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Action Research with Teachers: Children's Participation and Educators' Professional Development

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Abstract

This article explores the potential of a networked learning community for supporting teachers' professional development and transforming children's life in an educational institution. It draws on a small-scale action research project carried out by a team of Polish early childhood educators and academics who collaborated to create conditions for strengthening children's participation in preschool. The mode of work combined the teachers' individual investigation and actions in their settings with monthly meetings of the whole team serving as a space for the participants to support, inspire and challenge each other. Besides the implementation of concrete solutions by the teacher-researchers that enhanced their students participation, the project contributed to the emergence of the teachers' habit of critically observing, documenting, and reflecting on their practice, increased their confidence as autonomous professionals and change agents, and augmented their view of children as competent decision makers. It is argued that it is the combination of continuous individual critical reflection and regular collaboration that is instrumental in triggering and sustaining such changes.

Keywords

critical action research; networked learning community; teachers' collaboration; children's participation; the Mosaic approach

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Introduction

"Teachers tend to be loners by preference; they are unwilling to open up, unwilling to ask for help; because we have been taught that we have to cope on our own." This comment made by a preschool principal I interviewed expresses sentiments frequently voiced by Polish teachers and reported in research. As such, the *Strengthening the participation of children as agents in preschool everyday life* project reported in this article directly addressed this issue, with a view to creating a forum for preschool teachers from various institutions to jointly deal with the problems concerning children's participation in their schooling (a contentious issue in Polish education). Situated at the intersection of two research areas – specifically, teachers' professional development and children's educational rights – this article aims to capture the potential of the critical action research methodology for supporting teachers in transforming both their practice and the everyday experience of their young students. When such transformative processes involve confronting one's own beliefs and, especially, practices that clash with one's self-perception, they can be highly taxing if carried out in isolation. However, undertaking them within a group setting enables teachers to rely on the support of "critical friends" who are not only able to empathize with the challenges they face, but may also offer alternative perspectives based on their own practice. This kind of work often takes place within networked/professional learning communities (Day & Townsend, 2009; Duffy & Gallagher, 2016; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Katz et al., 2008). Despite attempts at instituting them in the Polish education system, they are yet to become an integral dimension of school culture (Elsner, 2013; Elsner & Bednarek, 2012).

The *Strengthening the participation of children as agents in preschool everyday life* project was launched at the University of Lower Silesia in Wrocław, Poland. It was designed as a small-scale action research project carried out by a team of early childhood education practitioners and academics, with me as the initiator and coordinator. The practical objective of the project was to develop and introduce approaches to enhance children's participation in the preschools where teacher-researchers worked. Being directly involved in early childhood education teacher training myself, I also wanted to explore the possibilities of supporting teachers in their professional development, in this case through teachers' research and collaboration. I had previously worked with teachers in continuing education programs who sought to transform their pedagogical practice. On such occasions, inspired by an approach to teacher education that used action research and educational ethnography (Červinková, 2013), I had

invited them to critically observe themselves, identify problems they wanted to tackle, and devise and implement alternative practices (Gawlicz, 2022). They had experienced truly profound changes, but they had frequently felt frustrated and disheartened when having to confront their own weaknesses alone or when they were openly criticized by their colleagues. Building on this experience, my project attempted to create a safe, supportive space for the teachers to meet and help each other in critically reflecting on and modifying their practice. Below, I depict the context and methodological framework of the project, discuss the changes that the project brought both in the children's participation and their life in preschool more generally, and in the teachers' development. I also explore the distinctive quality of working in a learning community that makes transformation possible. I argue that it is the combination of continuous individual critical reflection and regular collaboration that is instrumental in triggering and sustaining changes.

The context of the project: Children's participation and teachers' collaboration and research in Polish (early childhood) education

Children's participation in educational settings

The concept of participation prominently features in international early childhood education and care (ECEC) discourse (Quennerstadt & Moody, 2020), but its meaning remains unclear. In Hart's (1992) classic definition, it denotes "the process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives" (p. 5). However, as observed by Müller-Kuhn et al. (2021), who focus on student participation, the meanings of participation vary widely. The notion is used in an array of contexts: democratic education, children's rights, wellbeing, learning, and school practice, and it refers to having a voice/say, self-determination, and (formalized and non-formalized) opportunities for influence and/or involvement in decision-making. In their review of research on participation in ECEC, Correia et al. (2019) list listening to children, acknowledging their competences, and involving them in decision-making as the most commonly recognized aspect of participation. In the children's rights discourse based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (particularly Articles 12–15, but also 2, 3, 5, and 19), participation is understood as the right to be involved and taken seriously in decision-making, which, without presuming that children are the sole decision-makers, implies that adults not only listen to children, but also make decisions informed by their views and gradually transfer the responsibility for decision-making to children (Lansdown, 2010).

