Productive Participation – Children as Active Media Producers in Kindergarten

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ABSTRACT

Media education and media cultures should be considered a part of early childhood education, because media has an important role in children’s lives. With a socio-cultural learning approach, children are considered active participants and competent actors with the media. In this paper, media education has been approached as a case study from the viewpoint of active production and participation. The processes of creating media stories included steps from orientation and planning to action and story production. According to the results gained via content analysis, children were able to share ideas and listen to each other’s choices and opinions in participatory learning. They were also social actors motivated to participate in conversations and negotiations. The joy of learning and acting together intensified the social learning.

Keywords
Early childhood education, digital literacy, participation, media production

INTRODUCTION

Media is part of education at every level of the Finnish school system, including early childhood, which is referred to as ‘kindergarten.’ The general goal of early childhood education is to support a child’s learning and development in every aspect of everyday life (National curriculum guidelines on early childhood education and care in Finland, 2005). According to the latest research (Kotilainen et al., 2011), media have a remarkable and important role in children’s everyday lives from one to eight years of age. Therefore, media education and children’s media cultures must be considered as a part of early childhood education. Zevenbergen (2007) suggests that these young students, whose early environments differ from previous generations due to new digital
technologies, can face potential gaps in learning. In order to re-conceptualize pedagogy towards more participatory learning methods and support for children’s active agency and creativity, the idea of participation has recently been adopted as part of Finnish early childhood education (Venninen, Leinonen, Lipponen & Ojala, 2012). New participatory learning methods mean that children plan, implement, and evaluate their own learning in social interaction together with educators.

Practicing media production can be seen as a core activity for media education in early childhood. The idea is linked to the 21st century definition of media by Jenkins et al. (2006): instead of thinking of media and digital culture as simple, one-way communication, it is better to consider media a part of a system of actions and activities (Jones & Hafner, 2012). In other words, it should be seen as a system of interactive, social processes. In this research paper, we will focus on how children express their agency and participation in a process of creating their own digital media stories in an early childhood education context. ‘Media creation’ refers to children’s orientation to interactive production process. The purpose of this paper and our reflective analysis is to offer exemplary accounts of what can be achieved in early childhood media education when children are allowed to make media in participatory learning practices.

First, we will introduce theories of digital literacy and media, and participation in early childhood education. In this paper, children’s participation is considered from the point of listening to children’s voices and initiatives to influencing their society and developing ownership of their media stories. Then the data collection and analyses for this study is presented. The study was conducted as a case study in two separate kindergartens with small groups of nine children aged three to six years. The processes of creating media stories included four steps from orientation and planning to action and story production. The classroom situation was documented with a voice recorder and digital pictures taken by the children themselves.

These results show children to be creative media producers even though they did not have previous experience of making media in an early childhood education context. They were also social actors motivated to participate in conversations and negotiations about the media-character but also about the process. Furthermore, they were competent in planning and producing media stories. Regarding participatory learning, they were able to share ideas and listen to each other’s choices and opinions. The joy of learning and taking action together intensified the social learning.

MEDIA EDUCATION IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD YEARS

Digital culture, and especially social media, seems to have become an important part of culture with active participation across various forms of digital
media (Carrie et al., 2009; Jenkins et al., 2006). From the point of view of culture consumption, reading (media literacy) is becoming a productive task rather than the mere reception of information. Therefore, literacy can be seen not so much as a skill, but as a social practice (Burn & Durran, 2007; Kupiainen & Sintonen, 2010). In other words, practices involving digital tools and literacy can be considered as socially constructed, states Lafton (2012) in her recent study with Norwegian preschoolers. She found that in constructing knowledge and finding solutions in digital practices, communication and sharing are essential. Sintonen (2012a) also defined digital agency as a subjective inner negotiation, which can be strengthened through creative, human communications.

