

Participation and gender in circle-time situations in preschool

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This study sought to investigate participatory values in relation to gender, as expressed in interactions between teachers and children in circle-time situations in Swedish and Norwegian preschools. This paper reports evidence from three research questions: How is children's participation conditioned in circle-time situations? How are participatory values communicated to girls and boys? and What gender-related patterns emerge in teacher–child interactions in circle-time situations? The study is informed by Habermas' concepts of strategic and communicative actions, as well as Davies' idea of duality, the bi-polarity, between femininity and masculinity. Data consist of video observations of teacher and child interactions during circle time. The results show that children's participation is conditional on children's own willingness to participate, and on teachers' willingness to involve the children in a communicative action. Data reveal that the girls are more likely to take the initiative than boys and appear more comfortable in such an active position. It was also noted that there is a tendency for practitioners to interpret and value male and female traits as oppositional behaviours.

Keywords: participation; gender; circle time; preschool; Sweden; Norway

Introduction

Early educational activity in the Nordic countries is expanding rapidly and includes a marked increase in the number of one to two-year-olds attending preschool (Education Association 2010; Swedish National Board of Education 2009). The educational goals and visions expressed in both the Swedish and Norwegian preschool curricula (Norwegian Ministry of Education 2011; The Swedish National Agency for Education 2011) place strong emphasis on the education of children as regards democracy and equality, as well as addressing all forms of discrimination. Children's active participation is also a keyword in the respective countries' curriculum texts. From an international perspective, preschools in the Nordic countries are considered to be manifestly democratic institutions, and the education of children in these countries has been characterised by the term 'heard' children (OECD 2006; Sommer 2005). Educational policy in Norway and Sweden lays claim to a distinctive, shared ideology about children and childhood which includes fundamental values such as egalitarianism, emancipation, democracy and solidarity (Greve and Solheim 2010; Johansson and Emilson 2010; Wagner and Einarisdottir 2006). In essence, these countries display a shared community of values which aim to transmit a set of cultural ideals to preschool children.

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This study forms part of a larger project that aims to provide a national and cross-national corpus of practical and theoretical knowledge to inform future policy and teaching practices related to the fostering of values in early education in Nordic countries. The aim of this part of the study was to investigate participatory values in relation to gender, as expressed in interactions between teachers and children in circle-time situations in Swedish and Norwegian pre-schools. The research questions examined were: How is children's participation conditioned in circle-time situations? How are participatory values communicated to girls and boys? and What gender-related patterns emerge in teacher-child interactions in circle-time situations?

The circle-time setting

Circle-time situations are of specific interest in this study. In Swedish and Norwegian contexts, such situations are viewed as important for learning in preschool. Circle time is characterised by tradition as well as structure, and can be seen as an institution that takes place regularly and with a similar structure at the same time every day. The framing of these concepts is often based on traditions rooted in Fröbel's (1974) ideas, among others, and with the teacher having responsibility for the substance and the delivery of circle time (Fennefoss and Jansen 2012; Johansson 1983). Research suggests that circle time can embrace elements from early childhood education and from school practices (Bjørnstad 2009; Haug and Schwandt 2003) and can provide space for events characterised by engagement, learning and cultural mediation (Østrem et al. 2009). Preschool teachers tend to put a considerable amount of effort into planning and structuring circle time, and the event appears as a symbol of the teaching profession in early education. Consequently, one challenge for teachers is how to reflect participatory values in situations which are dominated by structure, tradition and teacher control (Eide, Os, and Pramling Samuelsson 2012; Emilson and Johansson 2009; Rubinstein-Reich 1993; Simeonsdotter Svensson 2009; Sønstabø 1978).

Participatory values in relation to gender

In the present study, values are defined as qualities in social actions that teachers and children experience, express and negotiate and which can be framed as positive and negative, good and bad (Emilson 2008; Johansson 2007). Participation refers to taking part, being included, accepted and/or engaged in an area of life and having access to needed resources (Molin 2004). Gender is regarded as something that is done (doing gender) in social interaction where cultural notions about female/femininity and male/masculinity play a crucial role (West and Zimmerman 1991).