For children's participation in decision-making to become real, four criteria must be met: space (children must have opportunities to express their views), voice (they must be facilitated in this process), audience (their views must be listened to), and influence (their voices must be acted upon) (Lundy, 2007). Adults are therefore expected to provide conditions for children's meaningful, rather than ostensible or tokenistic, participation. The focus on adults' role underpins Shier's (2001) model of participation, which progresses from listening to children to sharing power and responsibility with them, and presupposes adults' increasing commitment: from willingness to act, to creating opportunities for participation, to putting formal obligations in place. In Lister's (2007) conceptualization of children's citizenship, their participation (perceived as active membership in communities) is considered pivotal to their status as citizens, while Mager and Nowak (2012) point to the development of democratic skills and citizenship as effects of children's participation. These conceptualizations channeled thinking about participation in this project.

International scholarship consistently shows that children's opportunities to exercise their right to express their views, be heard, and influence educational settings are limited (Quennerstadt & Moody, 2020). This is definitely the case in Polish ECEC, even though the Law on Education stipulates that education should conform to the UNCRC. The terms "participation" and "participate" appear five times in the national core curriculum for preschools (MEN, 2017). Besides one abstract evocation of the child's need to participate in a group, the other instances refer to participation in organized activities, such as physical play, collective musical performances, and literacy development exercises. The core curriculum neither problematizes the notion of participation nor explicitly addresses children's involvement in decision-making, which implies that participation may be simply understood as children's involvement in teacher-initiated activities. Sparse as it is, Polish research on children's participation and decision-making in preschool suggests that children's opportunities to express their voice and influence their lives in educational settings are restricted, while teachers control most aspects of preschool everyday life (Babicka-Wirkus & Groenewald, 2018; Duda, 2017; Falkiewicz-Szult, 2007, 2014; Gawlicz, 2009; Röhrborn & Żylicz, 2013; Sławińska, 2015). Children have little say in matters concerning curricular activities, daily planning, space design or use, or meals. With no national formal provisions for ensuring children's participation in place, relevant attempts have only been made at a local level. Such initiatives have been implemented by alternative educational institutions (Gawlicz, 2020),

preschools guided by progressive educational approaches, such as the Dalton Plan or Montessori method, and NGOs dedicated to children's rights (e.g., IMDBeKi, 2015). Though limited to a few preschools, the project discussed in this paper attended to a largely neglected issue in Polish ECEC.

Teachers' collaboration and participation in change processes

As the opening quote of this paper suggests, teachers collaborating with one another in order to transform their educational practice is not common in Polish school and preschool culture. At least three factors contribute to this: fraught personal relationships among teachers; the organizational structure of schools, which does not promote collaboration; and the scarcity of teacher research. Educational research has reported limited mutual support among teachers in professional and personal matters, hostile attitudes at the workplace, such as backbiting and derision, and distrust resulting from competition and orientation on individual success (Łukasik, 2020; Mościcka & Drabek, 2010; Pyżalski, 2010). In Grochowalska's study on beginner preschool and elementary school teachers, the respondents reported that the poor quality of their collegial interactions, which failed to address their doubts and anxieties, accounted for one of the greatest stressors in their work. Further, teachers are reluctant to talk about their difficulties, as these tend to be interpreted as representing failure rather than having learning potential, and they also lack inspirational or authority figures among their colleagues (Kamińska, 2019; Przewłocka, 2015; Pyżalski, 2010). A low level of trust identified among teachers has been interpreted as mirroring general tendencies in Polish society (Kamińska, 2014). Additionally, the organizational structure of educational institutions in Poland does not promote collaboration. A detailed study of Polish ECEC teachers has shown that only little of their time was devoted to peer consultation and collaborative learning (Kosáčová, Filipiak, & Lemańska-Lewandowska, 2015). The findings of TALIS 2013 demonstrated that only five percent of teachers took part in staff meetings on a weekly basis (Przewłocka, 2015). Fewer than half of the respondents reported that they had received feedback on their work from their colleagues, while only ten percent received feedback preceded by lesson observation (Malinowska, 2015). Finally, teachers continue to be perceived as technicians who follow their superiors' instructions and tend to implement externally devised frameworks, rather than actively contributing to educational reforms, autonomously seeking alternative approaches, and taking responsibility for their own professional development, which includes critically examining one's own practice (Falkiewicz-Szult, 2007; Kochanowska, 2017; Madalińska-Michalak, 2019; Nowak-Łojewska, 2011).

Simultaneously, the legislation on education does provide a framework for teachers' engagement in and collaboration on research and learning. Most notably, the pedagogic supervision system, which was introduced in 2009, insisted on in-school self-evaluation, conceived as an autonomous process whereby the staff of educational facilities collectively investigate their practice with the intention of improving it (Mazurkiewicz & Walczak, 2012). Subsequent legal acts (such as the 2012 and 2013 laws on public institutions for continuing teacher development, psychological and pedagogical counseling centers, and pedagogical libraries) mandated the establishment of networks for teachers' collaboration and self-education (Elsner, 2013). The Center for Education Development (ORE) followed up with a support program for preschools, schools, and local teacher development centers to found such networks (www.doskonaleniewsieci.pl).