Media technology, content, and culture have an important role in the everyday life of young children (Ito, 2010; Klerfelt, 2007). Skills for understanding and using media are typically learned at home and from peers during the first years of a child’s life. Therefore, children learn skills for using media outside of formal education and, if granted opportunities, could also use this competence in their early childhood education (Plowman, Stephen & McPake, 2010). The media world, with its sophisticated systems of sharing and creating, is not only for adults, but also for children (Kupiainen & Sintonen, 2010). Children reflect and create their own media culture as they interpret, reproduce, and negotiate all cultural forms and rules Corsaro (1997). Nevertheless, not much research has been conducted on creative media production in early childhood education. Plowman et al. (2010) state that in early childhood education settings, media education is still often considered through a desktop computer with or without Internet connection and educators in early childhood education have problems adapting ICT to their pedagogy. In her research with children and their teachers in an early childhood education context, Klerfelt (2006) has found that children and teachers could build shared understanding of media cultures with interaction and overcome the gap that exists between educational institutions and children’s media culture with the help of a development project. From our perspective, the situation in Finland is similar: new participatory and productive approaches to digital culture (re)production have not yet become integrated in pedagogical practices.

As a part of education, the media in general offers opportunities for dialogue. According to Korhonen (2008), these opportunities can begin the process of exploring and sharing perspectives, but also deeper understanding. Thus, media can provide learning experiences. Interactive learning, which is shared with peers and educators is not a new idea, and learning in socio-cultural approach as in guided participation (Rogoff, 2003) could support children role as competent actors and agents of their own learning. Plowman et al. points (2010) out that technology grants opportunities to make this the process of learning, which emerges in social interaction in socio-cultural paradigm of learning, visible, but also to help children master their learning. Prout (2005) states that, when supporting children’s learning in social interaction, educators should ensure that media is not considered a one-way influence, but that
children can also influence and create media. Empowerment within media requires media literacy, which means understanding and interpreting various media as well as using skills to communicate, discuss, share, and create media. In this way, the foundation for agency and experiences of participation is established (Kupiainen & Sintonen, 2010), and learned during children’s early years.

When encountering media, children do play with media devices and materials, as Plowman et al. (2010) have found in their studies. They suggest that playful actions and guided play could be used as a pedagogical tool in media education with children. This requires support for educator in exploring and learning and not only in using media, but also in practicing new skills and exploring social interactions with media and technology. Play is an important part of children’s everyday life in early childhood education settings, and is linked to socio-cultural learning (Hakkarainen, 2006; Vygotsky, 1977). When developing children’s digital literacy by using playful and creative pedagogies, and viewing the process of learning as socially constructed, might help educators. In her studies, Klerfelt (2007) has found that children’s storytelling with digital devices can be improvised and pedagogical interaction between children and their teachers’ can be implemented at levels that support children’s learning. According to Marsh (2013), these pedagogies are constructed with flexible learning spaces and multimodal production/design, which means the process of production does not have to be stacked in a single computer program or digital device. In addition, the cultural relevance of digital activities and contests as well as opportunity for digital play, has an essential role in children’s learning. A final component of Marsh’s framework is participatory practice, which allows children to act together with educators as active agents.

CHILDREN’S PARTICIPATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

In the Sociology of Childhood, Corsaro (1997) points out, that young children should not only be socialized in the adult world, but they should also be considered active participants who interpret and reproduce the culture of their society. Young children are capable of expressing themselves and be incompetent in understanding their experiences and thus sharing them with others (Smith, 2002). The participation of children can be considered a part of the socio-cultural learning paradigm (Vygotsky, 1977), where children are involved in their everyday life as active agents of their learning influence (Berthelsen, 2009; Smith, 2002). According to Venninen & Leinonen (2013), children’s participation in early childhood educational settings is a multidimensional issue. Here the important elements are: well-being and active competence. The well-being of children requires support from educators, such as fulfilling needs and providing an opportunity for expressing independent initiatives and learning together with educators and peers (Emilson & Folkesson, 2006). On the other hand, participation also involves active competences: being able to
make decisions and learn. These are parts of children’s everyday life in kindergarten (Smith, 2002). The essential elements of young children’s participation are expressions of joy and membership in a group (Venninen & Leinonen, 2013). As mentioned before, play also has an essential role in children’s participatory experiences. Bae (2009) claims that in early childhood education institutions only in play, can children use power and make initiatives and decisions that have influence. She states that in participatory learning play and playful activities, children can reflect and interpret the rules of their environment and learn to have an influence on them. Pedagogical support from educators to children’s learning could be offered through play (Hakkarainen, 2006).

