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Safe, Inclusive Participative Pedagogy: Improving Early Childhood Education

Participation in Early Childhood Education

The Safe, Inclusive Participative Pedagogy (SIPP): Improving Early Childhood Education research project identifies and develops safe, inclusive and participative pedagogy, which is implementable and sustainable for communities where children experience particular stress and trauma. SIPP is a partnership project, working with research teams in each of the fieldwork countries (Brazil, Eswatini, Palestine and South Africa) and led by the University of Edinburgh, Scotland.

This briefing paper focuses on findings about participative pedagogies, exploring how intersecting inequalities impact on young children's participation and the different experiences of participation that impact early childhood learning.

Key messages:

- Participation is important to children, and they are able to express their views in various ways.
- Children's participation can be constrained by a range of factors, including by adults and learning environments.
- Early Childhood Education (ECE) settings were generally not perceived by children and parents as participatory spaces. In all communities there were factors that compromised children's participation.
- Participation is intertwined with other social, economic and political factors, including safety.
- Prioritising improved and shared understandings of participative pedagogies can help to improve children's experiences of participation.
- Misunderstandings and conflicting messages surrounding participation in policy documents can lead to misunderstandings in practice.

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Safe, Inclusive, Participatory Pedagogies of Early Years Education (2020-2024)

Early childhood experiences significantly influence children's later educational and health outcomes. Ultimately, if children flourish in the present and in their futures, this benefits children and their families, communities, and societies.

One of the biggest challenges is to 'reach the poorest, most remote and marginalised children' (United Nations, 2015) and to ensure high quality, inclusive early childhood provision even in the most challenging settings. Young children face deep inequalities and are often deprived of their rights, especially in challenging contexts where there are risks to their safety. Early intervention and prevention have become key international drivers for shaping early childhood policies and practices to address inequalities.

In particular, high quality early childhood education (ECE) can be a protective factor for children against the negative effects of poverty and other inequalities and can improve long-term developmental and employment outcomes. However, significant implementation questions arise, including:

- quality of learning experiences and professional support.
- culturally meaningful and appropriate learning opportunities.
- affordability, inclusivity, accessibility, and sustainability of ECE provision.
- pressures of, and responses to, the COVID-19 pandemic.

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SIPP is a mixed-methods research project. Early years education policy analysis and international systematic literature reviews exploring prevalence and burden of early childhood violence are complemented by in-depth community case studies in the four fieldwork countries.

This briefing paper focuses on findings about participative pedagogies, exploring how intersecting inequalities impact on young children's participation and the different experiences of participation that impact early childhood learning. We present local experiences from our four community case studies and identify cross-cutting actions that would enhance children's participation in early learning spaces, whether at home, communities or early childhood settings and programmes.

International policy understandings of participation

For centuries, children have engaged in social life, from labour to family care, to entertainment; however, their participation in decision-making has often been subordinated to adults' power and limited by social contexts. In 1989, the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), establishing an unprecedented framework of legally binding human rights for all children, including the right to participation. UNCRC's Article 12 outlines the right to express a view and have that view given due weight, commonly called the right to participation. In order to fully implement this right, Article 12 must be read and interpreted in connection with other participatory rights guaranteed in the UNCRC, including the right to freedom of expression (Article 13), freedom of thought, conscience, and religion (Article 14), freedom of association (Article 15), and access to information (Article 17). Thus participation, according to the UNCRC, includes but is more than 'taking part': it includes being involved in decision-making.

From a multilateral regional perspective, the African Union adopted the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child in 1990 to address issues relevant to African children. The Charter covers civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights for children, including the right to be heard (Article 4.2) and the freedom of expression and dissemination of their views (Article 7). Furthermore, Africa's Agenda for Children highlights the role of children in the aspiration to pursue a people-centred continent where all will be actively involved in decision-making (African Union, 2016).

From a country-level perspective, when a country ratifies the UNCRC they have the obligation to incorporate the Convention progressively into their national legislation. All Members States of the UN have ratified the UNCRC, except the USA (who has signed the UNCRC). Most governments have invested in establishing enabling environments to facilitate children and young people's participation and expression of agency (e.g., children's parliaments and councils), but not necessarily giving political influence (Josefsson et al., 2023).

Critics have raised potential pitfalls when implementing children's participation, including narrow outreach and partial representation, a focus on consultation rather than dialogue, the use of tokenistic approaches, a lack of inclusion strategies, and limited sustainability (Janta et al., 2021; Lundy, 2018; Shier et al., 2014; Tisdall, 2015). Furthermore, Tisdall (2021) argues that Article 12 can be less far-reaching and progressive in practice, as children face limited opportunities to influence decision-making. Adults remain guardians of this right, ultimately weighing children's abilities to participate based on age, maturity, or best interests (Lundy, 2018).

