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Children as playing citizens

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ABSTRACT

In this article, play is understood as activities of major importance for child-citizens and as activities that constitute various ways of participating. The researcher joined children in three early childhood education institutions in Norway in their activities and categorised their participation in their everyday life. The study depicts that, in some cases, routine activities can be categorised as play – for example, the movement from indoors to outdoors and ‘tidying-up time’. Thus, play in the form of doing jigsaw puzzles and playing ‘hide-and-seek’ appeared at times and in contexts that were not labelled as playtime in the daily routines. In contrast to role play, these kinds of play seem to be easier for the involved children to join in with. These findings highlight the need for facilitating multiple ways of playing, and thereby constructing conditions for children to enact their citizenship in non-formal settings such as play.

KEYWORDS

Child-citizens; play; activity; kindergarten; participation

Introduction

Educational contexts like early childhood education (ECE) often emphasise children’s learning from the perspective of their becoming good adult citizens. But ECE centres are not just places for future adults to stay. They are places where children stay and live, as children, or as I put it, as child-citizens (Grindheim 2015). Children can be regarded as ‘different’ citizens (Lister 2008), who live a ‘child-size’ citizenship (Jans 2004, 38). They are not responsible for all their actions in the same way as adults; they are more dependent on caretakers than adults are; their immaturity is, in a certain sense, a biological fact; they have less experience than most adults; and play is a more common way of interacting among children than among adults. In spite of these differences, they have formal rights related to democratic participation in their everyday lives (Office of United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 1989; Kindergarten Act §§ 1 and 3, 2005; Ministry of Education and Research 2011), although they are not entitled to vote. Children’s formal rights challenge the traditional liberalistic understanding of democratic citizens, which is based on rationality and autonomy (Cockburn 1998; Kjørholt et al. 2009). Children are not rational, autonomous or responsible, voting citizens; they are not adults but children, and thereby ‘different’ citizens.

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The move away from an adult-centred view of citizenship allows for recognising different forms of participation in both formal and informal settings (Biesta, Lawy, and Kelly 2009; Cockburn 2010). Research has delineated how an adult-centred understanding of where and how democratic participation is to be exercised may not accord with how children participate, inhabit, negotiate and challenge the given conditions for participation (Cockburn 1998; Liebel 2008; Seland 2009; James 2011). It is of interest, therefore, to explore the ‘citizenship as practice’ (Lister 2008), which is understood as the way children exercise their rights within the established conditions in the institution of ECE, and is conceptualised as different ways of participating within their given context.

ECE in Norway has a historical tradition of emphasising play; every day, there is time and space for indoor and outdoor play, often called free play. Several Scandinavian researchers view play and negotiations in play as free and democratic practices (Andersen and Kampmann 1996; Broström 2011; Alvestad 2012; Bae 2012; Østrem 2012). In play, children are deeply involved, contributing and participating. From the point of view of children, play is an important arena for joining in (Corsaro 2003; Søbstad 2004; Öhman 2006; Østrem et al. 2009). Researchers investigating children’s perspectives depict how children construct democratic values in their peer play groups (Johansson 2007; Karlsson 2009). Researchers also depict how children make patterns, routines and rules for access and interaction in play (Löfdahl and Hägglund 2006; Corsaro 2009; Skånfors 2010; Grindheim 2011). The latter contributions challenge research that addresses play as a naturally democratic activity, since not all children have equal access to play. This is a challenge for the children involved, and indicates that play is not always a democratic activity. My contribution in addressing this challenge is to examine play more closely, understood as an activity of major relevance for child-citizens and an activity that involves various ways of participating. This article is therefore structured around the question: *How do different kinds of play constitute different ways of participating?* The aim is to trace conditions for participation in play, and thereby indicate ways of expanding the conditions that govern children’s ability to exercise their citizenship.

