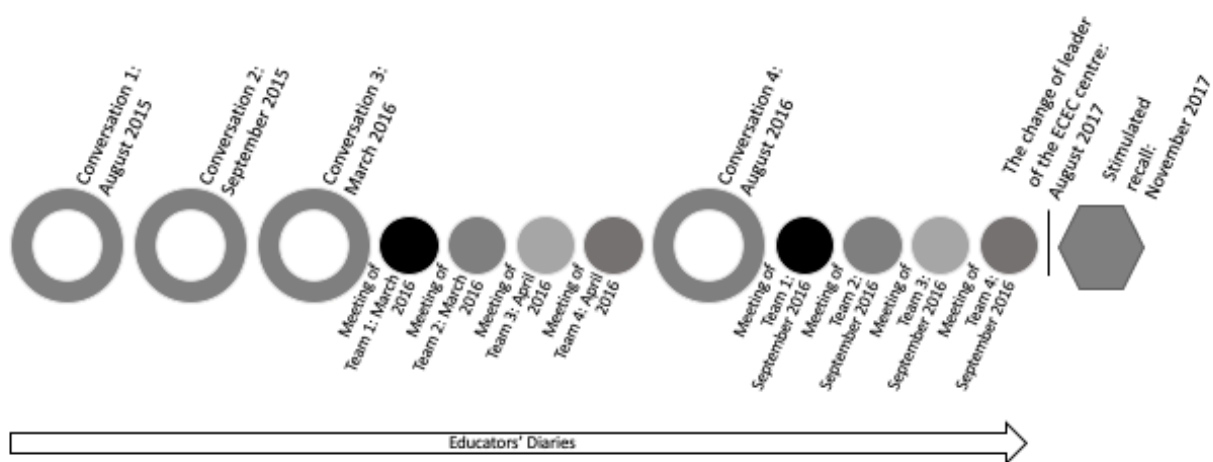
Typical for CPRs, all educators acted co-researchers. They were actively involved in the research process by defining the research subject, as well as producing and analysing the research data (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018; James et al., 2008; McIntyre, 2008; Patton, 2015). In our study, co-researching was found to be well grounded because all educators at the ECEC centre contributed to the active generation of knowledge for the research process and also functioned as



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co-investigators (Patton, 2015). The research was conducted as openly as possible (James et al., 2008; McIntyre, 2008; Patton, 2015). Because the leader had a dual role as both leader and researcher, it was essential to clarify to all participants that the objective was not to criticize the educators' work but to respect the characteristics of the specific work community and to an opportunity for the educators to express their views, which is crucial in CPR (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018; James et al., 2008; Patton, 2015).

All research data were collected during the educators' normal working hours in order to minimise the inconvenience of the data collection. The main research data comprises five elements: (1) four group conversations in which all educators shared their views about participation and on issues concerning ECEC that were important to them; (2) one stimulated recall conversation (see Dempsey, 2010; Schepens, Aelterman and Van Keer, 2007) with two educators at the end of the research project; (3) the diary notes of nine educators in which they reflected on their actions as educators and their observations on everyday life at the ECEC centre; (4) eight team conversations in which two or three educators engaged in dialogue with each other and evaluated a culture of participation in their own groups of children; and the (5) field notes of the first leader. All conversations were recorded, and the educators agreed on using them for research data. Figure 1 illustrates the data collection in this study.