Research about children's participation and influence in preschool has shown that these values are limited and conditional on the teacher's attitudes, rules and power. Various forms of teacher control appear to limit and/or enable participation in preschool. When the teacher's control over the content is weak, children's participation is given space (Covell and Howe 2001; Eide, Os, and Pramling Samuelsson 2012; Emilson 2007, 2008; Emilson and Folkesson 2006; Fennefoss and Jansen 2012). Opportunities for children's participation rest within the teacher's commitment to including the child's perspective in aspects of their education, in teachers' emotional presence and their playfulness (Emilson 2008; Johansson 2011). Eide, Os, and Pramling Samuelsson (2012) investigated toddlers' participation in circle-time

settings in Norwegian preschools. They found that although the toddlers take part in the circle-time community, their ability to significantly influence either individual or collective issues was limited. Conversely, Westlund (2011) studied teachers' modes of working with young children's influence in the running and organising Swedish preschools. She found that teachers experience a tension between their own governance needs and giving children freedom of expression. Westlund concluded that teachers should be less concerned with how 'they govern the activities in preschool' and instead with 'how this is done' (188–189). Children's participation has also been discussed by Eriksen Ødegaard (2007) as a power issue between the teacher and the child. According to Eriksen Ødegaard, power shifts from the teacher to the child when the teacher moves from ignoring to involving a child's story in the educational activity. Bae (2004), who studied the dialogue between teachers and children, showed how adults and children develop together through reciprocal dialogue. The dialogue processes are metaphorically conceptualized as spacious or narrow. The spacious pattern can be related to education for democracy and is based on tolerance, sensitivity, understanding, the ability to communicate freely and to have one's intentions understood. According to Westlund (2011), children's ability to influence their setting is facilitated through the teachers' modes of working.

The different modes of working include creating room for children's action, creating possibilities for dialogue with children, supporting interaction between children, planning activities with the children's interests in mind, letting the children make choices and decisions and giving children opportunities to take responsibility. (Westlund 2011, 175)

She also notes that teachers' democratic approaches are individually oriented.

Of interest to this study is whether gender patterns influence participation in preschool. On the one hand, research has highlighted that boys in preschool dominate, initiate and interact with teachers to a significantly greater extent than girls. Despite teachers' beliefs that boys and girls were treated equally, Odelfors (1996) found that boys were given more space than girls during circle time, free time and at mealtimes. On the other hand, research suggests that girls seek and achieve greater influence over educational activities (Hellman 2010; Tallberg Broman et al. 2002). Davies (2003), for example, found that girls dominate space regarded as home-like, inner and private, whereas boys have greater control over the public spaces in preschool. Within the classroom, Davis noted that boys and girls are generally required to participate in a way that conforms to gender stereotypes. Where girls exert power in the domestic sphere, it can be overridden by boys if it violates traditional gender norms (Davies 2003). Similarly Johansson (1999, 2007) found that girls tend to be more subservient than boys according to defence of rights (Johansson 2007). It has also been noted that violations of traditional stereotypes are frequently ignored by teachers and friends who attempt to uphold gender stereotypes (Eidevald 2009; Hellman 2010).

Theoretical foundations

In order to interpret and understand the communication between teachers and children, Habermas' (1995) concept of strategic and communicative actions employs two different forms of communication in which the intentions behind actions may differ markedly. Strategic action is goal and success-oriented, and the communicative action

is oriented towards mutual understanding. This theory is based on the idea of communication as a created understanding between people. This in turn requires communication which is free from distortion and misunderstanding that is rooted in power, status, prestige, fear or insecurity (Habermas 1995). A communicative action is defined by Habermas (1995) as an act by which we maintain interpersonal relationships characterised by openness, reciprocity and mutual understanding. This effort necessarily involves the recognition of other participants. Such a meeting between people is of an inter-subjective and symmetrical nature in the sense that the relationship is based on the equal worth of all people. The theory cannot, however, be applied easily to encounters between teachers and young children in the educational system. Here the idea that the communicative action is maintained by questioning and testing the validity of different opinions is particularly problematic. Maintaining communicative action between teachers and children therefore requires taking into account other forms of communication that can also be physical and non-verbal in nature. This theoretical approach has been used previously and developed by Emilson (2008). Emilson found that a communicative action between teachers and young children requires special qualities, which are described in terms of closeness to the child's perspective, emotional presence and playfulness. These qualities can be seen as a clarification of the communicative action as well as demonstration of the usefulness of the theory in relation to young children. It is important to emphasise that both strategic and communicative actions fall within pedagogical practice and that both these forms are rational in different ways. In this project, the focus is on the different ways of communication in relation to values currently employed in preschool settings.