Whilst the realisation of children's right to participate remains challenging, child-focused agencies have developed a host of typologies, programmes and methodologies in the last three decades to understand, unpack and support the implementation of the right to participate.

Participation in local contexts

Each of the four countries explored participation within their own local context in order to understand participation within their local environments and how participation was perceived by different stakeholders.

South Africa

Of the three core concepts of SIPP (safety, inclusion and participation), the third one – participation – was the most challenging to unpack with research participants.

Those adults who took part in the study understood participation as being involved, included and being able to express oneself. Early Childhood Development (ECD) Centre practitioners explained how this was enhanced by children feeling safe, being encouraged to engage and creating a programme where children play freely, have fun and do things for themselves, within age-appropriate boundaries. As one Centre Principal reported:

> *"Children are not forced to participate in activities. I encourage participation through fun activities, leave them until they are bored then invite the child to join me. Practitioners encourage children to do things for themselves. Free play, they always like."* (ECD Centre Principal)

Certain activities were highlighted as opportunities to enhance participation, such as children telling their own stories, bringing items from home for theme tables and fantasy areas, and book sharing rather than reading. Parental participation was also highlighted as beneficial to children's participation, including the importance of inviting parents to come to preschool and building their trust.

A key challenge for participation in settings was that sometimes teachers may be too busy to pick up on what children say. An individualised teaching approach, which takes account of different needs and interests and allows for participation, was difficult to implement where there were large groups of children. This was explained by one adult participant:

> *"Taking on too many children in the Centre can result in limited individual attention. This means that everybody has to follow the same routine every day."* (Community leader)

There were reports that children were more assertive at home, shared what they had done at preschool during the day and made their wishes known - such as not wanting to sleep - which parents then told teachers. Ways in which children's participation could be supported at home included children helping parents

with chores or parents helping children with their homework, asking about the child's day, playing games, sharing stories and listening. Given that many children and adults live in challenging circumstances, these approaches needed a lot of support. Certain participants reported that some Centre staff talked down to parents, especially to young mothers and that made participation difficult for those parents. Many parents said they felt voiceless themselves and had low self-esteem and confidence. Added to this was a lack of trust between different groups in the community, with some parents feeling unable to influence decision-making processes. Language barriers for some parents also made it difficult to participate.

It was noted that many parents did not understand the value of ECD or participatory approaches; cultural norms could discourage such approaches and parents were perhaps too tired to attend meetings to discuss participation. An example from one participant captured some of these barriers:

> *"Parents haven't had participatory approaches modelled to them and many feel daunted. This is often based on culture which is viewed to be discouraging participation, and the tension in participation between guidance and choice."* (Advisory focus group participant)

Such barriers were experienced by all adults, as certain participants explained. For example:

> *"For participation to happen some shifts with adults need to take place. A change of attitude towards the child."* (Advisory focus group participant)

Children could experience restrictions to their participation as a result of adult attitudes, as one participant explained:

> *"It seems like (children) don't feel they have a voice. Because they are not treated like they have a voice."* (Faith based group leader)

During interviews, children reported that they were happy with everything in the preschool but did not have a sense of choice as the teachers told them what to do. Some children described feeling angry when forced to do something they did not want to do. Children also demonstrated agency in how they responded to conversations such as changing the topic, demanding a drink of water, comforting each other, and inviting each other to go and pee.

Power dynamics and relations were viewed as barriers that inhibited participation. This was raised at different settings: between practitioners themselves; between practitioners and parents (young parents in particular); practitioners and children; and parents or caregivers, and children.

"It (participation) is tough (for parents and children to participate due to traumatic contextual conditions). It is not impossible, but it does take a lot more support. So it's like we need to have a little bit of rain in the dry land." (Faith based group leader)

Brazil

Marco Legal da Primeira Infância, Brazil's First Law on Early Childhood 2016, highlights the need for children's participation in the formulation of policies and actions that concern them including:

- a participative approach in guaranteeing services for organisations, professionals, children and parents (First Law on Early Childhood, Section VI, 2016).
- society and families should participate in a variety of activities for the protection and advancement of children (First Law on Early Childhood, Art. 12, 2016).
- appropriately trained professionals should ensure the participation of children in the formulation of policies according to their age (First Law on Early Childhood, Single summary paragraph, 2016).

Different perspectives and varying emphases on participation were evident from the research in Brazil.

