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**Hallmarks of participation—children’s conceptions of how to get access to communities in Norwegian Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)**

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## Hallmarks of participation—children's conceptions of how to get access to communities in Norwegian Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

This study focuses on children's participation in community and the research question is as follows: *What do children describe as hallmarks influencing their ability to participate in the ECEC community?* The study is based on a qualitative hermeneutic analysis of semi-structured group interviews with 12 five-year-old children from three different Norwegian ECEC institutions. How children express that they are included, mutually accepted and engaged with others are interpreted as hallmarks for participation. The main theoretical basis is Biesta's view of democracy as both action and a mode of togetherness, and also his understanding of education as socialisation, qualification and subjectification. The analysis of the group interviews resulted in five broad categories of the children's descriptions of their prerequisites for participation: trust, responsibility for others, adapting to the institutional rules, freedom to choose and refuse community, and common ground. At the end the findings are discussed and seen in relation to some implications for theory and practice.

Keywords: participation; community; democracy; children's experience; ECEC

### Introduction

Nordic curricula consider early childhood education as a place where children should experience participation and democracy (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017). However, research shows that participation and democracy are complex, multi-dimensional concepts interpretable in different ways (Johansson et al., 2016; Sinclair, 2004). This can lead to different ways of operationalising and practicing these concepts. A literature search shows that studies on children's participation in early childhood education (ECEC) settings have increased during recent years. However, the focus of research and pedagogy has largely been on children's individual participation (Emilson, 2008; Emilson & Johansson, 2017; Johansson et al., 2016). Previous research has shown children need and want to

1  
2  
3 participate and share in community with others (Corsaro, 2003; Grindheim, 2014; Koivula,  
4  
5 2017; Kultti and Odenbring, 2014). Participation in peer-group events is important for  
6  
7 children's development, learning and well-being (Björk-Willén, 2007). There is a lack of in-  
8  
9 depth knowledge about how children construct their everyday lives and how their interactions  
10  
11 contribute to participation and exclusion processes (Broström, 2006; Einarsdóttir, Dockett,  
12  
13 and Perry, 2009; Theobald, Danby, and Ailwood, 2011, 24). Johansson and Puroila, (2017)  
14  
15 show that early childhood education as a cultural meeting place for collective relationships is  
16  
17 still an unsolved challenge.  
18  
19  
20

21  
22 The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) emphasises that children are  
23  
24 active participants entitled to participate in their own lives (United Nations, 1989). According  
25  
26 to Davis (2014), UNCRC focuses too much on the individual child. She opines that to  
27  
28 maintain social sustainability the focus must also be maintained on collective rights. Focusing  
29  
30 on groups instead of individual children is also a new and important perspective in  
31  
32 questioning what good quality in ECEC is and should be (van Schaik, Leseman, and de Haan,  
33  
34 2017).  
35  
36

37  
38 Accordingly, it is necessary to look deeper into young children's participation in  
39  
40 everyday life in early childhood education (Theobald et al., 2011), especially in relation to the  
41  
42 social agency of social participation (Ife, 2009; Percy Smith and Thomas, 2010, 359).  
43  
44

45  
46 This study intends to add important and contextualised knowledge to the research field  
47  
48 looking at children's perspectives on processes for participation in communities in ECEC<sup>1</sup>  
49  
50 everyday life. This is important for supporting children's rights to actively participate in  
51  
52 developing ECEC institutions as democratic communities. The overarching aim of this study  
53  
54 is *to gain new knowledge about children's own perspective of their conditions for*  
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58  
59 <sup>1</sup> In this text ECEC refer to Norwegian ECEC settings which means daycare centers where children  
60 are between 1-5 years.

1  
2  
3 *participation in early childhood education and care with specific focus on the collective*  
4 *dimension of participation.* It is done through an empirical study scrutinising how groups of  
5  
6 children express how they are part of, included in, accepted by and engaged in communities  
7  
8 with others. Accordingly the research question is the following: *What do children describe as*  
9  
10 *hallmarks influencing their ability to participate in the ECEC community?*  
11  
12

13  
14  
15 In this study democracy is based on Biesta's proposal of democracy as a particular  
16  
17 mode of human togetherness and opportunities for action (2006, 2011).  
18