In research on early childhood education, the issue of how to support children’s participation is important. An educator’s skills in adopting the child’s perspective and supporting children’s chances to participate are essential, because very young children cannot choose participation by themselves (Emilson & Folkesson, 2006). Child-initiated activities are part of participation, where the educator’s role is to facilitate, support, and build an environment that is open to child-initiated activities (Leinonen & Venninen, 2012). Children’s participation may become a reality in such a day-care group, in which educators have an interest in children’s perspectives and willingness to support joint activities, while joy and sharing are part of everyday actions (Bae, 2009; Emilson & Folkesson, 2006; Venninen & Leinonen, 2013).

In this study, children’s participation is seen as a common activity of interpreting the world with other children and adults who respect and listen to children. Participation is seen to include the right to self-empowerment, when children take self-initiated actions and practice skills of responsibility and power (Emilson & Folkesson, 2006; Venninen, Leinonen, 2013). Children’s capacity to formulate and express their views and to participate in decision-making is highly dependent on the context and especially the extent to which educators can support and facilitate children’s participation (Pramling-Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2001).

The focus of this study is to describe and analyze how children become involved in media-production and how their participation becomes visible in activities like this. The research questions for this study are therefore:

1. How does child-ownership of media emerge and develop during the researched media-production process?

2. How does child-participation emerge and develop during the researched process?

3. What phases of self-initiated activity of children are parts of this process?
CONTEXT AND METHODS

This research is a qualitative action research case study. In early childhood education action research inquiry, according to O’Connell Rust (2007), focus is on ongoing processes of actions by children, because many of children are still developing their verbal skill wherefore their actions are part of their voices. In the action research, the theoretical ideas are linked to action and relationships among the data and are represented in social interaction (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006).

Data Collection

The data for this study was collected from a case study carried out in two group situations including 3-6-year-old children (five children in the first group and four in the second) in two separate kindergarten groups (2010). The classroom situations were conducted in the context of media production with participatory pedagogies, where children could decide the direction of the process by guiding actions and making choices. Media materials were presented and offered at the beginning of the class by the researcher who participated as an active observer during the whole process. Media materials included short animations with music (1 minute) and coloring pictures of a media character presented in animation (examples of material: Sintonen, 2012b).

Children were allowed to use media materials as they wished and act with them after the researcher was offered a chance to play with them and take pictures of this play. In Finnish early childhood education, the culture of action is often that children must ask permissions to act from the teacher (Karila & Kinos, 2012). For this reason the researcher gave room for the children’s initiatives and suggestions by accepting them and asking the children to follow them. The children got excited about a chance to play freely with the materials, and they adopted their own media character and began to build their own meanings and create stories for these characters. During the process, the researcher participated in conversations and asked the children to tell about their media characters and their actions. The researcher also encouraged the children to go on with their media stories by listening to each child’s voice and asking questions about the story. The children’s conversations with the researcher and each other were recorded. The whole process was documented with two digital cameras and an audio recorder. This process of creating media stories included four steps from orientation and planning to action and story production as presented in Figure 1.
Figure 1. The pedagogy of digital story creation process was based on ready-made media education materials available online (see Sintonen, 2012b)

From a methodological point of view, this method comes near to the story-crafting methods (see Karlsson, 1998), where children willingly tell stories of their own choice. These are then written down by the adults. However, in this study children’s storytelling was part of their social interaction and other activities in class. As shown by Van Deusen-Phillips et al. (2001), children’s stories are not only presented with spoken language, but also by activities, gestures, and interaction. In this study, we focus on how children express their agency and participation in a process of creating their own digital media stories in an early childhood education context.