Theoretical framework

Before presenting the methods used and findings from my fieldwork, I will set out the theoretical framework and concepts for analysing the findings. The main aim was to investigate the conditions for democratic participation contextualised in play. This aim requires a description of the conceptual understanding of democracy, democratic education and democratic participation, and an approach to play.

There are various understandings of what play is. The ambiguity of play makes it hard to define (Sutton-Smith 1997). It is crucial, therefore, to keep in mind the fact ‘that play is an essential aspect of early childhood education in its own right’ (Singer 2013, 174). From the teachers’ perspective, play can easily be reduced to a way of learning, a concept of freedom or a healthy occupation for joyful interaction. In addition, research highlights teachers’ strong preferences with regard to what good play is (Tullgren 2004; Øksnes 2011; Bratterud, Sandseter, and Seland 2012; Helgesen 2012). As a former teacher and now a researcher, I also have an idea of what good play is, and this may prevent me from noticing the varieties of play that the children engage in. I did not start, therefore, by

conceptualising play. Instead, I focused on children's participation in a variety of activities in three Norwegian ECE institutions. This served to facilitate a move away from an adult-centred view of citizenship. The focus on the ongoing activities also helped me to avoid the perhaps impossible challenge of defining play (van Oers 2013).

By focusing on the activities that constitute different forms of participation, including activities that may not have previously been thought of as play, it may be possible on closer analysis to identify a broader variety of play. This 'closer' analysis is based on the common characteristics of play that researchers have identified, despite their different approaches: the deep involvement of play, the aggregating aspect of play, the self-motivation of play and the fact that play themes are rooted in children's lived experiences (Schousboe 1999; Lillemyr 2011). From the child's point of view, play is a multitude of ways of being in the world; children play no matter what psychologists, teachers or cultural researchers call their activity.

Like many of the researchers exploring democracy in ECE in a Nordic context, my understanding of democracy is based upon my interpretation of Gert Biesta (2006, 2011). He states that the desire for a particular mode of human togetherness is, in short, a desire for democracy (Biesta 2011, 152). Involvement in play can be seen as an arena where child-citizens have a strong desire for belonging. I consider the desire for belonging to be universal for humans, although the ways in which communities are structured are the results of ongoing historical, relational and contextual processes, and represent ways of making it possible for people to live together in justice. The structures or constitutions of a community can be called a democracy, but the democratic process is the ongoing evolution of systems towards more equity (Biesta 2011). Biesta's (2011) view that the ignorant citizen is a possible contributor in democratic processes makes his approach of key relevance to my research among child-citizens. In my understanding, democracy as a way of life, in which everyone participates and forms their community in solidarity according to democratic values such as the equal worth of all humans, is a utopia; every community must contend with inequality and intolerance to a greater or lesser degree. Nevertheless, living together according to democratic values is a guiding ideal for my research, which entails an ongoing struggle to encourage the development of communities towards this ideal.

Biesta's approach to democracy enables me to widen my concept of democratic education that builds on Etienne Wenger's (1998) perspective. According to Wenger, participation is social and mediated, and interwoven with the context and the ongoing activity of the community involved. The ongoing activity shapes a community of practice that is constituted by joint enterprise, mutual engagement and a shared repertoire. I consider the different instances of play that the children join in with, or want to join in with, to constitute the current and contextual 'enterprise'. From this perspective, the specific play (or enterprise) constitutes reified ways to participate. Building on Wenger (1998), there is a mutual dependency in the ongoing activity between participation and conditions for participation (reifications in Wenger's vocabulary).

Biesta (2006) is critical of learning approaches such as Wenger's (1998) when it comes to democratic education, mainly because these approaches describe how to educate children through participation in dialogues in already established communities. To be socialised in an already existing community, in which the ways of participation are defined beforehand (reified), requires adaption to communities of equals, Biesta (2006) argues.