19 The concept 'participation' in this study refers to how children are taking part, included,  
20  
21 accepted and engaged in communities with others (Molin, 2004). Emphasis is put upon the  
22  
23 children's own perceptions and expressions regarding possibilities for being part of peer  
24  
25 communities. Participation is a prerequisite for a democratic society and is accordingly of  
26  
27 relevance in ECEC everyday life (Melhuus, 2015, 68). The term 'communities' is defined as  
28  
29 intersubjective situations where more than two persons interact or talk about a common issue.  
30  
31 Communities are characterised by the fact that the persons involved have shared repertoire,  
32  
33 mutual engagement and joint enterprises (Wenger, 1998, 73).  
34  
35  
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38

### 39 ***Previous research***

40  
41 Literature search on children's own perspective on participation in community shows that this  
42  
43 perspective still is sparsely studied. The few studies that were found focused mainly on the  
44  
45 individual child's perspective and not their abilities to participate in communities  
46  
47 (Einarsdottir, 2005; Karlsson, 2009; Pettersvold, 2014).  
48  
49

50  
51 Present research is often focused on educators' attitudes or their understanding of  
52  
53 democracy and participation (Emilson & Johansson, 2017). Participation from this  
54  
55 perspective is often shown to be restricted to individual choices and limited by educators'  
56  
57 power (Emilson & Johansson, 2017; Johansson et al., 2014). For example in questions  
58  
59 matters the schedule for teachers planning is it difficult for the children to participate because  
60

1  
2  
3 educators often dismissed or ignored children's claims (Johansson et al.,2014). This study  
4  
5 also shows that children adopted the rules in the school system, rather than being active  
6  
7 participants in constructing the system as such.  
8  
9

10 Research also shows that children have better opportunities to gain influence when  
11  
12 activities and play are initiated by themselves, rather than in routine situations and activities  
13  
14 initiated by educators<sup>2</sup> (Dolk, 2013; Emilson, 2008). Dolk's study (2013) showed for example  
15  
16 that the children had opportunities to participate in the community, but mostly if their input or  
17  
18 actions were based on what the adults had planned and what expectations they had for  
19  
20 children's ways to being.  
21  
22

23  
24 Other studies (Kultti and Odenbring, 2014; Löfdahl and Hägglund, 2006a) show how  
25  
26 children in collective activities use strategies like avoidance, silence, negotiation and  
27  
28 collaboration and partial acceptance to achieve personal autonomy by managing to resist the  
29  
30 institutional discourse of collective activities.  
31  
32

33 Several studies have questioned how children negotiate participation in adult-led  
34  
35 activities and strive to conform to social relations and positions (Ivarsson, 2003; Löfdahl and  
36  
37 Hägglund, 2006b; Pettersvold, 2015). In addition, knowledge about rules and conditions for  
38  
39 playing, age and gender are central criteria for children's negotiation for access to shared  
40  
41 activities with others (Markström and Halldén, 2009; Hännikäinen, 2001). Hännikäinen's  
42  
43 (2001) study, for example shows that children's use of playful actions in play encourage  
44  
45 togetherness among the children. Similar results are to be found in Johansson (2016) study of  
46  
47 conflicts and resistance in ECEC, where playfulness was identified to be used by the children  
48  
49 in communication of resistance.  
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59 <sup>2</sup> In this study, all adults working in children's groups in ECEC are called educators, because the study  
60 does not differentiate between their educational backgrounds.

1  
2  
3 Research also shows that the right to have and to decide about toys, age and  
4  
5 friendships are central aspects to access to participate in community with peers (Grindheim,  
6  
7 2014). Reactions towards injustice, resistance and anger are also considered important for  
8  
9 children's participation in this study. Dutch researchers reported that children in day-care  
10  
11 settings use common ground, cooperation and care to express and create a sense of  
12  
13  
14  
15 togetherness (de Haan and Singer, 2001).

16  
17 To summarise, previous research shows that multiple and complex factors contribute  
18  
19 to children's possibilities for participation in everyday activities in the ECEC institutions.  
20  
21 Although these factors are largely identifiable, research on access to participation in the  
22  
23 ECEC community from a children's perspective, and on community-oriented participation, is  
24  
25 still lacking.  
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29

### 30 *Theoretical framework*

31  
32 The study has a community-oriented approach to democracy, building on empirical data  
33  
34 dealing with children's experiences. Hart (2008, 45) suggests children's best opportunities for  
35  
36 democratic experience come from sustained involvement in a group. Similarly, Biesta (2009)  
37  
38 argues that citizens develop their democratic competence through qualification (developing  
39  
40 new knowledge), socialisation (becoming part of existing orders) and subjectification (for  
41  
42 example, self-esteem in action and thereby thinking and acting independently). The  
43  
44 subjectification dimension is at the core because it creates the ability to act as unique and  
45  
46 meaningful subjects.  
47  
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49