In this particular case, the ready-made media education materials were used as an inspiration for children – as a starting point for their own story creation and production. The media characters were first created in a rather traditional method with colored pens on paper and then taped on the wall, which symbolized a movie screen. The idea of using the wall as a movie screen was suggested to the children by the researcher. That enabled them to take photos from their own characters as a part of the story. Children could move their characters and draw the story world and the actions on the screen. Figure 2 gives an example of children using the movie-screen with their media-character.
Children could build their stories freely; the story was told by moving, adding, and/or removing characters and other subjects from the story (see figure 2), but also by choosing different camera angles. In the process, it was important to allow the children to use the digital camera, select viewpoints and subjects, and to choose the digital pictures from camera for animation. Indeed, all digital pictures were taken by children. Children could also use a computer to see the digital pictures they had taken, watch the short animation, and make an animation from digital pictures with movie-making software and the technical help of the researcher. At the end of both sessions, the children went through their media stories with the educators and had a premiere of their animation. Digital cameras, computer, animation, as well as crafting materials for the making of media-characters were available for children during the process. The data from these two classroom sessions, contained one hour and thirty-four minutes of recorder audio-data and observation memos written by the researcher. Also the digital pictures taken by children were used together with audio-data and observations to help researcher monitoring the media production process.

Analyze plan

The recorded audio-data was first transcribed (the length of transcriptions was 35 pages of written text) and then analyzed by content analysis together with written observations by researcher. The method of content analyses followed Elo and Kyngäs (2008) and contains phases of preparation, organization, and reporting. First the data was encoded in ‘meanings’ that could include one word or the whole sentence. It was important that each meaning was an item or an issue that could be cut from the context. For example, a
quotation such as, “This will be yellow?” was coded with the meaning ‘choosing’ or “This lives in the jungle with its baby” was coded with the meaning, ‘creating story’. For example, an observation of “child refuses a color offered by a peer” was coded as ‘maintains previous choice.’ The quantity of each meaning was also counted and represented for clarifying the scale of meanings. The numbers of meanings have been presented in Tables 1 and 2 in the results section. The mentions were organized in sub-categories such as, ‘shows independent initiative’ or ‘shared experience’ and then organized in two categories in the contexts of ‘interpretations’ and ‘production.’ Finally, these main categories are reported below. The original pieces of conversations as example of data were used to improve trustworthiness and clarity of research.

RESULTS

Media production is considered as two connected, growing phenomena: ownership and participation. They emerged first in the interpretation phase and after children familiarized themselves with the subject. Their impact grew and during the process, strong participation and strong ownership behaviors were identified (Figure 3).

![Figure 3. Growth of participation and ownership in process](image)

The interpretation phase began with children’s interpretation of the media character, including both participation and ownership building. In the production phase, children produced their own media material (e.g., objects, places, feelings and other story elements), which improved their ownership and created strong participatory experiences. The results are presented here within these two phases first on a general level and then, in both phases, as examples of participation and ownership.
**Interpretation phase**

The media character was presented to children by a short video clip with music and still pictures of the character. The pedagogical idea was to support social cohesion at first, as sharing and belonging to the group are an important part of a child’s personal experiences of participation. In addition, instrumental music without speech or any familiar song offered children an opportunity to imagine and explain the character, and form suggestions for creating a story. At first, the children’s interpretations were mostly descriptive in regard to the appearance of the character and the sounds of the music. When encouraged by the researcher, who accepted all interpretations and even asked for more, the children accepted that there were no wrong answers and all explanations were supported, wherefore they brought out other explanations. The children built their conceptions about the character rather quickly, and they described and analyzed the actions of the character at the researcher’s request. They were open to other ideas.