Parents defined participation as their constant presence in the daily lives of their children, interacting with them and supporting their development and learning. The following quote represents a fairly common response, but did not relate to parental participation in decision making in school:

"You must participate with the child. To see him grow, to be by his side. Because he depends on you. Don't maltreat him and give him an education." (Parent)

A number of parents said they would like to know more about what happened during their children's day at school. One response was:

"I am always present. I always ask: What did he do during the day? What was his behaviour in the classroom? What activities did he do? What did he eat?" (Parent)

However, some teachers complained that some parents saw early childhood centres as just babysitters and did not appreciate the importance of early education. Some parents and teachers talked about giving support to children in their school activities, attending meetings and other activities proposed by the early learning centres:

"For me, it is to give attention to what is happening in the child's school." (Parent)

"We need this participation. School and family must speak the same language. School and family need to understand each other. We must not confuse the child." (Teacher)

When talking about very young children, a number of teachers said they would sit down with children once a week and explain the week's program, taking into account what activities the children seemed to enjoy.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of early childhood centres reached out to parents with learning materials. However, low quality internet access, families having difficulty, and lack of experience on the part of teachers meant most centres could not do this.

Some respondents said that children did not participate in anything in the community and did not know of spaces accessible and interesting to children:

"We don't have good infrastructure here. We don't have good public squares here in Rocinha. We don't have playground equipment that works. Either we don't have sports courts or they are so neglected or crowded." (Community respondent)

"I would like there to be a public square. I would like there to be a swimming pool, I would like there to be music lessons." (Community respondent)

It was also noted that conditions within communities impacted upon opportunities to participate. Street violence with gun fire from drug traffickers and police inhibited freedom to walk safely around the community.

The demands on parents often limited their participation in school. Different family situations that facilitate or inhibit participation were cited, especially work hours and the time taken to get to work. There was little time to talk with teachers in the morning when many parents had to rush to work and very often another family member or a carer picked the child up in the afternoon. Some parents asked how they could be expected to engage in their children's education when they, the parents, could barely read.

Doing small household tasks together supervised by adults were cited as ways of bringing parents close to their children and some parents pointed out that these were occasions to chat with their children. There was little time to talk in the morning when many parents had to rush to work and very often another family member or a carer picked the child up in the afternoon.

Children's perspectives regarding participation in the community were very insightful.

What children reported they most liked to do was to be in the streets and to be able to play but that this was often not possible. Children's comments included: *"my parents don't have time"*; "*my mother is anxious"*; *"there are bandits"*; and *"my parents work too much, I take my sister to school"*.

Asked whether they were listened to and heard, in general, children felt their voices were not listened to. Several children responded with similar comments, such as: *"the teacher keeps talking and does not listen to us"* and *"we keep our hands up but the teacher does not listen".* When asked what they did to be heard, children replied with explanations such as: *"I scream until I explode"* and *"I cry, I shout and throw myself on the floor".*

Palestine

The team in Palestine conducted qualitative research that aimed to understand children's participation in Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Palestine by analysing the main policy documents and strategic plans that shape the practices of ECE in Palestine. Because the reality of children's participation is probably not to be found through analysing policy documents, the team also conducted interviews with key policy actors, stakeholders, and practitioners in the field of ECE to get a deeper understanding of children's participation. All interviewees were directly associated with ECE, as defined in the ECE policies, which encompassed children aged 3-6 years.

In analysing the policy documents and plans, children's participation as defined by the UNCRC was rarely mentioned or incorporated into practices in the Ministry of Education's policy documents. While experts and representatives from various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the Ministry actively contributed to the development of policy documents, children were not engaged throughout policy development. NGOs had incorporated children's participation conceptions and practices more aligned with the UNCRC, but they had primarily considered and involved adolescents rather than young children.

The analysis of policy documents and interviews with stakeholders showed that there were differing understandings of children's participation, with some leaning towards constructivist educational methods and psycho-social support opportunities. More specifically, children's participation was conceived among practitioners as learner-centred activities and opportunities through play-based approaches to have children share their feelings.

ECE supervisors expressed the complexity of fully implementing children's participation. One supervisor cited cultural factors that often prioritised adult perspectives over those of children:

"If we say that we have complete 'participation', then we are exaggerating. We try our best to reach a high level of children's participation, but we are aware that in our culture, the child interests are looked at from adults' perspectives, as 'we' see what is best for the child." (Supervisor)

ECE supervisors also talked about parents' priorities that may hinder child participation. Two examples were:

"Parents want their kids to read and write and expect homework." (Supervisor)

"In many cases parents move their children to those kindergartens that concentrate on teaching literacy and numeracy through traditional ways." (Supervisor)

Interviews with ECE teachers revealed limited views of children's participation and viewed participation from a pedagogical perspective. Teachers mentioned giving children choices during classroom activities, encouraging sharing of ideas and resources, and providing opportunities for children to express their feelings. For example, teachers gave practical examples when asked to define children's participation:

"[Children] share the toy they like with other children and put it on the resource corner for a while." (Teacher)

"I ask what you would like to be in the future, how do you feel today, and through that, we know what things bother them." (Teacher)

ECE teachers expressed a need for support in implementing children's rights and promoting participation and inclusion. They felt that practical experiences and training were necessary to effectively deal with children with disabilities or learning challenges.