50  
51 The democratic condition in education contexts lies in the subjectification dimension,  
52  
53 because this refers to processes driven by a desire to belong in a community living together as  
54  
55 different people not merely driven by norms related to what an individual is or should be  
56  
57 (Biesta, 2011). Biesta (2015) believes there is an unfortunate tendency for politicians to focus  
58  
59 on the qualification issue, through measurement of production and academic skills. According  
60

1  
2  
3 to his perspective good quality in education consists of finding a meaningful balance between  
4  
5 qualification, socialisation and subjectification. Biesta's (2009) views the subjectification  
6  
7 dimension as a key aspect for democratic practices and children as citizens and contributors in  
8  
9 democratic processes (Biesta, 2011). This view makes it relevant to study children's  
10  
11 perspective according to their descriptions of how to get access to participation in  
12  
13 communities according to how they are met by other children, which is this article's main  
14  
15  
16  
17 issue.

### 20 21 **Methodology**

22  
23 In this study, to investigate what children describe as hallmarks influencing their  
24  
25 ability to participate in the ECEC community, a qualitative hermeneutic interpretive approach  
26  
27 is chosen (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2008; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). The reason for this  
28  
29 choice is because we want to understand the meaning behind the children's expressions  
30  
31 through a dialectical approach, where perceptions are central. The epistemological interests in  
32  
33 such an approach are to understand meaning and to admit that human existence is based on  
34  
35 the interpretation. The aim is not to develop truth, but rather to explore perceptions as a way  
36  
37 to understand others (Ricoeur, 1971). In this way we try to come closer to the children's own  
38  
39 voices, at the same time being aware of the difficulties in understanding and interpreting  
40  
41 children's perceptions. Researchers always have a pre-understanding and horizon which  
42  
43 impact on the research's direction and validity (Gadamer, 1975). Throughout the analysis  
44  
45 process we deliberately searched to beware aware of that.

46  
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48  
49  
50 In this study we search for patterns of meaning using a hermeneutic, descriptive  
51  
52 approach. To reach an understanding of hallmarks for participation from the children's point  
53  
54 of view, we used qualitative semi-structured group interviews with children. These interviews  
55  
56 were part of a larger field study carried out from autumn 2016 to winter 2017. In the analysis  
57  
58 we consider parts and whole as operating dialectically with the data, seen in relation to the  
59  
60



1  
2  
3 context (Ricoeur, 1971). We also operate dialectically between an inductive and deductive  
4 approach to understand the data as a whole. Through the process we have tried to criticize our  
5 interpretations asking ourselves could this be interpreted differently.  
6  
7  
8  
9

### 10 11 *Participants*

12 Approaching 5-year olds children has ethical connotations. In this study we approached the  
13 five-years old children in three different Norwegian ECEC settings. These groups were  
14 strategically selected from the BePro project sample ([www.goban.no](http://www.goban.no)) due to variations in  
15 group size (16-48 children), organisational form (department, base/flexible), geographical  
16 location (one rural, two urban), institutional size (80-230), and ownership (two municipal, one  
17 private). The purpose of this selection was to secure a wide and rich variety in the empirical  
18 data to use in the analysis. The children involved in this study have been part of the GoBaN  
19 study over several years (T1-T2). In each of the selected ECEC settings three interviews were  
20 conducted with four children (n= 12; seven girls and five boys). The educators selected the  
21 children based on their interest in and willingness to participate.  
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### 38 *Group interviews*

39 Interviewing children can require a conscious relationship with the perspective of power,  
40 sensitivity in their presence and respect to secure their integrity (Farell, 2005). It is important  
41 to be aware of aspects of power and asymmetry between researcher and children (ibid). Group  
42 interviews allow children a certain degree of freedom to answer or not and can also create a  
43 more equitable balance of power when they are numerically superior (Eide and Winger, 2003;  
44 Seland, 2009).  
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54 The interview guide was piloted and a clearer link between the questions and specific  
55 activities and situations in the ECEC groups was made to make it easier for the children to  
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1  
2  
3 connect the questions to their own everyday lives in ECEC. Semi-structures interviews were  
4  
5 used to ensure that the same topics and main issues were addressed in all interviews.  
6  
7