Given the emergence of school-based research and teacher networks, the new legislation may seem to have given a boost to the culture of teacher research and learning communities. However, studies on the implementation of the regulations offer a more critical insight. Teachers rarely view self-evaluation as a chance to collectively learn through joint engagement in tackling burning issues. Rather, they approach self-evaluation (especially if organized as whole-school studies initiated by principals pressured by the educational authorities) as a meaningless bureaucratic burden of limited relevance to school change (Elsner & Bednarek, 2012; Kasprzak, 2013). Grochowalska and Sajdera (2017), who examined the evaluation reports for 31 preschools in one region of Poland, only identified a marginal presence of any forms of collaboration designed to buttress teacher development or to enhance the staff's collaborative skills. Similarly, the collaboration and self-education networks, whose introduction has neglected "the nature of educational change itself and the nature of the teaching-learning process and its social context" (Filipiak, 2019, p. 34), are regarded by teachers as yet another burdensome duty which they interpret from the transmission-based, rather than constructivist, learning perspective (Filipiak, 2019). Indeed, the resources collected on the ORE project website suggest a fairly technical approach to these networks as a tool for helping teachers deal with certain problems, rather than disseminating systematic learning processes involving a politically informed interrogation of the nature, meaning, and consequences of certain ways of being a teacher (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). The group we formed in the present project represented an attempt at moving beyond instrumental and prescriptive training and toward more personally meaningful, engaging, and transformative work, in line with Filipiak's (2019) call to replace "the rigid structure of 'training'

and online meetings" with "a soft entry into a learning conversation, a site of critical discussion and the narrative construction of reality" (p. 44–45).

The methodological framework of the project

The research team

The project was carried out by a team composed of three preschool teachers who were the primary investigators (Agnieszka, Marta, and Dagmara), me as an academic, and the graduate student Dorota, who was developing her M.A. thesis on children's participation. Agnieszka and Marta worked in public preschools, each teaching a class of 25 four-year-olds. The principals of their settings were receptive to new ideas in early childhood education, favored experimentation, trusted their teachers, and gave them sufficient autonomy, but most of their colleagues embraced more traditional, top-down approaches to teaching. Dagmara, the third teacher, was the leader of a small, private institution for preschool and early elementary school students; the facility was deeply inspired by democratic-education ideals. All three of them were dedicated to improving their teaching practice, regularly used professional development training, and experimented with new classroom approaches. However, their participation in this project was motivated by their interest in children's participation, rather than by formal professional development requirements.

The approach and methods

In methodological terms, the project relied on critical educational action research, understood – following Carr and Kemmis (2004, 2009) – as a form of inquiry undertaken by participants of social situations with a view to improving their practices, their understanding of those, and the situations in which they take place. Rather than approaching action research as an instrumental procedure for devising and testing a method, Carr and Kemmis consider action research an emancipatory practice whose participants transform as individuals and as professionals. Critical action research does not stop with professional change (that is, the generation of innovation and wiser practices by reviewing and renewing educators' existing practices), but pursues social change, achievable through "exploring current practices deliberately, systematically and critically, generating new and deeper thinking about their effects on themselves and on others (including children)" (Mac Naughton & Hughes, 2009, p. 48). The project involved establishing a small-scale networked learning community in which teachers from different schools met in order to explore their thinking

and practice (Day & Townsend, 2009). The commonly listed key principles of learning communities are voluntarism, choice, agency, ownership, and leaving it to the participants to make decisions about change (Day & Townsend, 2009, p. 179). We adopted these rules, with the teachers responsible for determining how the project would develop, and planning and implementing action. Although the initial impulse for the project and its general framework came from me, I did not play the role of an expert who provided definite answers or solutions to the teachers' problems, evaluated their professional behavior, or defined changes they should make. Instead, I attempted to be a "critical friend" responsible for "helping 'insiders' to act more wisely, prudently and critically in the process of transforming education" (Carr & Kemmis, 2004, p. 161). I guided the teachers through the project's stages, offered an outsider's view of their experiences by asking critical questions to stir reflection, provided them with resources, such as reading suggestions and examples of practice from other locations, and familiarized them with the research methods needed in the project. This implied negotiating a new role for myself as an academic, which is considered a prerequisite for meaningful teacher research (Gewirtz et al., 2009).

A range of methods were used by the teachers to investigate their practice. The central one was observation – in particular, reflective self-observation – whose results the teachers registered in field notes. We first intended to use video recording for later detailed individual and collective analysis and interpretation of the teachers' practice, but for formal reasons we had to forgo this idea. The teachers therefore had to develop the autoethnographically inspired practice of stopping to look at themselves in order to become aware of what they were doing. One of the teachers described it as "being more mindful of everything" and capturing situations as they unfolded: "It is … about incidents that happen at a given moment and you realize: All right, so this doesn't work, or I'd like this to work differently" (Dagmara, final seminar). Reflexivity was a key tool for the participants. Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (2015) understand reflexivity as "turning back on our experiences, identities, and relationships in order to consider how they influence our present work" (p. 29). This kind of "turning back" was what the teachers practiced: first, individually in and outside of their classroom, when they "had to think over [their] day" (Marta, final seminar), and later in our collective setting. To use Schön's (1983) classic phrase, they constantly moved between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. However, they also performed reflection-before-action, as they envisaged their modified practice, and reflection-beyond-action, as they told each other stories in which they were interpreting and reinterpreting

their experiences, in this way fostering self-exploration, transformative learning, and professional development (Edwards, 2017).

