

## Supporting Child Participation in the Early Years of Education

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### Abstract

*This paper aims to contribute to conversations around child participation within early childhood settings in Australia. Ethnographic approach was used for this study to explore child participatory workshops in Early Childhood Centers. The center in which this study took place was chosen as one of the sites of analysis for a broader PhD research project. Data were collected at the Early Childhood site using a variety of collection tools deemed child friendly amongst educators who conducted participatory workshops. By examining the pedagogical actions of the center, this paper explores six of their practices which support child participation. The findings provide practical applications of examples of practices which may be adopted by early childhood educators.*

**Keywords:** child participation, early childhood centers, early years, ethnography.

### Introduction

The inclusion of child participation for the first time in Australian policy context of the National Quality Standards was made in 2009 and it highlighted the need for a focus on participation by those involved in early childhood education. It is important that children should be involved in decision making when they are being affected by the decisions made by adults (United Nations, 1989). However, there is currently sparse Australian research which explores how children and their educators can be supported in exploring their experiences in participatory ways in early childhood settings (Theobald, Danby & Ailwood, 2011). Further, there is a minimal discussion around practical suggestions of what participation looks like for children and their educators. The reason may lie in the difficulty

that arises when doing research with young children. James, Jenks and Prout (1998) are of the view that when working with young children, the researcher is able to achieve most authentic results through ethnography. The researcher during the research must also keep in mind the continual ethical consideration that revolves around a child's consent (Alderson, 2005).

This paper summarizes child participation policy relevant to Australian early childhood education. It then provides an overview of the center where this research occurred. Finally, it outlines six practices observed at this center by considering practical and meaningful ways participation can be implemented within early childhood education through ethnography. Each of these practices support children in experiencing early childhood education in a participatory way. This research study aims to contribute to the discussions around child participation in early childhood centers and offer practical and meaningful suggestions for early childhood educators to uptake within their own practices and centers. Although this paper specifically considers the participative practices of one center in the Australian context, the paper may have a wider application both at a domestic and international context.

## **Literature Review**

Over 25 years ago, the official acknowledgement of children's participatory rights was adopted by the United Nations with the Convention of the Rights of the Child (The Convention), somewhat in response to the emerging social and political activism of the time (Moyn, 2010). The United Nations developed 54 articles as part of the Convention of the Rights of the Child in 1989. The Convention provided a documented international policy on children's rights. Each of the 54 articles relates to civil and political rights as well as economic, social, and cultural rights. Australia ratified the Convention in 1992 (UNICEF, 2003) and as such it is now incorporated into Australia's Federal law as an integral part of its human rights responsibilities. By being a signatory of the Convention, a platform is provided for the Australian government to be held accountable in ensuring they consider children's rights in both policy and practice.

For the first time, child participation rights were explicitly outlined in the policy with the inclusion of Article 12.1 in the Convention. Article 12.1 states that, “When adults are making decisions which affect children, children have the right to have a say what they think should happen and have their opinions taken into account” (United Nations, 1989, p. 4). The inclusion of Article 12.1 highlighted the need for children to be active participants within the society. This includes their education as well. Educators were encouraged by this inclusion to consider all children as competent individuals capable of having their view and opinion supported in having their rights met.

The National Quality Standards for Early Childhood Education and Care and School Age Care were introduced in December 2009, which are a part of the government initiative designed to bring consistency to child care services across Australia. The National Quality Standards and the Early Years Learning Framework focus on the rights of the child and see children as active participants in their own lives. Within these documents, the Australian government recognized and acknowledged for the first time the importance of a rights based education as “A child’s experience in their first five years sets the course for the rest of their life” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 14). The six defining principles underpinning the Australian National Quality Standards are based on developing children’s rights and this contemporary paradigm views the child as capable and competent. The Early Years Learning Framework also encourages educators to consider the children’s participation rights. It is important to remember; however, that early childhood services are all at differing stages of their journey in implementing the Early Years Learning Framework and that the document allows the flexibility for each service to take into account the individual characteristics of their context.