8           The three interviews lasted 21, 26 and 38 minutes. They were audio-recorded and  
9  
10 transcribed immediately afterwards. Two interviews took place in the ECECs' meeting rooms,  
11  
12 and the third in a small group room used for ECEC groups. The aim was to make the  
13  
14 interview situations as comfortable and as similar as possible to an ordinary conversation in a  
15  
16 daily activity in ECEC. Therefore, the interviews took place after the field researcher (first  
17  
18 author) had spent several days at the ECEC to get to know the children. A drawing activity  
19  
20 was also conducted as the interviews were performed, which made the situation more  
21  
22 familiar.  
23  
24

25  
26           The flexibility of the semi-structures interviews enable researchers to also capture the  
27  
28 children's utterances in conversations, yielding more comprehensive and authentic data for  
29  
30 analysis. In all three interviews the questions in the prepared semi-structured interview were  
31  
32 used in a flexible way considered to take the children's utterances into consideration  
33  
34 throughout the conversations. The questions concerned different themes on participation, for  
35  
36 example, what the children liked to do and if there was something that hindered them from  
37  
38 doing what they wanted, their reflections on being seen and met in ECEC (or not), and what  
39  
40 they must be able to attend in ECEC. In all three interviews the questions in the prepared  
41  
42 semi-structures interview were used in a flexible way considered to take the children's  
43  
44 utterances into considerations throughout the conversations. In retrospect, we see that the  
45  
46 children's answers could have been followed up more extensively. For example, when Alex in  
47  
48 ECEC 1 said he never raises his hand in circle times, we might have asked why.  
49  
50  
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### 55 ***Ethical considerations***

56  
57 The parents gave written consent and the children were well informed about their right to  
58  
59 withdraw at any time without explanation (NESH, 2016). They were also informed about  
60

1  
2  
3 where the interview would take place. The study is approved by the Norwegian Social  
4 Science Data Service (NSD). The data is handled with confidentiality, coded to be anonymous  
5 and securely stored. Three families prevented their children from participating, and these  
6 children were not included in the data material.  
7  
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### 13 *Analysis*

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16 The analysis can be described in three main, interrelated steps. The interviews were first read  
17 carefully, both as a whole and parts, with an open hermeneutic (Gadamer, 1975) approach.  
18 The next step was to read them repeatedly to scrutinise the children's expressions based on  
19 similarities, variations and recurrent patterns in the children's responses and interpret their  
20 meanings and patterns of participation in everyday ECEC communities. On some issues, a  
21 shared meaning emerged in the three interviews, as the children's answers were  
22 homogeneous. The children's descriptions were somewhat consistent in questions about what  
23 they like, what they need to be able to go to ECEC, what makes them happy and what they  
24 think is nice / not nice in ECEC.  
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37 The findings illuminate a variation on how the children talked about their experiences  
38 in the ECEC. In the third step, variations of utterances regarding the conceptions under  
39 scrutiny were grouped into five broad categories representing various hallmarks for  
40 participation as presented below.  
41  
42  
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44  
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46 The interviews were preformed and transcribed by the first author, thereafter  
47 translated and analysed by all the authors. The results were finally discussed and critically  
48 scrutinised between the authors. Additionally, a colleague experienced in this field gave  
49 valuable comments on a later version of the article. This contributed as we see it, jointly to  
50 secure the quality of the study.  
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## Results and discussions

The analysis resulted in five categories: a) *trust*, b) *responsibility for others*, c) *adapting to the institutional rules*, d) *freedom to choose and refuse community* and e) *common grounds*, which are described and discussed in relation to relevant theory and research below. Numbers identify the ECEC, and the participants' names are fictitious. All the ECEC are represented in the quotes.

The categories represent variations identified according to children's perspectives of hallmarks for participation in peer groups. Some categories appeared more often than others, for example, responsibility for others, common grounds and adaption to institutional rules. Other categories appeared more seldom like freedom to choose and refuse community, and also the category of trust. Together these categories offer a broad picture of hallmarks of importance for taking part in peer communities in ECEC -settings as seen from the perspective of the children.