In order to find out about the children's views, elements of the Mosaic approach (Clark, 2017) were implemented. While the teachers talked with the children informally throughout the project, they also invited their students to take photos of preschool venues they enjoyed or considered important. The images were then used by the teachers to engage the children in conversations more explicitly focused on the children's participation. These conversations continued as the children proceeded to making maps of, or books on, their preschool. The talks were audio-recorded, and the children's words were collectively analyzed by us and used in their books or maps.

Additionally, Marta informally interviewed her colleagues about children's participation, while Agnieszka surveyed the parents to learn about their attitudes to her plans of involving children more in decision-making. The material collected was shared with the other members of the research team and discussed in the meetings.

The development of the project

The project developed as a typical action-research spiral of planning, execution, and reconnaissance (Lewin, 1946) in which the teachers' collective and individual work alternated. Ten team meetings, lasting approximately 2.5 hours each and spread over a period of ten months, formed the axis of the project. They provided a space for the teachers to collectively plan their work, reflect on their observations, discuss their problems and challenges, and support and inspire each other. The meetings were audio-recorded, and the recordings were transcribed. Between the meetings, the teachers worked individually; they continuously collected data, produced documentation, and engaged in reflection. Typically of action research, the project progressed through a series of overlapping and recurring stages, presented below.

Initial reconnaissance

The aim of this stage was to establish a shared understanding of children's participation and to define the concrete focus of action for each of the teachers. In the first meeting, we compiled a list of the dimensions of participation pertinent to everyday preschool life, which then guided the teachers through individual observations. The aim of the observation stage was for the teachers to identify and document in their field notes the ways in which participation was (or was

not) practiced in their preschools, and eventually to select issues on which they wanted to work within the project. We also formulated a working definition of participation. Unlike the teachers in Avgitidou's (2020) research, who identified children's participation with showing an interest and responding to questions in class rather than taking a more active role, the teacher-researchers in this project, following Lansdown (2010), foregrounded children's involvement in decision-making. In the second and third group meetings, the teachers shared their observations and chose their points of interest, sometimes with the support of the group. All the teachers initially decided to focus on children's participation in planning practices. Additionally, Dagmara decided to consider her communication with children, and Agnieszka wanted to experiment with children's access to art supplies.

Significantly, the observations and reflection at this stage made the teachers discover that their practice was not what they had presumed it was. This was particularly striking for Dagmara, who had assumed, as the leader of a democratic preschool, that her students had a lot of decision-making power. By systematically observing how this setting operated, she realized that it was not the case. In some cases, simply noticing what was happening in the teachers' classrooms was not sufficient for them to grasp what the problem was, and only after describing it to and discussing it with the team were they able to realize that what they were doing was not what they had intended to do. For instance, it was only in discussion in a meeting that Marta concluded that she communicated her plans to the children, rather than involving them in planning. In any case, the realization of "how many things that I disliked in my approach to work were actually there. … I am not as good at my job as I would like to be," to quote Dagmara, prompted them to act for change. Again, in contrast to the teachers in Avgitidou's (2020) project, from the onset they were clear and open about their responsibility for affecting children's participation.

Planning and implementation

When designing the project, I had thought that action planning would predominantly happen during group meetings for the participants to benefit from the multiplicity of views and the collective development of ideas. This idea proved unrealistic as it ignored the emotional dimension of action research practice (Leitch & Day, 2000): having realized how far their practice departed from their intentions, the teachers felt an urge to act immediately and, thus, developed plans for action without waiting for the group to meet. As Dagmara commented in the final seminar, "When I notice something, I try to change

it right away. I wouldn't like to wait until the next month [meeting] to implement a plan for an issue that I see now." In some cases, however, the teachers supported each other in developing ways to tackle the problems they had individually or collectively identified. Each teacher then put these ideas into practice and later shared her reflections on the process with the group, which often led to the development of further action.

Further reconnaissance and evaluation

Reconnaissance in the form of observation and reflection was an on-going practice that accompanied the teachers' attempts to change their work. Halfway through the project, the teachers applied the Mosaic approach to explore the children's perspectives on their participation in preschool. At this stage, the children became co-researchers involved in data generation, and the findings from the investigation of the children's photos, interviews, and maps compelled the teachers to undertake further action, including on the level of the preschool as a whole.

Sharing results

While only three teachers were directly involved in the project, we sought to move beyond this small research group. The teachers continuously shared their ideas and insights with their colleagues, whom they sometimes involved in action. Toward the end of the project, we held an open seminar for teachers and education students, whom the participants told about their experiences. Finally, two teachers wrote a paper about the project for an online teachers' magazine (Pohl-Szymendera & Śledzińska, 2018) and another presented a poster about the project at an academic conference[1].