He goes on to stress that democracy is not a static concept of socialisation; it is created and evolves in accordance with the range of different participants who are living together in their contexts, in a 'world of plurality and difference' (Biesta 2006, 9). This view requires ways of conceptualising participation that allow for changes in systems towards more equity. To meet this requirement, Wenger's conceptualisation of participation offers limited help. Neither Hart's ladder of participation (Hart 1992, 1997), which illustrates a variety of ways to participate in educational contexts, nor the interesting Mosaic approach (Clark 2005; Clark and Moss 2011), in which children's participation through multiple voices is taken seriously, helps me to conceptualise a form of participation that indicates change. To meet this challenge, I take as a starting point Biesta's 'pedagogy of interruption', in which the focus is on participation that is not considered appropriate (Biesta 2006, 2010). As reification and participation are viewed as mutually dependent, I consider that the ways in which children interrupt play can facilitate the identification of reified challenges by which children enter or influence the playing community of peers. 'Interruptive participation' is operationalised as participation that is ignored or sanctioned by practitioners or children, as something that should not be done. This kind of participation may initiate a qualitative change in the playing community, if the community makes space for it. According to Biesta, not all interruption is of interest, only participation that may envision ways of living together in plurality and greater equity. Meeting another approach or seeing another person as differently equal is not the same as accepting or making space for participation that undermines democratic ideals (Ødegaard 2013).

Since the specific play, here seen as the joint enterprise, is connected to both reification and participation, I consider that participation that does not interrupt reified understandings of how to participate in play is also of interest in order to gain an understanding of children's access to, and involvement in, play. I turn, therefore, to Carl Cohen (1971) for a conceptualisation of participation that does not interrupt. Cohen (1971) understands a democracy as a community in which everybody has the opportunity to influence decisions that are of importance for their life. He views this understanding as a utopian way of living together, but the ultimate goal is to challenge regulations that limit these opportunities. In line with my understanding of Cockburn (1998), Cohen (1971) states that the ways citizens participate, inhabit, negotiate and challenge the given conditions for participation indicate how democratic their constitutions are. According to Cohen (1971), different ways of participating, both quantitatively and qualitatively, can indicate the breadth, depth and range of democracy. Breadth is a quantitative factor that indicates how many individuals have the opportunity to influence decisions. Breadth of democracy is crucial for all forms of democratic participation, because democracy depends on participation. Depth of democracy concerns how people participate, their involvement in the ongoing participation (qualitative factor). Range of democracy relates to the number of individuals who influence the decisions made in the processes, as well as whether the authority of their voices is taken into account. Democracy can be expanded by widening the community with respect to its breadth, depth and range. Solhaug (2003) and Børhaug (2010) have operationalised this concept in Norwegian school and ECE contexts. In addition, Moen and Granrusten (2011) suggest Cohen's concept as a tool for understanding and analysing democratic processes in Norwegian ECE. However, while Cohen (1971) relates democracy primarily to participation, he does not problematise the values that are interwoven in the

ways of participation. I agree with Biesta (2011), who states that democratic participation needs reference to democratic values.

This article focuses on participation's 'breadth' and 'depth', participation as 'range of democracy' and participation as 'interruption', all with reference to democratic values. Observations from the field that indicate these ways of participation are seen as related to the specific activity (enterprise) that is being performed, and thereby provide insight into how different kinds of activities constitute different ways of participation. The physical, organisational and historical contexts in which the activity is embedded have been taken into account, depending on where the children participated and what activity they were engaged in.

Method, fieldwork and analysis

The empirical material analysed to gain an understanding of how different kinds of play constitute different ways of participation builds on my PhD thesis (Grindheim 2014). The material has been constructed from experiences gained during my ethnographically inspired fieldwork (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007) in three ECE institutions in an urban area of Norway. The institutions involved differed in terms of organisation and architecture, but all of them have approximately the same number of children. The fieldwork started in 2008 in the first kindergarten, and ended in the third kindergarten at the end of January 2012. In total, 69 days were spent in the three institutions.