### *Trust*

In this category, the hallmarks of participation in ECEC communities is centred on trust in others: that others will neither fail you when you need them, nor offend you or disclose shared secrets. Lack of trust can contribute to avoidance of taking initiatives, fearing they will be perceived in an unpleasant and negative way leading to violation of the subjectivity, according to the children. A quote from Nils in ECEC 2 describes his fear of being laughed at during his performance as 'star boy' in the Lucia procession:

‘Researcher: Nils, I saw for instance that you felt sorry when using that star hat, do you remember?’

Nils: Yes.

Eli: Why so?

Researcher: You can tell us; why did you feel sorry?

1  
2  
3 Nils: Because, if it [the star hat] should bounce up they might laugh at me, and I would  
4 not have liked that.  
5

6 Researcher: So you were a bit scared that they should laugh at you, but do they laugh  
7 at you at the department?  
8

9 Nils: No, but I mean by those [other children] who are younger [than me].'  
10

11 Nils expressed that he does not like, and accordingly does not want, others laughing at him.  
12

13 He did not believe that those who belong to his own group would laugh at him. He was most  
14 worried about younger children from other groups who would be at the procession.  
15

16 Nils's statements communicate the importance of reciprocal trust: knowing one can  
17 rely on others and trust a safe peer community. This is also about identities, one's own and  
18 others, experiencing oneself as part of a trustful community. This is in line with how Biesta  
19 (2014) characterises democratic practices and subjectification processes. He claims that the  
20 participants' initiative should be responded to without being corrected, rejected or disqualified  
21 to support children gaining trust in the world, trust in their own power and understanding of  
22 significant democratic aspects (Biesta 2014, 38).  
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34 Trusting that others accept one's initiative in a respectful and profound manner seems  
35 to be a central dimension for the children. Without trust, children may not dare to take  
36 initiative, fearful of rejection or ridicule. Previous research has shown that absence of  
37 children's own initiatives creates scarce opportunities to have real influence as participants in  
38 early childhood education (Emilson, 2008; Emilson & Johansson, 2017; Johansson et al,  
39 2014; Grindheim, 2014).  
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### 50 ***Responsibility for others***

51 This category deals with hallmarks of being part of community by the way children take the  
52 initiative to treat their peers well. The children talked about taking responsibility for others by  
53 supporting, helping, sharing and including others in play or activities in the ECEC groups.  
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3 The children in ECEC institution 2 reported how they acknowledge and want to include in  
4 their play other children walking around with their 'head down/bowed' because it is seen as  
5 an expression of sadness. They also described how they tend to say: 'You can join us,' if  
6 someone walks alone.  
7  
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11  
12 In ECEC institution 1, the children talked about when Mira was excluded from a  
13 community she wanted to participate in:  
14

15  
16  
17 'Jorunn: Do you remember, Mira, when Eli said you could not help deciding in the  
18 carriage shed, and we said you could still join in? But however you stopped crying  
19 gradually.  
20

21 Mira: Yes.  
22

23 Jorunn: Because it was Eli who said it first.  
24

25 Researcher: You felt sorry when she said you could not join in, didn't you?  
26

27 Jorunn: But then they said, oh we completely forgot it, and you could join in.  
28

29 Researcher: So you managed to sort it out yourselves.  
30

31 Mira: Do you remember when I cried the first time, but then I stopped crying  
32 gradually?  
33

34 Jorunn: You did not cry for a long time.'  
35  
36

37  
38 Here we see that Mira was initially excluded from being part of and influencing the play in  
39 the carriage shed, but when the other children saw that Mira was sad they realised that they  
40 had forgotten themselves a little bit. Mira was allowed to decide and to stay with them.  
41  
42  
43

44  
45 'Forgetting' in relation to how to be together, as Jorunn says in the quote above, shows  
46 that the children think about how to act towards and take responsibility for each other in a  
47 community. But children reversing their decisions may be due to the norms and rules in the  
48 ECEC that it is not acceptable to exclude someone from a community they want to participate  
49 in.  
50  
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55  
56 This kind of dialogue appears to be a democratic, action-oriented process. We get an  
57 impression from the quote that the children respond by challenging the initiative; first  
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3 excluding, but then incorporating the initiative of Mira. According to Biesta (2006, 2010)  
4  
5 subjectivity is a complex term that accommodates the individual's ability to act as a unique  
6  
7 and meaningful subject. Corsaro (2003) sees exclusion in play as an expression of children's  
8  
9 willingness to create community with those already in the play. However, when the individual  
10  
11 (like Mira) is challenged in relation to other unique people, their subjectivity appear and can  
12  
13 contribute new perspectives and understanding to the community. This shows how valuable  
14  
15 actions like taking responsibility for others and thereby making them visible are for children's  
16  
17 access to participate in communities in ECEC settings. This finding confirms previous  
18  
19 research (Karlsson, 2009) showing how children supported and took responsibility for each  
20  
21 other within the community by guiding their peers to maintain the educators order, rules and  
22  
23 positions. While this hallmark has limited previous research this study has demonstrated that  
24  
25 from a child's perspective it is important facet of participation  
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### 32 *Adapting to the institutional rules*