The children’s interpretations were not only described in words, but also demonstrated by/with the character. Codes that were connected with the interpretations were found in 394 instances (64% of all 615 mentions). The majority of these were descriptions of the character (f=107) either to peers or to the researcher (Table 1). Examples of these quotations are shown here:

Boy 4: “It plays something. Like it has something in its hand.”

Girl 1: “It is like a clam”

Girl 2: “I think it told us something . . . like peek-a-boo . . .”

Girl 4: “It has music.”

Girl 3: “This character has yellow hair, because otherwise it won’t see anything.”

Researcher: “Do you mean that the yellow [hair] creates some light?”

Girl 3: “Yes it creates!”

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A total of 81 instances of children showing and demonstrating any item themselves were encoded from the data. In this interpretation phase, children also asked for the group member’s and the researcher’s acceptance of their choices and ideas: they asked questions and made suggestions about the details (f=43). A few of them pondered some problematic aspects of their character (f=9).

Building ownership

Characteristic of the actions connected with ownership were quotes that include expressions such as ‘Mine’ or ‘I have.’ At the beginning of class, children did not use those expressions, but soon they began to refer to a character as ‘my character.’ They also invented names for their character or used characteristics of themselves to refer to the character.

Girl 4: ‘Mine is not [ready] yet . . .’

Researcher: ‘Can they exist in space . . . and sing and play and dance?’

Girl 1: ‘Yes, they can, at least MINE can!’

An important part of building ownership was naming the characters (f=20, Table 1). Children asked about the name of the character and after finding out it had none, they proposed suggestions. The conversation about naming the character began at the very beginning of class in both groups and children asked for support from the researcher and each other. In the first group, children decided early that the character should have a common name, while in the other they negotiated and discussed the names for a long time during coloring and creating the appearance of the character and its attributes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpretations about material and process</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>% of all mentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Descripts the appearance of characters</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>15,6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shows or demonstrates character’s actions</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>11,8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describes character’s actions</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>6,5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ponders character</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1,3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggests or asks about character</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>6,3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Names character</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2,9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shows independent initiative</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>4,9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintains on previous choice</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>8,0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>394</td>
<td>64,1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Boy 4: “I don’t like that.”

Girl 4: “What was your suggestion, Girl2? Do you have one yet?”

Girl 2: “Everyone could have a different name for it. Any name that you like.”

Girl 2: “What if we all had a different name?”

After this proposal, children began to choose names for their characters. First, they thought about their favorite media characters (such as Hello Kitty or Mickey Mouse) or names that described the colors of the character (such as Rose). The names also changed a few times during the class.

Boy 2: “Mine is not Bubble; it’s Tassu!”

Girl 4: “Have you found a name for it, Boy 4?”

Boy 4: “No . . . No wait! It is Mickey Mouse! Yes. It is a friend of yours [points out researcher’s microphone, which has two microphone foams as ears].”

In the other group, a common name was invented and decided upon after a few suggestions, before the children even began to color their characters. The name, ‘Hokare’, which means nothing in any known language of these children, was decided on even though there were some opposing opinions. However, the name finally stuck with the character and the children began to refer to their character as, ‘My Hokare.’

Building participation
The researcher actively created participatory experiences. At the very beginning of the class, children were more uncertain and tried to look for the right answers to the researcher’s questions about the media character. They learned quickly that all stories were accepted, adopted, and supported. They seemed to understand the nature of the class and began to participate in its playful activities.

Independent initiatives (f=34, Table 1) about character appearances and other aspects were initially an important part of the participatory activities. Children also stayed their own choices at the beginning of the class (f=55, Table 1), as in the first quote. Later they also supported others’ participation, as in the second quote, when they experienced that the researcher supported these participatory interactions between them.