Written logs, thick descriptions based on observations and written text from planned and impromptu conversations with both children and practitioners were the main methods. The main methods employed are recommended for preserving experiences in qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln 2008). The oldest children, who were five years old, were the primary subjects of observation and interaction. The conversations most often related to observed events and represented an attempt to understand why the involved parties participated in the way they did. The observations and conversations were written by hand. Most often, these hand-written texts were transferred to computer files as thick descriptions and written reflections on the same day. Local documents were also collected, such as information for parents, plans for the week, month or year, and overviews of how the days were structured and how the children were divided into fixed groups. In total, approximately the same amount of text was collected from the second and third institutions, while somewhat more was collected from the first.

While aware that children are positioned due to gender, ethnicity and class, it was not the children involved but the *activity* – the specific play, or enterprise in Wenger's conceptualisation – that constituted the empirical material for this analysis due to my research question. In order to grasp the relation between participation and conditions for participation (Wenger 1998), I performed a twofold analysis in accordance with my understanding of James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium's view of 'interpretive practice' (Holstein and Gubrium 2008). One analysis is inspired by ethnomethodology and represents how the written observations from the field were categorised as participation in breadth of participation, depth of participation, 'range of participation' or as 'interruptive participation'. This analysis reveals *how* children participate. The other analysis is inspired by discourse analysis and involves identification of 'the constellation of procedures, conditions, and resources through which reality is apprehended, understood, organised, and conveyed

in everyday life' (Holstein and Gubrium 2008, 174). This reveals *what* makes this way of participation possible. In this article, the aim of this analysis is to envision and enable a broader understanding of the conditions for participation in different kinds of play. In line with my overall aim of understanding ECE from a perspective close to the children's, these conditions are identified by children's participation. Since participation in which children were deeply involved and engaged was related to what they were doing and where they were doing it, this facilitates the tracing of the conditions for participation in the various contexts. This reveals areas of importance in which child-citizens can be involved as 'different citizens'.

Findings

When summarising the children's participation revealed in the articles that made up my thesis, it was apparent that in-depth participation often involves participation in activities that appear to be play. In these play activities, the children were involved and engaged. They discussed and framed the play in relation to the established conditions for participation. Nevertheless, after categorising the participation according to my theoretical framework, these 'in-depth' involvements did not appear to be an obvious arena for democratic participation.

To illustrate my findings, I examine participation in three different kinds of play: role play, jigsaw puzzles and 'hide-and-seek'. Since the aim of this article is to trace conditions for participation in play, and thereby indicate ways of expanding the conditions that govern children's ability to exercise their citizenship, the empirical material is presented as previously categorised. The following comparison of children's participation in these examples lays the foundation for the summary and concluding remarks.

Participation in role play

Children's participation in play in which their negotiation of access or involvement is evident (Grindheim 2011) can first and foremost be categorised as in-depth participation. The depth of engagement illustrates how important it is for the children to be a part of the playing activity. I interpreted this as suggestive of child-citizens' expression of 'desire for belonging'.

With regard to one aspect of my twofold analysis, I employed an approach inspired by discourse analysis to identify patterns in children's argumentation: how they argued and what they argued about in their efforts to gain access to play or to have a say in how and what to play. The most obvious patterns seemed to relate to friendship, age, control over play artefacts, whether the play scene was already set, and how long the children had been in the kindergarten (Grindheim 2011). These patterns were not fixed, and the play themes, patterns for involvement and ways to play could change during play. These interaction patterns can be considered reified conditions for participation (Wenger 1998). Furthermore, these conditions are easy to recognise as participation patterns in a broader context. For example, researchers illustrate the importance of friendship for children in ECE (Corsaro 2003; Greve 2009). The value of having friends is embedded in the curriculum for ECE in Norway, as well as in our Western society in which friends seem to cover needs that were once met by the extended family. Similarly, age is a culturally accepted way