In summary, the Israel military occupation of land and resources, and the resulting daily oppression, led national and international interventions in children's rights to be directed towards safety and protection, which in turn led to a lack of emphasis on children's participation, particularly in ECE settings. The results of this study agree with Quennerstedt's (2011) assertion that adults exert considerable power and control in traditional educational systems, with the assumptions that adults transmit knowledge to children. These factors hinder the implementation of children's participation even if it were required in national polices. There is a need to bridge the gaps in policy documents and practices and to overcome controversies and ambiguity in the educational system regarding the incorporation and implementation of children's participation.

Eswatini

Fieldwork revealed a discordance in teachers', parents' and children's understandings of the concept of participation. Some participants defined participation as the roles that should be played by both the teachers and the parents in assisting the child to get a good education. Some parents outlined that they participated in children's education by providing holistic support for their child's growth, development, and learning. This included: providing a safe environment; a healthy parent-child relationship; financial, material, physical, psychological and emotional support, following up on children's schoolwork and progress; and choosing which school their child went to. Availability of funds from parents also determined which school their child went to since, unlike free primary school education in Eswatini, there is no free pre-school education. This means children from a poorer background did not participate in early childhood education from the age of three but, instead, had to wait until the age of five to be enrolled for one year in ECE as a preparation for grade 1 of primary school.

Some parents outlined that they participated in children's education, attended school open days, helped children with homework and collaborated with their child's teacher. Some parents viewed participation as the role that must be played by the teacher to teach children:

> *"The teacher is able to teach the child at school. Then I check if what they are writing they know?"* (Parent)

> *"Ok I communicate with parents through a WhatsApp group and ask them to support me in this and that. If I notice that there is a child who is struggling with something I talk to the parent directly and ask for support. Your child is struggling with ABC please help me with that. I also encourage them every day to ask their kids what they learnt at school."* (Teacher)

Teachers also made sure children participated in their learning by using different materials and different methods of teaching:

> *"I use charts. If you are preparing for the day, for example let's say that you are going to be teaching about transport more especially road transport, I will have charts showing the transport. There will be papers, pictures, scissors and crayons."* (Teacher)

Children reported feeling listened to more at school than at home. Strong relationships with teachers were cited, as was seeing the teacher as their protector. In most cases, children felt they would tell the teacher if they were being bullied. However, many parents worked and were busy with their businesses, leaving children with helpers or siblings when they were not at the ECE settings.

What needs to be done?

Key recommendations arise from learning across the SIPP Project. The recommendations are not in order of priority.

Participatory pedagogies in ECE go beyond attendance.
Developing participatory pedagogies in ECE requires children to be attending ECE provision. The participation narrative needs to be widened beyond simply focussing on enrolment, without losing the vital importance of sufficient, affordable ECE places.

Staff need support to develop participatory pedagogies.
Participatory pedagogies in ECE require ways of thinking about childhood that may be unfamiliar for some staff. Further professional development opportunities are needed for ECE staff to address understandings of, and promote the values of, participative pedagogies in practice.

Parents' participation is important to support children's participation in their education.
Parents' participation must be valued and encouraged by policy makers and practitioners. This should include prioritising opportunities for meaningful communication between ECE centres and parents about their children's education.

Participatory pedagogies in ECE may help to protect young children's rights in the home.
Where parents are engaged with the ECE centres and with their child's learning, they may carry these ways of engaging into their home. Opportunities need to be created for dialogue between parents, educators and policy makers about participatory pedagogies and participative approaches within the home.

There is a need to bridge the gaps between policy documents and what happens in practice.
Misunderstandings and confused messages about participation in policy documents can hinder bridging policy into practice. More consistency and greater clarity are needed if policy is to inform effective practices.

The value of Early Childhood Education must continue to be strongly promoted alongside effective participatory practices, so that ECE is taken seriously as an important means to promote children's universal participation rights.

Further richness on the findings and developments in each of the community case studies can be found in outputs gathered together on SIPP's website.

How can you find out more?

SIPP has produced a series of briefings, including one that details its methodology. For these and other information, visit: **www.sipp.education.ed.ac.uk**

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