34 This category holds the hallmarks of adapting to the institutional norms and rules in order to  
35  
36 participate in ECEC communities. The children described rules like raising their hand,  
37  
38 listening, not entering a room without permission, sitting nicely during circle time and waiting  
39  
40 to talk until the educator is ready to listen.  
41  
42

43 Children expressed these rules as norms to adapt to. In ECEC institution 1 the children  
44  
45 described how some of the boys look at this:  
46  
47

48 'Jorunn: Idar and his peers, they just fly around like that all the time. All the others,  
49 they do not.

51 June: Moreover, if Idar is sitting in a place that is not available, then the educators  
52 must tell him that he has to sit somewhere else.

54 Mira: Yes, because it becomes always nonsense when they are not sitting properly.

56 Jorunn: Yes, and so I am sitting with them sometimes.

58 Researcher: You have to sit with them then.  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 Jorunn: I am sitting in the middle sometimes.  
4

5 Mira: Because they should not joke.  
6

7 Researcher: Don't you like when they joke?  
8

9 Janus, June, Mira and Jorunn: No.  
10

11 Mira: Because they make such noise that we cannot hear anything.  
12

13 Researcher: Okay, so it is difficult listen to [...] mm.  
14

15 Janus: Thus, Nina (educator) must sit by them.  
16

17 Researcher: Nina?  
18

19 Jorunn: And, they do not raise their hand at all; all the others raise their hand.  
20

21 June: Some boys, like Vetle does not raise his hand, Markus.  
22

23 Researcher: Then it becomes a bit boring?  
24

25 Mira: Then it becomes noisy.'  
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29 In this quotation the children describe how some of the children (boys) misbehave and make  
30 noise during circle time, because they want to sit where other children sit. They also explain  
31 how some of them sometimes have to sit beside these peers to make them stop. The quote  
32 suggests that the children are familiar with what is the expected of them, and what correct  
33 behaviour is during circle time. The children practice these 'right' actions to make themselves  
34 visible in a positive way to other participants in their everyday activities.  
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43 Adaptation to rules and regulations in ECEC and early childhood education to create  
44 conditions for participation have been discussed by researchers (xxxxx, 2013; Grindheim,  
45 2014; Kultti and Odenbring, 2014; Löfdahl and Hägglund, 2006b). For example, Johansson et  
46 al, (2014) found that some children learn the 'institution codes' better than others do, and that  
47 those children get more influence. In our study we can ask whether some of the children find  
48 the rules of, for example, circle time too restricting. And maybe some of the children, as the  
49 boys who joke and do not sit where they are told, find the circle time boring and of little  
50 interest for them to participate in. Therefore, they resist by running around, joking and so on.  
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3 According to Grindheim (2014) children's anger might be expressions of children's rights and  
4 legitimate ways of participating. Situations like the one presented in the quote are important  
5 for the educators to grasp so they can give the children democratic experiences, because a  
6 community can only be democratic if an individual is allowed to bring in his or her initiative  
7 when challenged by the different perspectives of other subjects in a world of plurality (Biesta,  
8 2015).

### 18 *Freedom to choose and refuse community*

19 Hallmarks of participation can also be about refusal to participate. This category is about the  
20 opportunity for children to choose to be part of community, but also to refuse to participate;  
21 i.e., being able to choose what or who to play with. Jorunn in ECEC 1, responding to the  
22 question of why it is important that everyone has someone to be with in the ECEC, talked of  
23 how it is fun to be alone:

31 'Researcher: Why is it important that everyone have someone to be with in the ECEC  
32 setting?