of dividing people into groups; age determines when one starts school, when one can vote and the price of a bus ticket. In the study institutions, the children were divided into groups according to age. In addition, the fact that artefacts are used to constitute, perform and negotiate power in early childhood institutions (Nilsen 2000; Skånfors 2010) means that control over artefacts resembles control over economic capital – ownership of land was once a criterion for voting in Norway. Finally, the ability to adapt to a scene that is already set can be understood as the main idea underlying inclusion in educational practices, which is in line with the way newcomers are expected to adapt to that which is already established, often both in educational cultures and in democracies (Biesta 2007).

With regard to the other aspect of my twofold analysis, which was inspired by ethnomethodology and focused on categorising children's participation, I found that there were significant differences in the in-depth participation due to variations in the conditions of participation. The patterns identified above were not easy for a child in a lower position in the peer group to relate to. For a child aged four who is new at the kindergarten and has therefore not yet made any friends, it is hard to gain access to play started by five-year-old children, who are friends and have attended the kindergarten since they were a year old. With regard to 'range of participation', this child is not entitled to influence the decision, and his/her voice is not taken into account as s/he argues to join in; s/he lacks authority. In accordance with my categorisation, the number of children involved in these play activities seldom increased (participation in breadth). In addition, interruptive participation, which affected the conditions, was infrequent; for example, with respect to the age condition, there were often negotiations when a child claimed to be older than his age, but I did not observe any child challenging the age condition, for example, by referring to his knowledge of how to play the game.

These play activities appeared to provide vital experiences for the children involved. For children who fulfilled the required conditions, the 'range of participation' was easy to map. The children's play activities progressed by means of a variety of options and improvisations. For those involved, the game in progress offers various ways of participating; for example, if playing a family, ways of participation might include playing the roles of father, mother or baby, an aunt or a grandmother coming to visit, or even a family cat. The theme of the ongoing play offers many options. There is also participation that interrupts the condition for involvement in the ongoing play, provided if most of the conditions are met; for example, if a friend of the children in the ongoing play negotiates to join in, there is often room for another. It is possible for those involved to take into account the interruptive participation, thereby expanding ways to play in plurality and equitability.

A closer examination of the play activities in my analysis reveals that most appear to be so-called role play, play in which children have to take others' perspectives and cooperate in order to sustain the activity. The children were playing families of humans or animals, or they were playing different roles linked to Lego constructions or other artefacts such as toy cars and balls. As long as there are few conflicts, this kind of play often proceeds quietly. The scene for such play is often limited to a specific place. Even if this play activity involves a family travelling from, say, Norway to Africa, it is organised and easy to understand from the practitioner's point of view. This kind of play is often regarded as 'good play', and is frequently presented, analysed and evaluated by play researchers.

On the basis of my material, it is evident that role play involves a variety of participation for some of the children in the kindergarten, and this is a form of participation that can be interpreted as democratic participation. Nevertheless, there is a problem with child-citizens' desire to participate in these valuable play communities in ECE, when it is virtually impossible for some of the children to challenge the conditions for participation.

Participation in jigsaw puzzles

Children's participation when doing jigsaw puzzles (Grindheim 2012) can, like the role play, be categorised first and foremost as in-depth participation.