To understand how ideas about gender manifest themselves in the communication of values, we consider the thinking of Davies (2003) on how gender is created in an active interaction with available gender discourses and gender positions. The assumption is that both one's own self-understanding and interpretation of life are characterised by the notion of a dichotomy between femininity and masculinity. The idea of duality and bi-polarity works in the sense that the actual spreading of traits, actions, etc., is forced into a simplified view of a bi-polar model. There is seldom any absolute connection between biological sex and social practices but because the dichotomy male/female is embedded in language and structures our thinking (Also West and Zimmerman 1991), it seems obvious that boys and girls experience things differently. If the bipolar model is permitted and even expected, then boys and men take up positions that are linked to power while girls and women are assigned positions that often involve adapting. During their preschool years children frequently explore these feminine and masculine positions as they strive to be recognised as socially competent. Children position themselves but they are also positioned by their surroundings in relation to the dominant gender discourse. According to Davies (2003), it is important to examine the gendered approaches adopted by teachers and children in terms of conformity and transgressions of gender stereotypes.

Method

The data consist of video observations of teacher and child interactions in circle-time situations. In order to broaden the inclusion of different conditions of preschool education, the fieldwork took place in Norwegian and Swedish preschools located in different types of residential areas. Six groups of children ($n = 121$ children, 56 boys and 65 girls), aged one to three years, from each country, as well as their teachers

($n=40$) participated in the study. In each group, the interactions between teachers and children were videotaped during circle-time situations, four times per group. The analyses include 48 circle-time situations, and the duration of the combined video content is approximately 840 minutes.

In order to understand the communication focused on participatory values, data are analysed based on Habermas' concepts of strategic and communicative actions. Additional analytical concepts are: approaching the child's perspective, emotional presence and playfulness. Davies' (2003) concepts of category maintenance and transgression informed the analysis of the gender-related patterns with a view to determining how they are maintained and/or transgressed. By identifying the expression of both category maintenance and transgression in relation to the studied values, it is assumed to be possible to understand how the values can have different meanings or be communicated in different ways through interactions with girls and boys. The first step in the analyses was to identify participatory values. The next step focused on constructions and meanings of gender in this communication related to the values. We have searched for category maintenance as well as transgressions of gender patterns. The posed questions presuppose some kind of gendered structures that are created and intertwined in human interactions; they also presuppose that gender patterns are multiple and can be transgressed.

Possible aspects of gender patterns and transgressions related to participatory values were discerned. In this phase of the analyses, gender patterns seemed complex and difficult to identify. However, certain aspects related to gender were recognised. The next step was to choose video observations that seemed to represent participatory values and where dimensions of gender could be identified. It was important to determine if and how teachers seemed to ascertain and/or oppose gender patterns and if expectations concerning being like a boy and like a girl seemed to influence the communication of values. The observations were scrutinised repeatedly in order to identify values connected to participation and if and how the communication of these values seemed to be connected to gender in terms of category maintenance as well as transgressions.

Ethical considerations were paramount to ensure that the study met the ethical requirements of each country (Backe-Hansen 2009). Written informed consent for the children's participation was obtained from each preschool's management, teachers and children's parents. Gatekeepers were notified that participation was voluntary and that the children could leave at any time. Care was taken to protect the children's identity. Personal information and videotapes have been separated and safely stored in locked cabinets.

Results

The analysis revealed that children's participation is conditioned on both their own willingness to participate by taking the initiative and teachers' willingness to offer children opportunities to participate. The children appeared to take the initiative by expressing an opinion, challenging normal practices and influencing the content of circle time. It was also found that teachers offer children individual and collective opportunities to participate in decision-making. They encourage children to make their own choices and to take the initiative.