Collaborative action research for enhancing children's participation and teachers' professional development: The outcomes of the project

Consistently with Carr and Kemmis's (2009) claim about the interconnectedness of the political, personal, and professional dimensions of action research, the project engendered various kinds of changes. Most notably, it contributed to

[1] D. Lewandowska, N. Chomiak, *Przestrzeń w przedszkolu. Dziecięce konstruowanie znaczeń* [Preschool space: Children constructing meanings]. Poster presented at the conference "Małe dziecko – poznanie w zabawie," The Maria Grzegorzewska University in Warsaw, June 3, 2017.

the repositioning of children in the institutions involved by making the teachers change their perception of children and introduce arrangements that fostered children's participation. Given the generally subordinated position of children in Polish society, such changes, redressing the unequal relations of power, can be viewed as political and therefore contributing to broader social changes. The project also affected the teachers' self-perceptions as professionals and their functioning within their institutions. As Gewirtz et al. (2009) argue, for teacher research to be meaningful and productive, new dimensions of the teacher role have to be negotiated, which entails exploring social processes and underlying mechanisms in order to reconsider and transform teachers' everyday practice. This is what happened in the project discussed here. In this section, I draw on the transcripts of team meetings, the final seminar, and the teachers' interviews with the children to present the outcomes of the project. I focus, firstly, on changes in the children's life in the preschools which resulted from their increased participation and, secondly, on the adults' practice and their perceptions of it. The changes were identified by the teachers themselves, as they reflected on the project development. Finally, I argue that the mode of working in the project was the key factor in facilitating such changes.

Changes in the children's life in the preschool and their position vis-à-vis adults

Although the teachers' primary objective was to investigate the possibilities of increasing their students' involvement in planning their activities, the changes for children caused by the teachers' action were broader. They covered other aspects of the children's participation and affected their life in preschool more generally and, crucially, altered the teachers' view on the child-adult dynamics.

Shier's (2001) model includes five levels of participation: 1) children are listened to; 2) they are supported in expressing their views; 3) their views are taken into account; 4) they are involved in decision-making processes; and 5) power and responsibility for decision-making are shared with them. On each of these levels, there are three stages of commitment: openings (when practitioners commit to act), opportunities (when there are mechanisms that enable them to act), and obligations (when there are organizational policies that mandate action). In their effort to strengthen the children's participation, the teachers created opportunities for children's participation on the two highest levels.

To increase the children's involvement in planning, the teachers developed different mechanisms that fitted their settings. The issue was particularly pressing for Dagmara, who believed that there were obligations in place in her democratic

preschool to guarantee children's participation, and that the students' involvement in planning was common. However, careful observations during the initial weeks of the project made her realize that "very often there was no time [for making plans with the children], it would happen every second or third day, and sometimes a whole week would pass without a plan" (Dagmara). Together with her colleagues and students, she developed a routine of the whole school meeting in the morning to collectively make group and individual day plans, graphically visualized on a large board. This practice soon proved extremely important for the children. They took photos of the board and commented that they "could plan different things, choose what they felt like [doing]," as one girl said; they put pressure on their parents to come to the preschool on time in order not to miss the planning session and used the board to remind themselves and the adults about the planned activities.

Children's involvement in planning their activities was also supposed to lie at the core of the pedagogical approach in Marta's preschool, inspired by Célestin Freinet's educational philosophy. However, having observed her practice and discussed it with the other project participants, Marta realized that it was at odds with the presumed principles. She used some techniques from Freinet's repertoire, but failed to actively engage her students in planning. Rather, she just consulted with the children, either indirectly as when watching them play to identify and incorporate their interests in planning or by telling the children about her plans to see if they liked them. Her solution consisted in using group debates, a technique she had already implemented, to provide the children with opportunities to discuss their ideas about "what they would like to do, what to learn about" (Marta). She then relied on the results of the discussion when making a monthly plan.

Agnieszka's large preschool had no regulations mandating children's participation and followed a relatively stringent day order. Despite this, she found possibilities to involve her four-year-olds in daily planning. Every morning, the group decided whether they would play outdoors in the morning or in the afternoon, and the children eagerly contributed to the decision-making process by citing details of the weather forecast they knew from their parents. Agnieszka consulted the children on when to have an English lesson and gave them freedom to decide whether to play in the room or in the hallway. While seemingly insignificant, these changes entailed sharing the decision-making power with the children and, as such, represented a vast departure from the usual routines.