Girl 2: “How about drawing some hair . . .?”
Researcher: “That is a good idea. One could because there is none in this picture. You could choose what kind of hair it has.”

Boy 4: “I’d want you to make it . . . like a picture.”

Girl 2: “We could make . . . draw other things for them.”

Boy 4: “Together?”

Researcher: “Good idea. We could draw here on the big paper things that your characters could be interested in.”

Production phase

A total of 221 mentions were connected with the second phase of action; producing media materials that were found from the data (Table 2). This constituted 36% of all mentions (F=615).

First, the children produced their media material only as a coloring activity, but soon began to build and interpret their character in terms of narrative. Their storytelling actions (f=51) grew and they no longer talked about the colors or other attributes. They began to build a relationship with the characters: they talked about the characters and explained their choices as if they were their characters’ choices. These actions brought the media characters alive and the children seemed to experience that the characters were participating in their play. They talked and acted on behalf of their character. Table 2 shows the different productive actions of the children during the class.

**Table 2 Production Phase**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Production of media materials</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>% of all mentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Produce a story</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>7,4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Find a contradiction from story or character</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0,9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiate or decide</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>4,8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain a choice</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4,2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve ownership</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>10,5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support participation of another</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>10,6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share joy or share a choice</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>4,4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>35,9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After the characters were finished, children added them to the movie screen and began to build a world for the character. The two groups had different reactions in this regard. In the first, a child shared an idea that the character had come from outer space and they produced space materials i.e., rockets,
planets, and space travelling gear. In the second group, each child began to build her/his own world and a story for the character. In this group, everyday issues like the home of the character as well as traveling were discussed.

Improving Ownership

From the data, 72 mentions were found of children building their ownership of the character. Mentions referring to improving ownership were mostly found from the second half of the classes in both groups; this was the point at which children began to strongly refer to their character as “mine” or “my character.” Ownership referred not only to the character, but also to the movie screen, which was called “our movie” and digital pictures “my picture” or “I will take a picture.” Children also recognized their own media character from the digital pictures and from an animation built during the class from pictures by children.

Boy 5: “I know my own. I can recognize them.”

Girl 2: “I know my own [character] . . . it told me it doesn’t want to be there.”

The children asked several times if they could keep their character after the class. They also suggested that the researcher could have a copy of the digital pictures taken during the class. In this case, these signals might reflect a feeling of strong ownership. Interestingly, children did not seem to build such strong ownership towards the animation, though they watched it willingly and were excited about the show. Only one child was more interested in making animation. He wanted to discuss it after the group had watched it and felt displaced when not all his pictures were in the animation. After a negotiation, the child suggested a conclusion:

Boy 4: “Why weren’t all of my whale [pictures] in there [animation]?”

Researcher: “Are there more? Maybe they are still in here [camera].”

Boy 4: “No worries . . . we shall make a second part . . . a whale part.”

Researcher: “A second part of the movie?”

Boy 4: “Yes. My movie.”

Strong participation

Joy and inner motivation are important parts of children’s participation in early childhood education. Both groups had many laughs, excitement, and shared experiences during the classroom activities. Children seemed to enjoy
This activity and — according to the observations — were involved the entire time (about 45 minutes per group).

Boy 3: “My Hokare is here. . . boo! [laughs]!”

Boy 4: “Here is the cockpit . . . .”

Researcher: “Oh yes, yes. Aren’t passengers allowed to go there?”

[Boy 3 and Girl 1 laugh]

Girl 1: “No, but you can . . .”

Boy 3: “You are a driver!”

Researcher: “Oh, . . . ok.”

Boy 3: “Mine [cockpit] is soo big, that there can be several drivers.”

Boy 4: “My Hokare drives this rocket on its own.”