To communicate participation the data show that a communicative action is needed. One interpretation is that teachers' intention is to come close to the

children's perspectives by listening carefully and by being sensitive to the children's different intentions and expressions: when a strategic action occurs the value of participation seems to vanish. This kind of action is often used when the teachers communicate different kinds of reprimands to maintain control over circle time. The analysis revealed that circle times presuppose social order – all the children are expected to participate and to sit still and properly. The children seem to be aware of, and often support and reconstruct, the structure and rules for this activity. In the communication between the teachers and the children, circle time is maintained both as an institution and a community.

Data indicate that certain children are given opportunities to participate under specific conditions. Gender might be such a condition but also other conditions can be involved here, for example, age, competence, initiatives, needs, position, ethnicity, structure and social order. However, the girls in the study are more likely to take more initiative during circle time than boys. On the other hand, masculinity appears as a cultural pattern that is communicated in an unreflecting way. This is, for example, shown in storytelling where different figures are given male identities. Possessing competences loaded with masculinity seems to be both encouraged and highly valued. Notwithstanding, the girls appear to be the most active participants in circle time.

To illustrate these conditions for children's participation in relation to the communication forms and gender, one circle-time situation has been chosen to exemplify the results. On the one hand, this example is representative because it covers the different conditions for participation found in data. On the other hand, it is unique because of the teachers' explicit attempts to encouraging gender transgressions; this latter point was much less obvious in other circle-time situations.

The setting (30 minutes)

The teacher Donna gathers the children and they begin to sit down on the cushions spread out on the floor in the room. The room is quite small and adapted for circle-time situations. In one of the walls there is a bookcase with material that is commonly used in circle times. A branch decorated with things the children have created is hanging from the roof. Seven children are involved in this interaction. The teacher Monica leads the activity. Donna supports her before starting up by keeping order, helping children to sit properly and to wait for circle time to start. Then Donna leaves the room.

The content of the circle time is a moral story told by the teacher, and the message is that everyone should have the opportunity to participate in a community. Participatory values are identified and seem to be central. The story also highlights the value of others' well-being and the importance of caring for others. There are various layers of values embedded in the interaction, the moral essence of the story and the moral meaning of the circle time in this particular group:

Not fun, Gary (2:3) says with hesitation in his voice. *What do you mean isn't fun*, asks the teacher Donna in a friendly tone. Donna sits together with the children on the floor. *No-ot fun*, Gary repeats. *But now we are going to have fun*, says Donna encouragingly. *Yea*, Gary answers. He takes a cushion and places it on the floor. *Ye-es, circle-time is a lot of fun you know*, repeats Donna in a cheerful voice. The teacher Monica enters the room. Donna gets up and turns towards Jack (1:1) who is sitting on a cushion in the circle. She places him next to Monica. *Circle-time*, says Jack and Monica responds and

repeats: *circle-time*. She continues: *Now we are going to have something that's fun for you too. Let's see what we can find...* Monica leaves the room to fetch some toys for Jack to fiddle with. Britney (2:1), Judy (2:8) and Gary are discussing circle-time seemingly assuming that it is not fun. Britney looks thoughtful and mumbles: *No-ot fun*. She looks at Monica when she enters the room again but Monica does not hear Britney's statement. Monica puts a little box with toys in front of Jack. Then Britney calls for Donna's attention: *Donna, not fun now! No, Gary says so, but you think circle-time is fun, right*, Donna objects. *Noo, not fun now*, Britney insists. *Not now? But now Monica is coming and I think she will do something fun during circle-time. What are you going to do?* Donna sounds enthusiastic. *It's a secret*, says Monica. *Not fun now*, says Britney and shakes her head. *Yes, now is it fun*, Donna insists in a determined voice. *Well let us see now...do I have everything now*, says Monica. She makes herself comfortable on the cushion and states that they have everything. *Not fun now*, Britney repeats. Monica leaves the room quickly again to fetch a lorry that is loaded with things. Monica says: *Look here? What is this? What is this*, she whispers. *Santa Claus*, Judy suggests. *Yes, it is a Santa and here we have....* says Monica. *Teddy Bear*, says Judy.