33 Jorunn: But I think it is fun to be alone.

34 Researcher: Do you think so?

35 June: Moreover, my dad thinks it is a little fun to be alone.

36 Researcher: Why do you think he thinks it is fun?

37 June: Because then he does not have to listen to all that nagging.

38 Researcher: So actually, it is alright to be a little bit by oneself in the ECEC setting  
39 also.

40 Mina: Dad likes when it's quiet.

41 Researcher: Okay, but here in the ECEC institution do you like being alone?

42 Jorunn: Yes, I like it.

43 Mira: Me too.

44 Jorunn: Only if I do not have anyone to play with in the ECEC group, then I walk  
45 around alone and play on my own'

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3 This quote is interesting because belonging to a community, having someone to be with, is  
4 very prominent in the material overall in light of what the children like most of all in the  
5 ECEC institution. It indicates that solitude is not necessarily experienced by the children as  
6 being the same as exclusion from a community. Perhaps the children are trying to  
7 communicate that it is okay to be alone and still be a part of the community if it is one's own  
8 initiative.  
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17 The analysis in this study indicates that children may want to be present on their own  
18 terms (Dolk, 2013; Emilson & Johansson, 2013) and have the power to assert their own  
19 integrity by refraining from participation in communities.  
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24 Based on our material we think that having freedom to choose or refuse to participate  
25 in community seems to the children to be central to their subjectification, meaning that they  
26 can be participants in their own way in communities with others. This has not been addressed  
27 much in research, but is according to the children in this study an important hallmark from a  
28 child perspective.  
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### 36 37 ***Common grounds***

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39 In this category the hallmark of participation is about maintaining common ground. The  
40 children expressed common ground in different ways. For example, by using the same  
41 humorous expressions and actions, referring to sameness in gender and language, common  
42 interests and being involved in the same activities. Below is an example of how the children  
43 made use of sameness and imitation to create common ground. In ECEC institution 3, the  
44 children said playing the 'imitation game' is among what they best like to do in the ECEC  
45 setting:  
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54 'Ada: So, it is a lot of fun to play imitation game.

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56 Researcher: Okay, how are you doing that?

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58 Ada: We do something funny and then the other *must* do the same.  
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3 Ole: Mm.

4  
5 Ada: Then we start with something funny and so we start to laugh.

6  
7 Amine: We do it [now]?

8  
9 Researcher: No, we cannot do it now; we can do that afterwards.

10  
11 Ada: It is fun, fun to play imitation game.

12  
13 Amine: Then we have to say a word [...], then the others must say the same, and then  
14 Ole [the one to do what the word means] must come up and go first.

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16  
17 Ada: So, it is very fun to play imitation game.'

18  
19 This quote shows how the children, by playing an imitation game, take care of each other's  
20 subjectivity, as they create room for, safeguard and build on each other's initiatives.

21  
22 By participating in this game, the children seem to create their own common  
23 engagement and cooperation, where the sameness can make them feel that they are subjects  
24 participating in an intersubjective community. Through imitation, an experience of 'we' can  
25 be constructed between the children, because it creates an interest in, and recognition of,  
26 others. A back-and-forth movement is created by the children's imitations, responses and  
27 continuations of each other's imitation initiatives; they create something special together  
28 (Brown and Levinson, 1987; de Haan and Singer, 2001; Singer and de Haan, 2007).

## 41 42 **Final discussion**

43  
44 In this study we investigated how children describe abilities to participate in ECEC, with a  
45 special focus on the collective dimension.