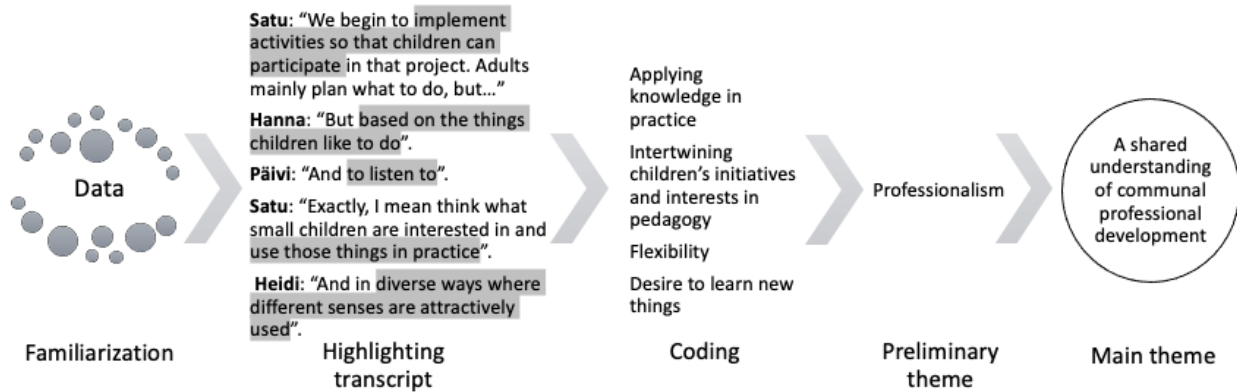
**Figure 1.** The research data

**Thematic analysis**

In our analysis, we used thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Through dialogue between data and theory we aim to gain an understanding of what elements are critical to the development and construction of a culture of participation in an ECEC setting.

At the start of the analysis phase, the first author familiarised themselves with the data by listening to conversations and reading the diaries and written notes about structure, content and duration, and noting other remarks of interest. She then listened to and checked the transcribed documents and generated semantic codes from each transcript, coding every segment of text that appeared to be relevant to or specifically addressed the research question. We then started generating preliminary themes by mind mapping and identified seven preliminary themes: sensitivity, activity, stability, comprehensiveness, sense of community, professionalism and leadership. We categorised these themes into three main themes: the importance of the development of a shared understanding of the image of the child; the desire of the work community to develop professionally according to the requirements of ECEC; and understanding the importance of leadership as a supporting and promoting elements of a culture of participation. When analysing the latent codes in more detail, we found that these three elements were bound together by a strong community discourse, which we call the we-narrative. Figure 2 illustrates the analysis process of one of the main themes.

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**Figure 2.** Example of the thematic analysis process

In order to enhance the rigour of this qualitative study (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Kreftling, 1991), we took into account the following four criteria of trustworthiness: credibility, confirmability, dependability and transferability. We accounted for credibility and confirmability by identifying the thematic categories. In the analysis, dependability was certified by verifying the steps of the research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Transferability was evaluated from the rich data and dense description. Despite these procedures, we had to recognise the limitations of this study.

In this CPR, validity could not be evaluated through concepts based on a realistic paradigm, which would imply permanent truth or true facts (Heikkinen, Huttunen and Syrjälä, 2007), because our research was based on emancipatory knowledge and reality. Thus, in the CPR, instead of *validity*, it was reasonable to use the term *validation*, which is understood in this context as being the gradual development of an interpretative process of the world (Kvale, 1993). Despite the study being based on Finnish experience, we hope that the findings will provide theoretical and practical perspectives for practitioners and policymakers globally.

## Results

Our thematic analysis shows that the critical elements of the development and construction of a culture of participation (Figure 3) are as follows: (1) a shared understanding of the

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image of an active child, (2) a shared understanding of communal professional development, (3) relational and reciprocal leadership and (4) a shared we-narrative that enables the comprehensive understanding, promotion and maintenance of a culture of participation.