The profound insights into the children's experience in the preschool that the project participants gained in the process prompted them to look for other ways to

nurture their participation, especially given the photographs and interviews made it clear how much the students valued having their voices heard. The children repeatedly took photos of play spaces and talked about their ability to decide what to do there, of the kitchen where they decided what and when to eat, of the decorations they had made of their own accord and chosen where to display, and even of an old poster which a teacher had intended to throw away, but refrained from doing so upon a request from a child who later said she liked the fact that the teacher would listen to her. Encouraged by such findings, the teachers tried to expand the audience for children's voices and their influence (Lundy, 2009) by talking to their colleagues about planning schedules so that the children had more access to their favorite rooms or by making sure that, instead of making an indoor swing unavailable, the staff discuss with the children the way to use it without disturbing others. Agnieszka created a new site for the children to make decisions and take responsibility when she made it possible for them to serve some of their food and allowed them easy access to previously restricted art materials, developing the rules for their use with them. Thus, the teachers were learning to identify new spaces for the children's voices (Lundy, 2009), while reflecting on their own commitment to hear them (Shier, 2001). For instance, Dagmara related the moment when an exceptionally early delivery of lunch came amidst the children's other activity. They became excited about the food, but Dagmara's colleague said to her: "Let's not have lunch right now, shall we?" In the meeting, she commented on her own response:

> I said: … I'd rather we talked about it with the kids. … If I treat a child like a subject who can decide when to eat, why should I determine with [my colleague] whether we should eat now or not? And I think that a month ago … I would've just said: OK, so let's not eat, and finish what we're doing – but somehow I've started noticing even such small things, not only how we communicate with children, but also how we [the staff] communicate with each other, how important it is. (Dagmara)

Mager and Nowak (2012) cite changes in teacher-student interactions as an effect of student participation. As Dagmara's relation indicates, the project influenced the teachers' perception of children and their understanding of their perspectives. Admittedly, the teachers espoused the vision of the competent child from the very onset, but this view was cemented as they realized how skillful the children were in taking responsibility, negotiating, making collective decisions, and solving conflicts. This encouraged the teachers to relinquish some of their control. It has been observed that the effects of children's participation include the development of life skills, such

as communication, social, or decision-making skills (Mager & Nowak, 2012). With the increased opportunity for participation that the teachers' actions afforded, the children had more chances to practice such skills, which could have made them more noticeable to the teachers. The teachers also learned to construe the children's resistance differently, as they discovered that the children were far more willing to cooperate with adults once the latter took their decisions seriously. This made the teachers interpret the children's resistance not as disobedience or a lack of interest, but as a sign that they wanted to be genuinely heard.

Afforded by the Mosaic approach, the access to the children's perspectives sensitized the teachers to their students' distinct perceptions of their preschools. As Dagmara put it, they realized "how much the children have to say about the preschool space." Specifically, their photos and interviews indicated that they viewed the facility's physical space differently than adults did. They valued "children's places" (Rasmussen, 2004), such as hideouts of their own making, more than those structured by their teachers. They ascribed their own meanings to the latter, as evinced by a girl's explanation that she photographed the music room not for its technical function, but because "I hide here when I'm angry or happy," as the girl said. The children's maps made Agnieszka grasp how important relationships with friends from other classrooms were for her students and that they would like to experience them more than the organization based on a strict division into groups allowed. As a result, the teachers began to reconsider their prior belief in the aptness of their communication with the children and to create, in Shier's (2001) terms, new opportunities for themselves to hear the children (e.g., by sensitizing themselves to their messages) and to support the children in expressing their views (e.g., by offering new expression channels, such as the photos or maps). What Marta said about data generation had a broader reverberation for the transformed child-adult relationship:

> I was able to stand side by side with them. Not that I am just the person asking questions, but that we research something together. I wasn't their guide either … I simply gave them the camera and followed them. Just like that. As if I was co-acting with them. There were these two of them, and I was the third one. Yes, it was a great feeling. (Marta)

Changes in the teachers' approach to their practice

The habit of observing, documenting, and reflecting on their practice was among the most immediate effects of the project on the teachers' work. The teachers themselves acknowledged that, contrasting this with the common conduct:

"we all reflect somehow on our work, but we are not conscious of it. … We know that certain things exist, but we simply don't take them into consideration as we go about our daily work" (Agnieszka). Grounded in autoethnography, the project forced the teachers to consciously approach these usually neglected things. Marta talked about "a very different kind of awareness, a very different attitude" that she had developed. "I see how much is changing in my way of thinking and … how I've started to observe what is going on … looking more carefully at different things," Dagmara admitted. They emphasized the usefulness of focusing on concrete aspects of preschool practice, which made them scrutinize some previously unconsidered dimensions of their work and, as a result, become more aware of what they were actually doing. As a result, they were ready to question their own practice and unwilling to accept partial or superficial solutions. In context of nurturing the children's participation, this entailed looking into whether "children indeed have a chance to make decisions, whether they really make decisions or, in fact, we only think so" (Marta). Their careful observation of preschool everyday life made the teachers realize that their influence was more incisive than they would want to admit.