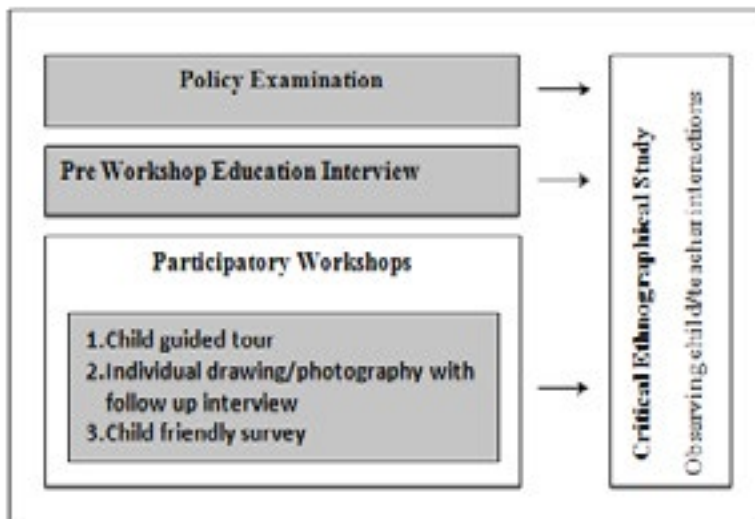
Child participation is thus, a fundamental part of Australia’s educational system, but when trying to understand child participation, an immersive experience is crucial. Critical ethnography is a particularly useful methodology for such studies, which involves child participants as it allows them “a more direct voice” and enables

them to actively participate “in the production of data” (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998, p. 8). Further, an ethnographic researcher is able to gain a real sense of understanding of the educational setting and is able to accurately capture participants’ voice, thoughts, feelings or interpretations about their experiences (Walford, 2007). The main purpose behind this research is to examine the pedagogical actions of an early childhood center and explore practices that support child participation.

## Methodology

This research uses preliminary findings from part of a broader PhD research project. Using a critical ethnographic methodology, the PhD research study explores child participatory workshops in a number of early childhood centers. Data were collected at the site using a variety of methods, including a study of educator conducted participatory workshops. The workshops were designed to enable children to be authentically engaged in the project by exploring what was significant to the child at their preschool. Child friendly data collection tools included a child guided tour, child photography and drawings with follow up interviews and the completion of a survey about the child’s perceptions of their preschool (Malone, 2006, 2008, 2011). Table 1 depicts a visual representation of the study.

Table 1. The data collection methods



## **Site of the Project**

Keiraville Community Preschool (known hereafter as KCP) which is located in Wollongong, New South Wales (NSW), approximately 80 kilometers south of Sydney, was chosen as one of the sites of analysis of a broader PhD research project. KCP was carefully selected due to its documentation and governance, claiming that participation rights form an important focus of their educational philosophy. It has been operating since 1952 and caters for 40 children aged 3 - 5 years every day, with just over 100 children attending each week. The preschool's educational staff includes: Two university trained educators, two technical and further education trained educators, and an inclusion support worker (known hereafter as educators). This is a not-for-profit community owned preschool, managed by a committee of 11 volunteer parents who are both the employers and licensees. This is known as being a stand alone service and means that the preschool is not affiliated with large service providers in the state.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval for this project was given by the University's Human Ethics Research Committee. An information letter was sent to parents and consent from educators, parents, and most importantly the children were obtained. Continual ethical consideration needed to be given to the notion of child consent (Alderson, 2005; Alderson & Morrow, 2004; Gibson & Twycross, 2007). In considering child consent questions, Alderson (2008) continues about how and if it is even possible for children to authentically provide real consent when considering existing power relationships between adults and children. In an attempt to address this during the first workshop, the activities were explained in child friendly language to the children. Children were asked if they wished to participate in the project and written consent was completed. Verbal consent was also sought throughout the ensuing workshops. Children were given the option whether and how to participate in each activity.