**Figure 3.** The critical elements of the development and construction of a culture of participation

### **Shared understanding of the image of an active child**

Our analysis shows that the shared understanding of the image of an active child allows children to be treated as individuals, accepting their initiatives and involving them in the planning and implementation of activities. In this way, a culture of participation was realised throughout the ECEC centre, not only by individual educators. Further, the internalization of childhood values was revealed as being significant. It helped understand the meaning of a culture of participation in the everyday routines at the ECEC. Educators saw childhood as a unique phase that

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they needed to support. Children were perceived as being capable actors who could influence their learning environment by wondering and exploring and whose knowledge has meaning to the activities of the community:

*Hanna: It (childhood) is such an important phase of life. And that I could retain the perspective of a child during my work with children. That I am not just an adult, not just a teacher, but someone who is guiding them, holding their hands and helping, and retaining the perspective of a child, to allow them to wonder, explore and resolve, because it is natural for them to explore; and if I see something outside, we explore it together. I would like to stick to this in my work.*

Educators saw children as active agents who feel a need to do meaningful things with the educators. The knowledge produced by the children was built upon and utilized by the educators throughout the planning and implementation of activities. Our data show that children produce information and knowledge in multiple ways. Educators need to identify what things are meaningful to children and make these visible for a group of children:

*Anu: All the time...it's not only from 09.00 till 10.30. During this time, you take the children's initiatives seriously and let them have their say. But this should be happening all the time. We are with them the whole time. During the time we are there, they have a right to be heard. And they are heard.*

The sensitivity and neediness of children were highlighted by the educators; a peaceful and unhurried atmosphere was considered to be important. This reflects the educators' insight into the shared everyday life at the ECEC centre. It was emphasised that consideration is important: turning children down and humiliating them was regarded as being harmful. Instead, the educators wanted the children to feel that they made the educators and other children happy by being themselves:

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*Jonna: We also have children who were able to handle it (getting dressed), but who didn't like to be hurried. But we should give them the time they need. For some children, being together on a one-on-one basis (with an adult) so that you share this time and focus on getting them dressed to go outside, gives them self-confidence. Also, it is this individual time, when you get the chance to guide the child in getting dressed without hurrying.*

## Shared understanding of communal professional development

The educators set the goal for creating a culture of participation together with the leader. There was a shared desire to critically reflect on the structures and practices of the ECEC centre and aim at a community-based pedagogy in which all members of the community were active agents. Participation was seen as a holistic way of working and was positively perceived as it provided a lot of input for the educators. The analysis revealed that the educators were afraid of becoming blind to their own attitudes, ways of working and recognising the needs of the children. Thus, the ability to observe and evaluate, as well as apply new knowledge, were regarded as important skills.

The educators reported that confidence in the work community encouraged reflection, trying out new ways of working, negotiating rules and immersing themselves in playing and acting with the children. The shared understanding of communal professional development aptly describes their desire to support the significance of childhood through their own work. All their decisions were justified by a shared understanding of the image of an active child and the well-being of children:

*Anu: I couldn't work without a culture of participation anymore. I have sometimes thought about what it would be like if I changed into that kind of person or educator, who would simply make her own plans and do things that way. I simply could not operate like this! Somehow, I feel like I've*

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*grown into a person who can be more and more on a lower level (the same level as children) and who has learnt to seize the moment.*

### **Relational and reciprocal leadership**

The data show that the leader of the ECEC centre plays a key role in building a safe atmosphere and high-quality pedagogy. The leader determines the kind of leadership and conversational cultures that are being used. We found that relational leadership and a reciprocal leader who promotes a culture of participation challenges the educators to reflect on and develop their work, bring new phenomena into activities, act consistently during periods of change, and build a peaceful atmosphere in challenging and changing situations. This results in confidence, openness and sense of participation.