This kind of awareness is significant in Poland, where observation typically serves bureaucratic ends; it produces technical evidence of the implementation of the core curriculum or evaluates a child's proficiency in terms of predetermined standards. Such processes have been interpreted as the colonization of schooling by bureaucracy, where educational processes have become Baudrillardian simulacra and "instead of thinking, instead of being attentive, instead of creating their own educational practice, [the teachers are] forced to work according to an externally imposed, standardized matrix of behavior that could be indexed, measured, and reported" (Zamojski, 2014, p. 26). If compiled in order to produce a simulated reality, documentation cannot be used as an instrument for promoting reflection on actual practice. It does not provide space for thinking about fundamental political questions relevant to teachers' work and is, instead, a technical activity devoid of transformative potential (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). In our project, the awareness of the work developed by the teachers was of a very different nature as it urged them to critically consider what they did with the children, why they did so, and what consequences their work could have.

The teachers' critical attitude to their work made them reconsider their pedagogical position. Though experienced and confident professionals, Agnieszka and Marta admitted to their initial concerns that their principals might not accept the new modes of working developed in the project or that their colleagues might

assess their work as disorganized or chaotic when they gave the children more freedom. Agnieszka recalled her dilemma when she allowed the children to decide whether to play indoors or outdoors, and they consistently chose the former: "On the one hand, I thought it was great that they made their decision, and I could see how happy they were to play inside, but on the other hand, I was afraid that I would be held accountable for it." The awareness of the requirements placed on teachers to implement the core curriculum, which made some outdoor play time mandatory, the principals' and parents' expectations, and her own sense of what was good for children added up to a challenge she had to handle. As a result of such situations, the teachers had to reconsider their priorities, which Marta depicted as teaching herself "to separate formal requirements inscribed in educational laws from [her] relationships with the children." The teachers' extended reflection process helped them distance themselves from the regulations, codes, directives, and collegial and parental expectations, that is, from the factors that Olczak (2011) identifies as instrumental in teachers' loss of autonomy. The practitioners in the project developed a more critical stance on them, looked for ways to meet them without becoming dominated by them, and, when faced with others' reluctance or resistance, tried to explain what they were doing, rather than giving up.

Finally, the project gave the teachers a chance to experience themselves as agents of change. Carr and Kemmis (2004) note that "the action researcher attempts to discover how situations are constrained by 'objective' and 'subjective' conditions, and to explore how both kinds of conditions can be changed" (p. 183). The two public preschool teachers in the project identified objective factors that restricted certain actions, such as a relatively rigid day structure, an unfavorable teacher-child ratio, and limited funds. Describing action research with Chilean teachers, Guerra and Figueroa (2018) observe: "when teachers analysed their practices, at a superficial level, they were acquiring teaching tools, but at a deep level they learned that change begins with themselves" (p. 406). For the teachers in our project, change included developing a new perception of external constraints and learning to create opportunities. As Agnieszka reflected, while still bound by external regulations, she tried to "find moments during the day, during the week, when the children could decide anyway." The teachers were powerfully motivated by their newly acquired awareness of the importance that the children placed on their own participation.

However, the teachers also realized that transforming one's educational practice, including with regard to children's participation, does not happen once and for all. Instead, it is a process that needs to be constantly reviewed

and renewed. As Dagmara noticed, "It is not the case that we have changed something, and now everything works great." The teachers came to understand that the changes implemented call for attentive scrutiny to prevent relapsing into the previous, well-known modes of working and that ongoing reflection on one's practice reveals new dimensions for reconsideration and transformation. In this way another cycle of the action-research spiral begins.

The combination of individual and collective work

When designing the project, my intention was to create a framework in which the teachers could critically look at their practice, experiment with new ideas, and inspire each other. The combination of individual and collective effort was crucial in this respect. The teachers' individual research gave them a better understanding of their work both through insight into the children's perception of the adult-produced space and through the continuous observation of and critical reflection on their own practice. Kemmis et al. (2014) highlight that critical self-reflection "actively interrogates the conduct and consequences of participants' practices, their understandings of their practices, and the conditions under which they practice, in order to discover whether their practices are, in fact, irrational, unsustainable or unjust" (p. 6). Through this kind of reflection, the teachers realized that things were not what they had thought they were; specifically, that there was no children's decision-making when they thought it was present, that there was a degree of manipulation in their communication with the children, and that they did not trust the children as much as they had thought to be the case. As already shown, such realizations prompted the teachers to take action.

The collective dimension of the project strengthened the discovery effect of individual observation and reflection in two ways: by providing the participants with support and by offering provocation. Davies's (2014) notion of the community as an emergent, experimental space that offers multiple possibilities of joint thinking and doing illumines this double function of our group. Davies believes that communities may create opportunities for their members to experience themselves as more powerful and able to act effectively, but they also need to prevent petrification resulting from rigid adherence to one, purportedly indisputable truth. On the one hand, our small learning community, which Agnieszka explicitly dubbed a "support group," provided its members with "power to make changes" (Marta). The teachers shared enough to be able to grasp each other's problems, empathize with each other, and offer meaningful suggestions. Valuing children's participation, they all appreciated the steps the others were taking in order to foster it, rather than questioning their relevance

and meaningfulness, as colleagues from their preschools may have done. The different experiences of each group member inspired the others to reflect on their own practice and take action: "When you are speaking, I immediately wonder: Have I noticed something like this?" (Marta); "Listening to the girls talking about what they did, how they worked, was a push for me: I want this too, I want to try, I also want to change something" (Dagmara). Rather than being left alone with their emotionally burdening observations or struggling for ideas, the three teachers had a space in which they could accompany each other in the process of making changes.