They asked for opinions, supported other ideas, and built their stories on previous stories. They expressed their participation with spoken interpretations and stories, physical activity, and by production of their own and shared media materials. Choices, wishes, and shared decisions were all connected with their media materials. Children also helped each other and built their participation by asking others’ opinions (f=33) and taking their initiatives forward (f=40, Table 2). In their media-content production process, children needed to make choices alone and then share them with peers. They described and explained their actions actively to each other as well but also to the researcher, and shared ideas with others. The quote below contains an example of individual storytelling (Boy 3) and a shared decision, because the children decided to continue their stories together (Girls 4 and 2):

Boy 3: “Mine own had to go to the island and then it found a treasure [draws a treasure map with an X].”

Girl 4: “Come, Girl 2 . . . these [characters] could go play together!”

Girl 2: “Good idea . . . let’s do that!”

Shared joy (f=30, Table 2) inspired children to produce more ideas. Some physical activity was involved; children also expressed their interests bodily:

Boy 2: “[Tassu [Paw] would come visiting . . . [takes a character and goes to visit another].]”
Girl 2: "They could dance together . . . [takes peer by the hand and both begin to dance].”

Boy 3: “They fly with their planes . . . [makes a paper plane and shows how it flies].”

Participation was also strongly visible in shared interactions in both group cultural contexts. Children interpreted and acted as a group. They noticed and kept up initiatives and ideas of their peers. On the other hand, children also doubted or even rejected ideas they did not find interesting.

CONCLUSION: PRODUCTIVE PARTICIPATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD MEDIA EDUCATION

Observations show that children viewed digital materials in the same way as any items or objects of play and action in the kindergarten group. Even if this was the first time for both groups to have a computer and digital cameras available during pedagogical or class activity, they stated that they had used both devices at home. The video of the character was available to the children as well as the digital cameras, and children adopted them as an element of their activity. Children adopted digital cameras as a part of storytelling, created their media characters swiftly, and asked their peers to take pictures of them while working with their characters. They also took pictures of their own media characters.

In the first group participating and taking photos was part of children’s play – also when they used toy cameras (old cameras without batteries or film) in the activity. Taking digital photos and videos was therefore considered as a kind of media play for children, even though they disagreed when they learned that ‘pictures’ from the old cameras could not be loaded in the computer for the movie. Taking pictures was a form of play, but also a motivating activity that gave the children an opportunity to document class activities and use them as a part of their storytelling.

Girl 1: “What can we do with that computer?”

Researcher: “We can load your pictures about these drawings here from the camera into computer.”

They recognized their characters and parts of the story from the computer screen. Conversations, negotiations, and suggestions were also given and taken when a movie with digital tools was constructed at the end of the class. Children were excited about the movie and shared an idea to make the classroom a theater. They ‘sold’ tickets to the premier and commented actively on animation, as the quote below shows. The animation was viewed several
times and in the first group children suggested, that they could dance with their media characters when watching animation.

Researcher: ”Now the movie begins.”

Girl 4: ”I’ll watch!”

[Children laugh, giggle, talk, and comment on the movie all together]: Look, that’s mine! Where did it go? Is that yours?

Boy 4: ”What is this? . . . I didn’t see it.”

Girl 2: ”It jumps . . . only has one foot.”

DISCUSSION

This study shows that young children are committed to and very interested in creating their own media content (digital animations in this case), if they are guided through the creation process with the possibility of participatory actions. Children were given a picture of a media character as a starting point, but children themselves created the whole story and content around the character. This study concerning ownership and participation shows positive aspects of small children's media production competence in interpreting and producing media, especially digital stories. On a more general level stories are very naturally link digital culture production and children’s own thinking (Klerfelt, 2006). Since the process of learning is considered through a socio-cultural learning paradigm (see Plowman & al. 2010), media could also be considered as a two-way interaction, where children not only absorb information, but also create and produce their own media in interaction (Prout, 2005). In this study, children seemed to develop strong ownership of their media character and the stories built among them. Children created meaning for their media characters and stories about them in interaction with their peers and media. Media devices and technology were not the focus of action, but they provided an opportunity to document and share media material. Children used this opportunity willingly during the class, and discussed and negotiated the process of taking and viewing digital pictures.