## **Study Limitations**

The main limitation was the time the researcher spent at the center. Data were collected over twelve visits each of approximately four hours duration. However, research with children is “A time-consuming, resource-intensive, often messy process that requires considerable time and commitment to work through” (Dockett, Einarsdottir & Perry, 2009 p. 13). More time may have enabled further understanding of the center’s practices and observation of relationships between children and educators. Although this is part of a larger study, at this stage only those practices seen at this one center have been described below. The list of pedagogical practices which support child participation is therefore not exhaustive and should be seen as examples of good practice rather than a comprehensive or complete list. The research process will be repeated at another site as part of the larger project and further pedagogical practices may be added to this list.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Data collected were analyzed and significant practices were noted. This study found that at KCP participatory rights were considered when educators looked for opportunities to seek children’s opinion, recognized the connection children had with nature, developed a sense of belonging, valued relationships with children and family, and supported children in being agents for social change. By implementing these practices into pedagogy, children’s participation rights were supported.

### **Children opinion and influence decisions**

The Early Years Learning Framework encourages educators to view children as “Active participants and decision makers [which] open up possibilities for educators to move beyond pre-conceived expectations about what children can do and learn” (DEEWRA, 2009, p. 9). Educators at KCP look for incidental and planned opportunities for children to offer opinions and make decisions. An example of this is the involvement children have in the presentation of their

work. Children were asked, “Do you want to cut this or leave it as it is?” or “What colour paper should we use for this craft?” At KCP, children are encouraged to pursue their interests and return over time to the incomplete activities. For example, block structures remain standing overnight offering opportunity for construction to be added to it the next day. Artworks are left out for the addition of new media or further details. Opportunities exist for children to return back to activities the following day, allowing them to be explored deeply and fully. This offers opportunity for students to make real decisions about their work.

The importance of peer tutoring and collaborative learning is recognized and enables children to offer opinions to their peers. Children are positioned by educators as the knowledgeable experts as they are encouraged to ask other children for assistance rather than an adult. Each day has a predictable pattern so children can anticipate what will happen next. Educators ensure that routines such as meals and other activities do not interrupt key learning sessions. For example, children can come and eat morning fruit if and when desired. Eating becomes a choice for the children. Lunch time is also a relaxed, chatty, and a fun social time where the educators talk to children about their center. Educators use this time to encourage children to make decisions about their learning by asking questions about what activity they would like to do next or what equipment would they like taken out. Children assist with the placement and packing away of equipment.

### **Nature and the outdoor environment**

The outdoor learning environment is made up of separate spaces. Children know how and where to access the materials and/or equipment they need and are free to move equipment from area to area. A wide variety of plants with different leaf shapes and colors, seed types, scents, edible or not edible, deciduous or evergreen are planted to enable children to be exposed to a wide range of textural surfaces offering different sensory experiences including pavers, pebble paths, concrete, dirt patch, sand, rocks and opportunities for play with water, seed, flour, slime and finger painting. Children

are free to make decisions around the outdoor play environment by making cubbies, tents, camps, rearranging materials, producing plays, puppets, and obstacle courses. A wide scope is provided for the children to engage in real outdoor work including using wheelbarrows to garden, tools to weed, and collecting rocks or sticks.

### **Developing a sense of belonging**

When children feel a sense of belonging, they are more likely to participate. Participating is an important part of belonging, but it is “also dependent on how far a child feels that sense of belonging” (Rogoff, Mistry, Goncu & Mosier, 1993, p. 3). Belonging is a two-way process. It is “About having opportunities to express personal agency and creativity, about feeling able to contribute, to love and to care for others, to take on responsibilities and fulfil roles, to identify with personal and community activities, and to share in collective celebration” (Woodhead & Brooker, 2008, p. 3). Conversations with educators at the preschool involve reference to the child and family connections to the preschool while introducing children to the researcher, it was noted that the educator knew the child’s name and spoke about their connection to the center or how the family had contributed to the preschool. For example:

*“Mary and her mum, dad and sister came to the working bee two weeks ago and helped plant the vegetables in the garden” (Educator M. Gleeson, personal communication).*

*“Billy’s uncle was the plumber who fixed our pipes when they broke a few weeks ago” (Educator M. Gleeson, personal communication).*

A visual record of preschool history and past partnerships with families is displayed in a prominent position. Past celebrations of preschool events feature heavily in the albums. Children are seen reading these books and picking out their family members and reminiscing about special photos.