The analysis revealed that when the leader of the ECEC centre changes, the leadership culture may also transform itself from relational leadership to traditional management. Also, through their own activities, leaders promote or prevent educators from reflecting on their ways and basis of working and analysing their culture. If the focus is not on the sense of community, the culture deteriorates. Dialogue and reflection help change processes. However, it was found that all conflicts in the work community are challenging for the we-narrative and therefore for a culture of participation:

*Anu: Compared to the previous two years, I think we are not challenged enough to implement it (a culture of participation) now. Participation is not discussed much in meetings or teamwork. Of course, if I explain what we have been doing with the children, then I perhaps learn that we have properly taken into account the children's views or interests. But these are just words, we are not actively encouraged to do this, and the extent to which I hear the children's own voices depends entirely on my own efforts. So, and if I think about those two years, the two first years, how much*

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*we talked about a culture of participation and kept diaries. And now it feels like it (a culture of participation) it has almost completely disappeared. We don't get any support.*

### **The we-narrative: the understanding, promotion and maintenance of a culture of participation**

The shared understanding of the image of an active child, the shared understanding of communal professional development, and relational and reciprocal leadership are intertwined as the we-narrative. It describes the strong and shared sense of community and involvement throughout the community, which includes all the children and educators. As the following quote illustrates, the we-narrative conveys confidence in the work of others and a desire to commit to common goals:

*Hanna: Well, because it starts with so many little things: throwing yourself into the moment, doing things together, looking for opportunities.*

*Anu: Like those kinds of small things. But the very thing that WE are here, and WE do, WE go, and WE survive and so on.*

In the we-narrative, the educators were considering the children's perspectives through their own actions. They reflected on how they could plan and implement pedagogically through the children's initiatives; the main focus was on children as learners and human beings. In a culture of participation, the data showed that each member of the community had an important role and that it is important that educators feel happy about children's ideas and initiatives, which act as a basis for concrete action. Also, for the common development of a culture of participation, it is essential to promote child awareness and familiarity throughout the community. Educators cannot sufficiently support the children if they do not have a strong and deep understanding of them. A culture of participation needs the we-narrative in people's practical thinking.



### Discussion

This study aimed to establish the critical elements in the development and construction of a culture of participation in an ECEC setting. The results show that a culture of participation requires four elements: (1) a shared understanding of the image of an active child, (2) a shared understanding of communal professional development, (3) relational and reciprocal leadership and (4) a shared we-narrative that enables the comprehensive understanding, promotion and maintenance of a culture of participation.

Our findings suggest that children's active participation in the planning and implementation of reciprocal interaction promotes sense of participation in children and educators. Importantly, a synergy between the elements of the learning environment improves the quality of children's learning and development (see Downer, Sabol and Hamre, 2010). Furthermore, Downer et al. (2010) conclude that this synergy promotes professional cultures of collaboration and continuous improvement, and probably also supports the well-being, learning and professional development of educators. Together with Connors (2016), we argue that teachers are probably most likely to fully engage in and benefit from this type of professional development when they are supported by a strong culture of both collaboration and continuous improvement. They may be better placed to bring such a culture into their learning environments (see also Schoenmakers, 2015). Thus, a strong culture of continuous improvement may result in high-quality teaching by both enhancing teachers' learning and by enticing them to stay. Personal experience of participation contributes to the ability to promote sense of participation for children (see also Connors, 2016; Neuman and Cunningham, 2009). Furthermore, this sense of participation strengthens the individual's involvement in shared action and therefore increases their well-being (see also Granrusten, 2020).

Even though there was a common desire to promote a culture of participation, a hectic atmosphere and the high number of children in relation to the number of educators affected the

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children's initiatives when there were suitable spaces for children's play. Changes in educators and the presence of substitute practitioners also influenced how the educators could take the children's initiatives into account. Furthermore, the study revealed that there were differences in the educators' level of involvement in a culture of participation, and that this changed depending on the given situation. These differences were attributable to the educators' own experiences of participation and assimilation of the working methods in a culture of participation. The significant element is the individual's assimilation of a culture of participation. Our study shows that when educators were orientated towards a culture of participation and the participatory methods had been internalised, they understood the comprehensiveness of a culture of participation and did not believe that participation involved separate methods. If this was not the case, participation did not materialize or was diminished by challenging working conditions, or when there was no support from the team or from the leader of the ECEC centre. It was also challenging for the educators to include participation in all areas of ECEC (basic care, naps and mealtimes, transitions, etc.). This finding is confirmed by the results of other research (Downer, Sabol and Hamre, 2010; Connors, 2016). This may affect the educators' abilities to observe children's needs and initiatives. Thus, it is crucial to pay particular attention to the well-being of educators at work.