Monica takes all the things off the lorry. The children watch her curiously. *A lorry and a teddy bear and all the things here. Let's take them off first*, says Monica. Jack makes a little whoopee. Monica watches Jack as she is talking. She takes a figure out of the driver's cab. *Then we have a small figure here*, she says. *It's the girl...this girl knows how to drive a lorry. She is very talented. So she is going to drive this lorry today. Let's see where she will go*. Monica speaks in a playful voice. The children are observant. *Then I have a little book here so I can tell you this story*. Monica starts to drive the lorry around on the floor. *Here comes the girl who drives the lorry.... Brrrr. Whaaat?* Monica stops driving and places a Santa in front of the lorry. *Beep, beep, beep. Stop, stop, stop, there's the Santa standing and hanging around*. Monica is driving the lorry towards the Santa. All the children are silent. They are paying close attention. *He seems so lonely*, says Monica with a sad tone of voice and continues: *Then the girl asks: do you want to come with me. Yes, the Santa says. I want to come with you. Oh that's great, the girl says. Then I can go. Yes, then she starts driving again*. Monica uses her voice in different ways when she illustrates the story. When the Santa wants to go too, Judy quickly puts him on the back of the lorry. Monica drives. *Brrrrr. Can you sound like the track too*, she asks. The children sound: *Brrrrrrr*.

Monica continues to drive the lorry around the floor. Meryl says something inaudible and points at a tattoo on her elbow. She does not get any response from the teacher. She shows her arm to Dennis who is sitting next to her. Dennis looks at her arm. Monica puts a pig in front of the lorry. The lorry stops. *Here the pig is lying and brooding*, the teacher says. Judy bends over and picks up the pig and puts it on the lorry. *There you go, that's good, now the pig can go too*, says Monica. Britney looks at Judy and says: *Britney also pick. Watch out, here comes the girl who is driving again, here she comes... Brrrrrr*, says Monica. The pig and the Santa are going for a ride. Dennis talks to Meryl and shows her a tattoo on his arm. Monica touches Dennis's foot to indicate that she wants his attention again. Dennis stops talking with Meryl. Monica drives the lorry further. She picks up a small doll and lays it in front of the lorry. Judy gets up directly to put the doll on the platform. *Oh, now someone has fallen on the street! Stop, stop, stop*, says Monica and continues: *And then the girl asks like this: oh poor boy do you want to come with me? Yes*, Judy says. *Yes and he comes too, they are going with the girl*, says Monica and drives the lorry. *I have a tattoo of a tiger on my arm*, says Meryl and shows her arm. Monica watches and confirms: *Yes you have...* Several of the children begin to look at their arms. *Yea Britney also hit here*, says Britney and shows her arm. Monica confirms her by saying: *Yes you have something there too. Well now we will see who is next to go for a ride. Who is it now*, Monica asks and puts a new figure in front of the lorry. *Stop, stop, stop, now we stop again...and now the dog*

is going for a ride too, says the teacher. Quickly Judy picks up the dog and puts it on the lorry. *He is a little bit cold, the dog, but now I think he won't freeze anymore. He's got so many friends on the lorry*, says Monica. Monica shows physically how the dog freezes. *Hmmm*, the children agree. Monica puts a teddy bear in front of the lorry. Britney points at the lorry and says: *Britney pick*. Monica does not comment on Britney's initiative, instead she continues the story: *Well he is actually crying. He is a little bit sad*. She talks with compassion in her voice. Judy hops on her knees towards the lorry to put the teddy bear on the platform. Monica stops her and says: *Britney can put it on. That's good. Now it's Britney's turn to put it on*. She continues the story: *Oh he can go for a ride too. Thanks, thanks, thanks, the teddy bear says. I'm not sad anymore*. She sounds enthusiastic. *No-o*, confirms Judy. *I'm very happy now. And then they drive to the girl's house*. Monica takes the figures off the lorry and places them in a circle on the floor. Everyone sits quietly and watches when Monica shows the figures. *And then they're going to have a party*. After some small talk, Monica puts the figures on the lorry again but she gives one of them to Jack: *Do you want this one? There you are. Thanks*, says Jack quiet and with a light voice. *There you are*, says Monica. *Me too these*, Gary insists and sounds sulky. *He is allowed to have that because he is not so good at sitting still in circle-time. Do you remember that we have said that? But he is learning, Jack, he is learning*, says Monica and looks into Gary's eyes. After that the circle-time continues with another story.

