

TITLE

Epistemological challenges on participatory methods with children. The ISOTIS pilot study on ECEC and primary children's views on inclusion.

PROPOSAL INFORMATION (TOPIC, RESEARCH QUESTIONS, OBJECTIVE, CONCEPTUAL OR THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ...):

Over the last decades, the representation of children, of their competencies and rights, has profoundly changed at socio-cultural and political level, as well as in academic research. In the wake of the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and thanks to the contribution of the 'new sociology of childhood' (Qvortrup, 1987; Corsaro, 1997), children have been recognized as competent actors, reliable informants and active citizens able to contribute with valuable ideas in all matters affecting them (O'Keane, 2008) – a notion of childhood, we may observe, well established in the early childhood pedagogy and curriculum since the early 80ties (Pastori, 2017). Hence, the children's role in the research process has been reconceptualised both theoretically and methodologically. Childhood studies have claimed the capacity for the child to be a researcher, with a shift from «research *on* children» to «research *with* children» (Mayall, 2003). Children have gone from being 'positioned' as mere objects, or, at most, subjects of research, to being research partners that can actively and meaningfully cooperate and co-construct along with researchers (Bessell, 2015).

The centrality of children voice and the importance to empower children have been emphasized to such an extent that their participation to the research process has been intended as a condition *sine qua non* for scholars of Childhood Studies (Christensen & Prout, 2002). More recently, the very question of children participation and the notion of children's voice have been critically addressed and deconstructed (Komulainen, 2007; Lewis, 2010). Particularly, research with children, especially with very young ones, gave rise to major ethical concerns, highlighting the inherent risks of oversimplification, hypocrisy, manipulation, practices more formal than substantive (Atweh & Burton, 1995; Fielding, 2004). As Mortari (2009) points out advocating the need of a «research *for* children», the now well established value and right of children's participation in research must not result in participation at any costs. Rather, research should aim at offering a positive, meaningful and significant experience to the children involved.

After a first phase of emphasis on children's voice and participation and a second phase of deconstruction and critical approach to such notions (Gallagher & Gallacher, 2008), childhood studies need now to rethink children's participation in a critical, yet constructive way. Notwithstanding that children's voice needs to find the way to be expressed and heard, these issues must be taken into account by researchers, especially when they focus on very delicate issues such as inclusiveness, wellbeing, respect for any difference. In these cases, the risk of manipulation of children's voice, as well as of hurting the young informants are higher (Bittencourt Ribeiro, 2017).

The present paper, set within the collaborative, EU-funded project ISOTIS (*Inclusive Education and Social Support to Tackle Inequalities in Society*, International coordinator P. Leseman, University of Utrecht; PI of the Italian team G. Pastori, University of Milan-Bicocca – <http://www.isotis.org/>), aims at developing further this methodological reflection. Its goal is to offer a critical analysis of the methodological issues related to access to children's standpoints, more precisely when it comes to sensitive issues such as inclusion. The research questions that we intend to address are:

- a) Given the ethical, methodological and political risks that research on sensitive issues including children involves, should we renounce to grasp their viewpoints?

- b) How can we involve preschool and primary school children in exploring and discussing how they experience inclusion/exclusion in school contexts characterized by cultural diversity and social inequalities?
- c) How can we address these issues in a way that can be sensitive, yet meaningful to children?
- d) How can we align our interest as researchers with children's competence, motivation and interests, guaranteeing the right of children's participation while taking into consideration the risks of such participation itself?

METHODOLOGY OR METHODS/RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS OR SOURCES USED:

The present paper gathers on the data of a pilot study conducted in Italy in preparation of a cross-cultural study that will involve eight countries. The study focused on pre-school and primary school children's views on inclusion of diverse and disadvantaged children in their school contexts. Specifically, we explored children's ideas on how inclusion, acceptance and respect for differences find expression in their classrooms. Moreover, recognizing that children should be given the opportunity to shape their own education (Pastori & Pagani, 2016), we elicited their proposals about what could be done to make their school (more) welcoming and inclusive to each child.

According to suggestions and indications drawn from an extensive literature review, the methodological proposal experimented in the pilot study hinged around the following key-points:

- a) children were involved in the research process as co-constructors and co-researchers;
- b) children's own experiences and stories were not directly under focus, since they might find direct questions regarding the topics addressed intrusive or tough to answer;
- c) a multi-method approach (Clark & Moss, 2001) was adopted. This choice not only met the need of triangulation, but also provided a richer and more comprehensive picture of children's viewpoints.

In fact, recognizing and listening to children's many languages (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1998) ensured that each child had the opportunity to explore and represent their perspectives in their own terms. Therefore, many different methods and techniques were used, such as participant observation, small group interviews, photo tours, digital book making, mood boards.

CONCLUSION, EXPECTED OUTCOMES OR FINDINGS:

This paper proposes a critical analysis of the methodological proposal experimented in the pilot study conducted in Italy. Drawing on the reflections that had led up to the design of our methodological proposal and had sustained the entire process of its implementation, this paper intends to offer an opportunity to reflect on the challenges and questions that arise from adopting participatory methods with children. Particularly, the challenge is to think how to shift from a "socially and historically situated methodology" (Sarcinelli, 2015:9) – that takes into account the social identity of informants, the specific objectives of the research, the social construction of childhood and status of children in a given context – to a method to be used in a cross-cultural study. We will explain the choices and ethical dilemmas we faced, namely concerning the right to consent to participate to the research. We will highlight the greater sensitivity and critical reflectivity that researchers should show, especially when dealing with delicate issues, balancing children's right to participate with the need to ensure that the participatory experience is of worth to them. Finally, in the light of the experience gained on the field, we will provide some suggestions for researchers who want to elicit children's perspectives about inclusion, acceptance and respect for differences in the school context.

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