As noted in previous studies, the adoption of a new culture is challenging (Kangas, 2016; Nyland, 2009; Venninen et al., 2014; Webb, 2015). The mutual dialogue and reflection at different stages caused cracks in thinking (see Malinen, 2000), which enabled the advancement of one's own professional development and of the group towards a culture of participation. Furthermore, Vecchi (2010) stated that changes introduced by teams are more permanent than those introduced by individuals. Our findings are similar to the findings of Ojala and Venninen (2011), according to which a culture of participation requires reflection on the basis of activities, in which the leader is able to perceive the basis and theoretical background of the activities. The fundamental basis was positiveness: the educators wanted to share the success together. Pedagogical reflection,

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giving and receiving feedback and explaining decisions in a safe atmosphere were key elements in the shared understanding of professional development (Connors, 2016).

The we-narrative shows a change of thinking and internalisation (see also Uhl-Bien, 2011). The results of the research suggest that without the we-narrative, the promotion of a culture of participation concerning the entire ECEC centre will not succeed (see also Kirby et al., 2003). It is also particularly significant that a culture of participation disappears when there is no coherent and systematic pedagogical development (see also Venninen et al., 2014). In this regard, the leader of the ECEC centre has an important role to play in integrating new educators into a culture of participation. In order to be successfully realised, the we-narrative requires a form of relational leadership in which the entire work community has the opportunity to influence common issues and thus commit to the goals, which have been mutually set (see also Granrusten, 2020; Uhl-Bien, 2011). The courage of educators to discuss themes related to leadership showed that relative and reciprocal leadership made it possible to conduct research within one's own work community. When all members of the community are involved in planning the research, combined with a constant awareness of their role as leaders and educators, conflicts of interest are avoided.

The results of this research clearly suggest that an ECEC centre acted as a shared place for children and educators in which the everyday routines and activities were established in shared meanings, experiences and well-planned pedagogical activities. Participation was seen as a comprehensive experience developed in a group; the sense of belonging to a group and the opportunity to take initiatives were key to this experience (see also Weckström et al., 2017). The benefits of a culture of participation are far-reaching. In our study, the educators talked about the significance of participating in the everyday life of a child. Thus, we argue that children's empowering ECEC experiences of acting in a group, reciprocal interaction, and approving and appreciative encounters, are key to the prevention of exclusion and the promotion of active citizenship. Through a culture of participation, it is possible to lay a solid foundation for learning at

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school and in working life, in which self-regulation is needed more than in ECEC and in which peer groups are more important.

The main conclusion of this study is that by using the we-narrative, the educators wanted to strengthen the children's participation and agency through their own work and by creating a culture of participation. This research has enabled the tracing of communal and interactional ways of studying participation as an all-encompassing culture. We can state that the implementation of a culture of participation requires flexibility, a strong desire to be part of an ECEC community, the ability to work in a self-regulating manner and incorporate pedagogy into children's initiatives without losing perspectives on the interests provided by the children, dialogue between all participants, and reflection on developing one's own working methods. The children and their actions inspired the educators to listen more carefully to the children and to develop professionally. However, this is not enough: a culture of participation requires a relational approach to work, and all educators must be committed to it. In the we-narrative we noted that educational change is also a paradigm change (see also Riva, 2015).

There is still a future need to study a culture of participation in more detail. It is important to investigate the activities initiated by children in cooperation with educators in shared projects. Furthermore, it is also important to understand how a shared pedagogical leadership (between ECEC leaders and educators) affects a culture of participation and the promotion of the we-narrative. Further research, both nationally and internationally, is needed to better understand the phenomenon of a culture of participation.

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