Children taking the initiative

One condition for children's participation in circle-time situations seems to be that children take the initiative. This is, however, not enough; children's participation seems also conditional on the communication form used. The example above illustrates how children take the initiative to raise an issue as well as how a communicative and a strategic action affect the children's opportunities to participate. The event also points to some differences in the communication with the boys and the girls, which raises questions about whether these differences have something to do with gender.

Initially, we can follow how the children initiate an issue where the circle time in itself is evaluated. When Gary makes his statement *not fun*, the teacher asks him to exemplify his opinion. Her tone of voice is friendly and she seems interested in finding out why Gary does not like circle time. She does not, however, continue to ask for his opinion, but she assures Gary that circle time will be fun today, and Gary seems to agree with her. Donna communicates respect for the boy's perspective and for him as a person. She relates to Gary as someone able to express and experience meaning, at least on a discursive level. In this way she communicates participatory values, respect and perhaps also equality. It also seems that Donna wants Gary to experience circle time in a positive way and probably she wants him to change his opinion about the activity. The communication form is communicative in character and includes dimensions of closeness to the child's perspective and an emotional presence by being sensitive to the child's intentions.

As the interaction continues and Britney takes the initiative to participate in the communication, the teacher's interpretation of the circle time becomes more dominating. The intrinsic value of circle time appears to be significant to the teacher. When Britney takes up the thread about circle time as not fun her opinion gets a different response than Gary's. At first, neither of the teachers picks up on her statement. When Britney repeats her opinion directed towards Donna, the teacher counters Britney's point of view. First, she refers Britney's statement to another child (Gary) and then she rejects the statement. She insists that the children like circle time

and that this event will soon be fun. Here, the communication form seems to change from a communicative action to a more strategic action. The teacher seems goal-oriented and she uses power to reach her goal regardless of the children's opinions. The participatory values seem to vanish, and the disciplinary value of adaptation can be discerned.

The intention behind the communication is unknown but some questions can be raised. Is this kind of communication related to taken-for-granted expectations of gender? Is it because Britney is a girl that her opinion does not count, either as her own opinion or as adequate? Or can this be related to Britney as a specific child in this specific group of children, irrespective of gender? Is this related to the fact that circle time has an intrinsic and positive value for the teachers and the possibility that Britney's position will be adopted by the other children and result in a negative atmosphere? Can this be related to the framing of the situation per se, where the teacher's position is to support the structure of the event and to allow the other teacher to introduce the theme of the story?

Later on, the children initiate another issue about tattoos. Also in this sequence values related to both participation and discipline can be identified. First, we can see how Meryl starts the discussion about tattoos. She shows her arm to Dennis and a few minutes later Dennis shows his tattoo and talks with Meryl about it. Then the teacher touches Dennis' foot. He interrupts his communication with Meryl and is silent. The teacher persists in her intention to continue the story. One possible interpretation is that she uses bodily touching as a tool for discipline. With this gentle gesture she reminds him that he should be quiet and not interrupt the storytelling. Dennis seems to understand the gesture. Another possible interpretation is that the bodily touching is intended to involve the child in the storytelling. But what we can see in this example is the fact that Dennis becomes silent and he seems to remain passive rather than participating in the continuing creation of the story.