With regard to the analysis inspired by discourse analysis, I 'traced the biographies of things' (Tilley 2009); in this case, the 'things' are jigsaw puzzles. Jigsaw puzzles have been in use since 1760 to promote the individual learning of mathematics, patience and concentration (Sutton-Smith 1986). In the old books that I studied during my teacher training, jigsaw puzzles are introduced as games for adaptation, concentration, observation and recollection that limit creativity and authentic experiences (Balke 1979; Rasmussen and Broström 1982). In the light of these characterisations, jigsaw puzzles would not be expected to lay a foundation for democratic participation. These assumptions were also confirmed by my fieldwork. In the actual kindergarten, jigsaw puzzles were used as an artefact for organising the daily activity in the period between lunch and outside play. Since the cloakroom was too small to cater for all 18 children at once, the children had three choices as to what to do after finishing their lunch: to go directly to the cloakroom, get dressed and go outside; to play with building blocks in one of the rooms; or to do jigsaw puzzles in the second room. One of the three practitioners employed in this group helped the children to get dressed, one had her lunch break and the third was outdoors with the children who were most eager to go outside. There were no practitioners in the two rooms for building blocks or jigsaw puzzles, but the practitioner in the cloakroom was close by and could hear what was going on. The children were aware of the practitioner's 'hidden' presence; she interfered with their interactions if someone was hurt, but did not intervene as rapidly as in other contexts since she had a lot of children to help with their clothes. The children were free to stop their building or puzzles at any time and go to the cloakroom. The historical understanding of jigsaw puzzles, and the way they were used and organised in the context of rooms and routines, are viewed as reified conditions for participation (Wenger 1998).

With regard to my analysis, which was inspired by ethnomethodology, I focused on observations made when the children were putting together jigsaw puzzles. They did not isolate themselves, sitting quietly doing the jigsaws; instead, they competed with each other, and constructed rules for how to win or lose the jigsaw puzzle competitions. There were a variety of different ways to participate in this game. According to my theoretical framework, there was participation in breadth, as everyone in the room was included since they were all doing puzzles. In addition, both the number of children involved (participation in breadth) and their involvement in the activity (in-depth participation) increased as the children came closer to completing the picture in the puzzle. There was also in-depth participation in the negotiation of ways in which the puzzles should be done or what rules to play by. Moreover, a sense of 'range of participation' was evident; the authority of the children involved was taken into account since they had to

adjust the rules with whoever they were playing with; no loser would bother to stay in the room if he lost the game all the time. The way these children did their jigsaw puzzles also interrupted the common understanding of how these should be used. It was possible to develop new and alternative ways of participating in this activity, due to the organised movement from the meal to outside play. This was a joint activity in which the challenge was to balance ways of playing and find new ways of doing the puzzles, rather than to complete the puzzles in an isolated, intellectual and adaptive activity.

Doing the jigsaw puzzles involved a variety of ways of participating, since the children had to establish the rules for the activity with the persons involved. Thus, the community of children managed to balance the play with a certain degree of equity. The children involved were making a qualitative change that would increase equity in the educational culture, in a structured time space, and in relation to the fixed material of jigsaw puzzles. In accordance with my understanding of Biesta, the children's participation in this play activity enabled them to experience ways of living together that were closer to the utopian ideal of democracy.

Being closer to a child-citizen perspective, this kind of play is an easier way to join in, and hence to belong to the desired community of playing peers, than the previously analysed role play. The fact that the activities were organised in time and in specific rooms as a part of the routine did not create difficult conditions that could limit ways of joining in with this game. Time and space for the jigsaw puzzle activity was not labelled as playtime on the daily timetable for this kindergarten; it was simply a way to smooth the flow from being inside to going outside. As a play researcher, I would not have chosen this time of the day to study children's play but, having spent time with the children and experienced how they participate in activities in their everyday life, I discovered that these routines were also interesting as play.

Participation in hide-and-seek

Children's participation in games of hide-and-seek (Grindheim 2013) can, like making jigsaw puzzles and role play, first and foremost be categorised as in-depth participation. However, all of my categories of participation were present in the material, including participation 'in breadth', 'in depth', as 'range of participation' and as 'interruptive participation'.