46  
47 The analysis showed that having *trust in* and *responsibility for others* seem to be  
48 important from the children's perspectives. Being part of a community presupposes that you  
49 put yourself at risk through your ideas, thoughts and actions. Having trust means that the  
50 children rely on other individuals taking care of their initiatives in a respectful, predictable  
51 manner. Trust can therefore be an important basis for participation, and thus a prerequisite for  
52 democratic practices and subjectification processes supporting children to experience  
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3 themselves as persons belonging to a community and worthy of respect (cf. Biesta, 2015). The  
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5 hallmark of trust may be regarded as mirroring the hallmark of *responsibility for others* as it  
6  
7 appears by supporting, helping, sharing and including others in daily activities.  
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10 Another hallmark concerned knowledge of how to interact with others, by for example  
11  
12 creating space for the children's *freedom to choose or refuse* how and if they wanted to  
13  
14 participate in community with others. Participation is often something positive and requested,  
15  
16 but here we also show that participation can be something a child wants to (eventually) retire  
17  
18 from. This hallmark is complex to accomplish in practice, related to the individual child as  
19  
20 well as the group perspective. If every child in the group could choose whether he or she  
21  
22 wanted to participate in certain activities or situations, this could counteract democratic  
23  
24 processes. However, children's expressions of those hallmarks indicate that it might be  
25  
26 important for educators to reflect on obstacles, power and complexity when initiating  
27  
28 pedagogical content in order to contribute to and secure all children's subjectification  
29  
30 processes. This requires from educators a deeper understanding of the underlying processes of  
31  
32 hallmarks of participation according to the children themselves. Giving children power to  
33  
34 choose to join in or retire has been stated as important aspect of participation in previous  
35  
36 research (cf. Grindheim, 2017; Pettersvold, 2015)  
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42 We also found that *common ground*, particularly expressed as sameness, contributes to  
43  
44 the terms of participation in a community. It may happen when children establish an  
45  
46 intersubjective relation where respect for others' different ways of acting is central, as shown  
47  
48 in imitation play. Common ground is expressed in various ways, such as imitating each  
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50 other's humorous expressions and actions and doing the same activities. De Haan and Singer  
51  
52 (2001) found that children created togetherness with other children; for example, by imitating  
53  
54 nonsense words.  
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3 Children's *adaptation to the institutional rules and norms* demonstrates the  
4  
5 complexity of participation in a ECEC community. In our study this was evident through how  
6  
7 institutional norms acted as obstacles as well as giving support in subjectification,  
8  
9 socialisation and qualification processes. These obstacles emerged, according to the children,  
10  
11 through conflicts between the children on how to obey (or not) the rules and how this affected  
12  
13 possibilities for participation. Biesta (2015) speaks of good quality in education as about  
14  
15 finding a meaningful balance between the three dimensions qualification, socialisation and  
16  
17 subjectification.  
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22 Previous research has demonstrated that children draw on different regulations and  
23  
24 resources when they construct their own everyday life and social interaction with others (e.g.  
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26 xxxxx, 2016; Grindheim, 2014; Löfdahl and Hägglund, 2006a, 2006b). This current study has  
27  
28 demonstrated that when children play an active role in planning and performing daily  
29  
30 activities, and when their perceptions are heard, their feelings of participation in community  
31  
32 are enhanced. The application this has for ECEC is that it supports and shows an alternative  
33  
34 way for children to adapt to institutional rules by for example showing how children's  
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36 resistance to institutional rules may occur without using aggressive expressions, as Grindheim  
37  
38 also found in her study (2014).  
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#### 44 **Conclusion**

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46 The aim of this study was to examine conditions for participation in early childhood education  
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48 and care as seen from the children's perspective, with specific focus on the collective  
49  
50 dimension of participation. The core hallmarks identified in the analysis as important for  
51  
52 supporting participation were having *trust* in others; showing *responsibility for others*; having  
53  
54 *freedom to choose or refuse* how and if they wanted to participate; *common ground*,  
55  
56 particularly expressed as sameness; and the ability to *adapt to the institutional rules and*  
57  
58 *norms*.  
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3 The study confirms previous research underlining the importance of social  
4 relationships for children's participation (e.g. de Haan and Singer, 2001; Emilson, 2008;  
5 Grindheim, 2014; Ife, 2009; Johansson et al., 2016; Koivula, 2017). However this study  
6 expands and specifies the concept of participation in communities by describing central  
7 hallmarks of importance when searching for access to participation in communities. The  
8 active role of the children themselves, by allowing them forward and taking their expressions  
9 into account when planning and performing daily activities, seems to be of importance to  
10 enhance their feeling of participation in community. Taking children's perspectives of  
11 hallmarks into consideration allows for a view of concerns; for the self and others, for shared  
12 values, interests and knowledge and for the rules of the institution. This knowledge will be of  
13 importance for ECEC educators in their everyday work when actively support children's  
14 rights to actively participate in developing the ECEC as a democratic community.  
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31 This study has given insight into hallmarks of participation in three Norwegian ECEC  
32 settings. Whilst they may be perceived as quite representative from the Norwegian stance, and  
33 may point to elements and phenomena that could also be important considerations in other  
34 settings, they are in a strict sense only valid as an indication of what the children in the three  
35 study settings describe as important factors influencing their ability to participate in their own  
36 ECEC community. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that what children themselves point out  
37 as important is highly dependent on cultural aspects related to their own social environment. It  
38 can be argued, therefore, that this study's findings indicate that children's own voice of  
39 participation in community is of special interest for future cross-cultural research.  
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