In contrast to the previous sequence about the statement that circle time is not fun, it is now a boy who is neglected and corrected. The value of discipline is communicated by a gentle touch. The teacher uses her power in a friendly way to maintain control over the content. The communication with the girls seems different. When Meryl and Britney continue the discussion about tattooing, the teacher responds. She looks at their arms and confirms their statements. But very soon she returns to the story. It is now the girls who receive response from the teacher. This participation appears to be extremely temporary. On the surface, the value of participation and the right to raise your voice are given to the girls. But still, this right is subordinated by the teacher's intention to tell a story. Thus, no clear gender pattern is revealed but we can see that the teachers respond differently to the children's initiatives during circle time. In the first sequence (circle time is not fun), the boy seems to be respected and his statement leads to the teacher's interest and questions. On the other hand, the girl's initiative does not seem to be taken seriously, which results in limited communication from the teacher. The opposite seems to happen in the tattoo sequence. When a boy interacts with one of the girls, this result in (friendly) reprimanding but when one of the girls interacts with one of the boys, there is no reprimand. Instead, the teacher takes up the thread and a short communication follows. One might wonder if being a girl sometimes means not being taken seriously and being a boy sometimes means being reprimanded. Inequality appears to apply to both boys and girls. In both cases, this leads to a lack of participation.

Children being involved

Being involved by the teachers is another condition for children's participation. The analysis revealed that the children are invited to participate both individually and collectively. Also this condition is dependent on a more communicative action. Related to gender, it is obvious that the girls are more involved in circle time than the boys. In the example referred to, it is shown that the girls are more involved in the narrative than the boys. An attempt to transgress gender is also revealed.

The teacher offers the children opportunities to participate both individually and collectively in the story. Judy takes the initiative to put the animals on the lorry, which the teacher allows; it could be said that she offers a form of individual participation. At the same time, it is the teacher who controls the content as well as how this content is communicated. Usually, such strong teacher control results in a strategic action, but the communication form here is of a more communicative nature since she is emotionally present, uses a playful tone of voice and seems to be oriented towards mutual understanding. The children seem interested and they listen carefully. But it is the teachers who own and initiate circle time. The teachers create the agenda and they decide the conditions for the content and for how to participate. Some of the girls are active in setting up the narrative. They take the initiative to participate and the teacher supports their initiatives. Nevertheless, their initiatives are primarily restricted to following and supporting the storytelling. The teacher does not explicitly involve all children in creating the story; it seems to be up to each child to get involved. Anyone can join, but no explicit invitation is given to everyone. But as a group, all the children are encouraged to participate collectively by, for example, sounding like a lorry. This, however, poses an important question: Is this genuine participation of real significance for the individual child or for the preschool community?

The girls are active in reconstructing the story. The boys seem to take a more passive position compared to the girls when they do not take the initiative to take part in the narrative. Perhaps one can say that the content of the story, and the storytelling concerns areas that traditionally refer to expectations about being as a girl. The girls also support the teacher in reconstructing circle time. This might indicate that active positions for participation in the storytelling are offered to girls and can be easier for the girls to maintain while more passive positions in the storytelling are offered to the boys and may be easier for them to maintain.

However, what is of specific interest in the narrative is the teachers' decision to let a girl drive the lorry. This is a conscious choice and the teacher emphasises that this girl is very competent because she can drive a lorry. This gives cause for reflection. One interpretation is that this might be a form of gender transgression when the teacher tries to communicate equality and reduce differences between boys and girls. Nevertheless, a compensatory approach to the value of being a girl seems to be embedded here. The teacher emphasises that girls are competent and with this she also indicates a comparison with boys. This statement might on the contrary lead to the opposite of the intended value of equity. It becomes remarkable and unusual that a girl drives a lorry. The fact that all animals are given male identities is also taken for granted. Possessing competences loaded with masculinity (driving a lorry) seems to be both encouraged and highly valued.

Conclusions

The aim of this study was to investigate participatory values in relation to gender, as expressed in interactions between teachers and children in circle-time situations in Swedish and Norwegian preschools. The study examined three questions: How is children's participation conditioned in circle-time situations? How are participatory values communicated to girls and boys? and What gender-related patterns emerge in teacher-child interactions in circle-time situations? Conclusions are presented below.