The children’s joy and excitement was visible as they laughed and were actively involved in the action. The activities and issues they talked about concerned positive participation processes with issues of: decision-making; sharing; expressing initiatives; and negotiation. Participation seems to create motivation and involvement among children, which can be considered by Rogoff (2003) as social learning. Rogoff’s concept of learning is based on communication and social interaction, but also on observation and participation in ongoing processes. These results are in line with results on young children’s participation in Finnish early childhood education (Venninen & Leinonen, 2003).
and support earlier research (Sintonen, 2012a) of children adopting the element of digital agency through creative, action-oriented processes with adult guidance and support. In this research, classroom educators did not plan the actions in advance, but the researcher, who acted as an active observer, supported children’s initiations. As found before in Emilson’s and Folkesson’s (2006) study, children need support for participation and therefore the results of this research give new understanding of children’s digital learning and productive participation.

Children’s self-initiated actions in this study were considered as a base for strong participation. These actions were conducted and taken forward by children and the researcher in shared experiences; they are part of participation in early childhood education settings (Smith, 2002; Venninen & Leinonen, 2013). Since the teachers do not feel as competent with digital media as do children who are so-called digital natives, this approach helps educators and children create meaningful learning experiences together (Klerfelt, 2006; Prensky, 2012). Re-conceptualizing pedagogical planning and implementation from a ‘to children’ approach to a ‘with children’ approach (see Zevenbergen, 2007; Leinonen & Venninen, 2012) requires reflection on the paradigms of learning and conception of the child as an active agent of his or her own learning and development.

Using and producing media is an activity that fits well in the pedagogical learning environment in early childhood education settings in Finland. As has been shown, it creates interaction (in action per se) between children and the teacher as well peer-to-peer interaction. Using media devices offers opportunities to document activities and to process them from a child’s perspective instead of only collecting production or viewing learning from the teacher’s point of view. Documentation has given an instrument for the educator to analyze the issues that actually take place in everyday situations and educational processes (Dalberg et al., 1999). When also conducted by children, the documentation is deeper and educators can acquire children’s perspectives and adopt them in their pedagogical planning.

Digital production is a creative, communicative activity, which could bridge the gap between education and media (Klerfelt, 2006). In media education, critical issues such as equal access to the opportunities, experiences, skills, and knowledge that will prepare children for full participation in the digital world should be guaranteed (see Jenkins & al. 2006), also in the context of early education. Young children should be helped to confront the media and its model of the world and approached as digital content creators and participants. In this research, children were very committed to using digital tools (cameras) and showed interest in turning created stories into movies. In this case productive participation means children also affected the creation phases, the ways that media tools were used, and the situation of viewing the animation. Productive participation requires negotiations and shared decision-making. The future media landscape of these children might be filled with communi-
cative acts on many levels (Prout, 2005). For example, social media is actually about mutual recognition; media is no longer a one-way communication. According to Heinonen and Halonen (2007), recognition includes all positive feedback that an individual receives from being connected to a community. An important part of childhood media education is children and young people creating their own content with their own conditions – teaching and learning through media. This does not exclude the need for teaching about or with the media (Buckingham 2003). In the learning processes the three gaps of media education: Transparency of media materials, ethical challenges of social media and participation gap as present by Jenkins & al. (2006) should be taken account. Teachers can facilitate and enable children’s learning by providing productive and interactive participation processes, but they must be aware of media education practices in early childhood education settings and consider and reflect upon their pedagogics to ensure that children have equal access to use and produce media. When supporting children’s participation in media, these critical aspects could also be included in goals of learning, to be discussed and practiced together with peers and teachers. Though this kind of concept of critical media education with young children raises new questions of values and democracy education, these should be answered in future research.

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