With regard to my analysis inspired by discourse analysis, it was of interest that all of the categories of participation were often evident at the changeover from an activity organised in small groups to an activity for all the children or vice versa; or during the changeover from being inside to going outside. This was in an open-plan kindergarten, where there was no way of closing off the two floors, which were connected by stairs in the middle of the building, and moveable walls except for the rooms designed for specific learning activities. This architecture reflects the growth of neoliberalism in Norwegian society, which stresses the importance of the individual child's 'free choice' regarding where to play and with whom (Kjørholt and Seland 2012). Conditions for the varieties of participation being investigated seem to be an announcement by the practitioners declaring, for example, that it is 'tidying-up time', or other changeover situations within the daily routines. When tidying-up time was announced, the children paired up with whomever they were close to and rushed, for example, behind a wall. When I asked

them what they were doing, they told me they were hiding from the practitioners. The open plan provided many suitable places to hide, from which the children were able to watch any practitioners who were trying to find them. The daily routines were quite strict because all of the children (80) had to pass through the narrow cloakroom to get outside to play and come in again; thus, the schedule for the use of the cloakroom had to be followed. The structure of the kindergarten, the daily routines and the children's reconstruction of the 'tidying-up time' announcement are viewed as reified conditions for participation.

With regard to the ethnomethodological analysis, the children's participation in these observations was categorised as participation in breadth; the more children involved, the more the fun of hiding seemed to escalate. They were also deeply involved in this activity, discussing where to hide, how to do it, and eventually when to give up hiding. The participation not only among the children but also between the children and the practitioners can be categorised as 'range of democracy'. Among the children, this was evident in the way those hiding listened carefully to each other regarding when to surrender; the authority of the children who wanted to surrender was taken into account. Among children and practitioners, this was evident in the way the practitioners were forced to 'find' the children and take them to the planned activity; the practitioners had to take into account what the children wanted to do, so the authority of the children's voices was taken into account here as well. By not following instructions, the children interrupted the daily schedule and the child-practitioner power balance and control over the routines of the day. Thus, the educational culture changed qualitatively towards more equity.

I understand the children's hiding from the practitioners as children were simply playing hide-and-seek and they enjoyed it. By joining the children and trying to share their perspectives, I learned that the hiding indicated that the children liked to play this game, together with the practitioners. This understanding was confirmed when the children told me that the practitioners were not very good at playing, apart from 'catching them', a comment that was accompanied by broad smiles. This activity was certainly not labelled as playtime in the daily routines of this kindergarten; it was not planned. From a child-citizen perspective, this kind of play is the easiest way of joining in and thereby belonging to the desired community of playing peers, compared to both the jigsaw puzzles and the role play analysed above. This game of hide-and-seek appeared to be more fun the more children and practitioners involved.

Concluding remarks

The play activities presented here differ in terms of the conditions for participation. The hide-and-seek game appeared to be the easiest form of play to join in with. Doing the jigsaw puzzles, which was organised as a structured activity with 'space' for children to define their own procedures, also appeared to be accessible to any children who wanted to be involved. In contrast, the role play appeared to be the hardest to join in with for the children who did not fulfil the constructed patterns for participation. Research on play in ECE reveals many interesting suggestions regarding the advantages of role play or pretend play. I fully applaud this research, but the over-focus on this kind of play may have cast a shadow on other kinds of play. My findings question the accepted

understanding of what good play may be, and thereby challenge the settled play system. It stresses the need for conditions that allow for multiple ways of playing, in order to extend the playing contexts qualitatively.

In line with the starting point of my article, play is understood as activities that frame ways of participating, in which children are deeply involved, and as a culturally determined phenomenon, which is characterised by limited freedom due to contextual conditions for participation (reifications). Nevertheless, children as ‘child-citizens’ do challenge, change and interrupt the given conditions, using a variety of participation forms. This way of understanding play, combined with my understanding of Biesta’s (2011) validation of the ignorant citizen, provides new insight into research about both play and citizenship. By giving serious consideration to relations in play activities, which child-citizens themselves appear to consider important and which can be viewed as democratic participation in their everyday lives, these findings challenge the accepted ways of structuring children’s conditions for enacting their citizenship in non-formal settings such as play.

Disclosure statement

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