Children's participation is conditional on their willingness to participate and on their teachers' willingness to facilitate their active participation. Two dilemmas were discerned. One concerned the tension between collective and individual needs, and the other the power differential. The collective can be viewed as important and highly valued in circle-time situations. Similar to previous studies, findings reveal that teachers place importance on bringing children together on a daily basis in circle-time situations with a view to communicating information and reinforcing collective actions (Kärby 1990; Rubinstein-Reich 1993; Simeonsdotter Svensson 2009). Where children become actively engaged in the process they can influence pedagogical practices. Supported by their teacher, like Judy in the example given, some children continuously take the initiative. Active participation has in a previous study (Emilson and Johansson 2009) been interpreted as a collectively oriented value, while other democratic values such as exerting influence and negotiating were interpreted as individual traits. Given our findings suggest that active participation is often an individual rather than a collective trait, and it might be concluded that democracy in preschool is highly individual-oriented. Further research is however warranted to examine these findings in greater detail.

The other dilemma concerns the power differential between teachers and children. Participation in circle time is mandated with all of the children are expected to participate and to behave in certain ways. At the same time the results indicate that children are present on their own terms and control the degree to which they are involved and participate in the circle-time event. Some children are very active. Others listen and seem to enjoy the event, some appear ambivalent and others act as though forced to participate. Given the results of this study, it seems appropriate to question the nature of young children's participation. For example, is participation characterised by a child producing a sound, such as a lorry, at the request of the teacher? If so, we strongly argue that this over simplification ignores the complexity of active participation.

Further, we argue that communicative action is necessary if the intention is to communicate participatory values. Supporting previous research, the results suggest that the what-aspect of communication (the value) is interrelated with the how-aspect (Emilson and Johansson 2009; Johansson 2011). Our findings suggest that circle-time activities are delivered in a friendly atmosphere where teachers strive to understand the children's perspectives. In the main, we found teachers were emotionally present and playful in their communications with children. These qualities are viewed as important for a communicative action with young children and for the communication of participatory values (also Emilson 2008). Communication varies, however, and sometimes a more strategic action takes shape and the dimensions above seem to be reduced. This happens when the teacher wants to maintain control over the communication and when they use reprimands in different ways. At the same time

as the communication of participatory values seems to assume a communicative action, this analysis also shows how it appears to vary in relation to a number of aspects. For example, the teachers communicate differently depending on the child involved, the subject raised and their own professional intentions. Gender aspects might be involved here, but there are various possible interpretations. The teachers' ambition to override the dual categories of male and female can be identified in the example given but is uncommon in the rest of the material. In the example given, this ambition, however, seems to vanish as the interactions proceed. Taken-for-granted ideas about masculinity and femininity seem to influence the communication in spite of the teacher's intention to override dual categories.

Another conclusion is that the girls take more initiative in circle times than the boys do, and that boyishness (masculinity) seems to be the norm according to which girlishness (femininity) is interpreted and valued. However previous research has shown that boys were given more space than girls during circle time despite teachers' beliefs that boys and girls were treated equally (Månsson 2011). This study suggests that girls take the initiative and achieve participation and influence in educational activities to a greater extent than boys (also Hellman 2010; Tallberg Broman et al. 2002). It must, however, be emphasised that gender patterns in the communication of participatory values are complex and difficult to identify. Few examples were noted concerning transgressions or the maintenance of gender categories, which is why our conclusions must be tentative. It must also be emphasised that the data reported here are based on one setting. Even though this interplay was chosen to represent the wider study, it may not fully reflect practices in other settings. Whilst, the study indicates that gender might be involved in the communication of values, it fails to determine whether the gender differences reported here reflect gender practices *per se* or simply reflect individual differences. We have already suggested that some children are given opportunities to participate under specific conditions, conditions that can be related to age, competence, initiatives, needs, gender, position, ethnicity, structure, social order, etc. A gender pattern observed, however, is that boyishness (masculinity) is the norm according to which girlishness is interpreted and valued. Although this dichotomy is largely unspoken, it is evident in the roles allocated to males and females in stories and songs with masculinity presented as being more highly valued than femininity. Although boys and girls engage equally in circle time, it seems to be easier for girls to adopt a more active participatory position than boys. Further research is warranted to determine whether the issues identified here are setting culturally specific or reflect practices that serve to replicate dominant gender stereotypes.

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