At the same time, the variety of perspectives, which the participants brought from their different work contexts and career tracks, provided enough of a challenge to prevent the group from reaching the point where "truths become unquestionable [and] dialogue is suffocated" (Davies, 2014, p. 9). The teachers asked questions that made the others reconsider their work, rather than reaffirming it, and thus provoked them to embark on new, seemingly risky, ventures. Having more expertise in research on children's participation, Dorota and I could offer a more distanced view of the teachers' practices, taking them out of their immediate context through "giving [the teachers] the needle," to use Dagmara's phrase. In this way, the participants had a chance to develop a more complex understanding of their work and move forward. This dynamic is well illustrated in Agnieszka's experiment with letting the children split themselves into two groups for a sports class. In a meeting, Agnieszka described what she had done: she had put two pieces of looped rope representing the groups on the floor, gave the children sticks with their names, and read out their names in an alphabetical order, telling the children to place their sticks in the loop of their choice and make sure they did not exceed a certain number. She recalled with satisfaction how smoothly it had worked only to be confronted with Dagmara's question: "But don't you feel that going in an alphabetical order creates some sense of injustice?" Otherwise supportive of the change Agnieszka had introduced, Dagmara shared her experience of letting the children make similar decisions without structuring them and encouraged Agnieszka to try this as well. Agnieszka was anxious and uncertain about the prospect, but she did that and discovered that her fears had been unfounded as the children competently managed the task on their own.

Last, but not least, the regular meetings were important for pragmatic reasons, because they offered the teachers, busy with their everyday duties as they were, an extrinsic motivation to move beyond their routine and make time to carry out the project work. Dagmara frankly confessed: "I knew that a meeting was

approaching, and I had to make some changes so as to have something to talk about." Because altering one's practices, however urgent it feels, is emotionally challenging, it is easy, as she said, "to come up with excuses." Therefore, the rhythm and the sense of mutual commitment that a learning community develops should not be underestimated as factors in sustaining individual change efforts. As Dagmara concluded, "having this experience, I think that all teachers should be meeting, not only in their own preschool, but indeed in a group outside of it, and talking about what they are doing and sharing experiences."

Concluding thoughts

"Deep changes in practice can only be brought about by those closest to the day-to-day work of teaching and learning," Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009, p. 39) observe. Żytko (2015) adds that the process of changing a teacher's work style hinges both on expert support and collaboration with other educators who share their experiences and ideas and compare the results of their actions. This is corroborated by the project described in this paper. Despite its micro scale and short duration, it produced significant effects for the participating teachers and children. It gave the children an opportunity to experience themselves as agents in the research project, and generated mechanisms for them to enjoy their participation rights in a longer run. The teachers modified their professional practice and, perhaps more importantly, went through an intellectual transformation, as they acquired new tools for better capturing and naming their own practice, which could support their transformation efforts in other contexts. From this perspective, the project has shown that change – both in children's lives in ECEC and in teachers as professionals – is achievable through a low-key endeavor that does not require extensive resources and can be integrated with everyday work requirements.

Yet such projects have their limitations. The effectiveness of our work partly depended on the support the teacher-researchers obtained from their principals and some cooperation from their colleagues. Without those, the process would have been much more challenging, and the project group would have been all the more important. Further, the collaboration of the team members was limited to group meetings. Time constraints prevented the participants from expanding it to include mutual visits, which would have buttressed their becoming conscious of their practice. Dagmara made it clear: "When you look carefully, there are all these small things. Heaps of them. And these are only the things that I've become aware of, and I keep thinking about the masses of things that I'm not yet aware of, and if an outsider came and looked, they would say: 'And there is something

here and there, and there.'" Involving observers from outside of the project team who would share their perspectives could be even more instrumental in enabling the teachers to identify problematic dimensions of their work and evaluating the results of their actions, and should be considered in future research.

Ultimately, no matter how significant, the changes that single teachers are capable of making can only be limited. The systemic constraints, be it in individual preschools or on the national level, may effectively preclude teachers embracing or progressing in transformative work; and effectively tackling such obstacles can be beyond individuals' power. This raises questions concerning the feasibility of wider social changes that critical action research presumes through such small-scale projects. Projects like ours are partial, only representing local attempts at changing children's position and enabling small groups of teachers to experience the potential of collaborative action research. As Lansdown (2010) makes clear in relation to the enactment of children's participation rights, while this kind of work is important, it is insufficient. This observation is applicable to educators' professional development as well. Systemic changes are needed, both in teachers' preservice and continuing education and in institutional mechanisms for children's participation. Small-scale projects cannot and must not replace wider efforts. Still, projects like ours can and do contribute to making children's and adults' experience of their shared life in educational institutions more enjoyable, meaningful, and fulfilling, and thus have their place in multidimensional transformative endeavors.

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