## **Relationships between educators and children**

Educators at the Preschool have a strong focus on developing and maintaining positive relationships with children. “When educators create environments in which children experience mutually enjoyable, caring and respectful relationships with people and the environment, children respond accordingly” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 25). Practices at KCP include educators squatting to children’s height whilst maintaining eye contact during interaction. Children, in addition to parents, have their own sign and are able to sign themselves in and out if they choose. Educators have established clear protocols during group time discussions. Children sit in a circle and are expected to contribute to group discussions. Clear speaking, listening when another person is talking and turn taking is maintained during group times.

## **Collaboration with family members**

“To establish genuine relationships and partnerships with families, educators find authentic ways to listen to and speak with families” (DEEWRa, 2009, p. 17). KCP recognizes that families are children’s first and most influential teachers. They prioritize supporting relationships between children, educators, and families. Educators articulate their belief that when families feel informed about the philosophy and curriculum, they are likely to feel empowered in engaging in a discussion with educators. Regularly sharing of anecdotes between families and educators assist in relationship building. KCP offers parents unlimited access to the children’s educational environment by providing comfortable places for parents and other adults to sit and relax with children. Parents drop in during the day to say hello to children, read a book to a group or play games with them.

Photos play an important role at KCP. Family photos are displayed with encouragement to add photos of the children outside preschool. Each child is provided with their own personal photo album to take between home and preschool to allow shared relation-

ships to develop. Although weekly newsletters are a common educational practice, KCP has a clear philosophy around the sharing of ideas, in offering glimpses of children's thinking by providing examples of thoughts on topics and by educating families on relevant topics. Examples include: sharing policies such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, promoting the importance of play based learning with references and links to latest research, and giving advice to families on ways to discuss with children concerns about important steps such as the Transition to School. The vision of the preschool is regularly shared in the newsletter with contributions and collaboration by community members. Family participation is advanced in the weekly newsletter with the acknowledgment of different ways families are involved in the center. Examples include: images and information about a father bringing his drum kit and sharing his music, a parent sharing her talents with the cello and violin, parents cooking with children, a parent sharing her talents at belly dancing, and a parent sharing his stuffed crocodile.

### **Children as activists of political and social change**

Opportunities that actively allow children to instigate action that will bring benefit to the greater society and world are provided. Children are encouraged to instigate and encourage family action. Examples where children are given opportunities to participate in real opportunities to be agents of change include:

**Earth hour participation.** Each child is given two candles: one for their family and one to give to another to spread the word about Earth Hour. This is a simple way for families to help children feel empowered to make a difference for the environment and start some valuable conversations with extended family, friends, and neighbors.

**Treasure hunting.** Each child has their own treasure hunting bag with their name and suggestions of the type of treasure that may be suitable for recycling. The emphasis is on recycling products that may otherwise have been considered junk or unusable.

**Environment sustainability plan.** Sharing of the center's environment sustainability plan with students, families, and the wider community, the children decide on a tree to plant within the center which will be their own ideas tree. Every child takes home a leaf and a copy of the sustainability ideas plan. Families write their ideas and children bring the leaf and ideas back to the center. Ideas are then added to the tree.

## Conclusion

This paper summarized significant policy around child participation. It noted the inclusion of Article 12.1, the participatory right into the Convention and that Article 12.1 contributed to the inclusion of rights in Australian policy, the National Quality Framework, and Early Year Learning Framework. The paper outlined the methodology used in this study and provided background to the site where data were collected. Finally, it provided practical application of examples of practices which encouraged child participation. These practical and meaningful practices may be adopted by Early Childhood Educators. Although considering one center in the Australian context, this paper may have a wide application. It has contributed to the conversation around everyday participative practices with young children in early childhood centers and to the current conversations around participatory rights in such centers. Early Childhood Centers worldwide may benefit from the practices discussed above.

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