

“We have to learn for ourselves” Participation of unaccompanied minors in a Finnish reception center



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According to the UN Convention on the Rights of a Child, every child has a right to be heard and to be taken seriously in all matters concerning him or her. Participation is a right of all children and youth in Finland, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Although promoting child- and youth participation in reception centers is challenging, it is important especially for children coming from the most difficult circumstances. The asylum process is long and frustrating, and without enough meaningful activities, the waiting time can harm the development and the mental health of the children.

This paper examines how under-age units of reception centers can work as institutions of non-formal education towards participation; what kind of participation do the unaccompanied minors want, and how can it be promoted? The article is based on a participatory action research (PAR) project with seven 14-17 year-old unaccompanied girls and their counselors. The results show that many girls preferred strong adult-guidance and security over active participation. However, most girls wanted to take more responsibility for daily tasks in little steps, with gradually decreasing adult help.

Key words: unaccompanied asylum-seeker children, participation, Children’s Rights, Participatory Action Research (PAR).

Avainsanat: yksin maahan tulleet turvapaikanhakijalapset, osallisuus, lapsen oikeudet, osallista va toimintatutkimus.

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Introduction

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (hereafter CRC), ratified in 1989 and signed to date by most UN member states, has contributed to the global impulse to promote the participation of children and youth by acknowledging it as their civil and political right. Article 3 states that all actions concerning the child should take into account his or her best interest. Article 12 declares that children and young people have the right to express their views freely, and to be heard in all judicial and administrative proceedings affecting them. (Unicef 2007; see also Mason & Bolzan 2010, 125.) A general comment (6/2005) to the CRC titled “*Treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside of the country of their origin*” states that asylum-seeker children should be treated primarily as children, secondarily as asylum-seekers. According to the Aliens Act of the Finnish Law (2004/301, section 5) the rights of immigrants should not be limited any more than necessary, and that in all decisions concerning “*alien children*”, a special attention shall be paid to the best interest of the child. The act on the Reception of Asylum Seekers (2011/746, section 5) has similar content; all actions should consider the best interest of the child, as defined in the Child Welfare Act (2007/417), and children over 12 years of age should be heard before making decisions concerning them, unless “*such hearing is manifestly unnecessary*”.

The CRC, together with the mentioned acts, can be understood as constituting all children’s right to participation. Participation is a fundamental right in itself, and it is also a means for children to realize their other rights, which are stated in the CRC (Lansdown 2010, 13). In this article I discuss par-

ticipation as a right of unaccompanied minor girls, and the need to broaden the definition towards a more culturally sensitive concept, acknowledging their ethnicity, gender and vulnerability. I discuss what kind of participation the unaccompanied minor girls want during their asylum process, and how youth participation can be promoted in the underage units of a reception center. The need to focus on girls arose from discussions with the counselors. Currently offered activities, such as football, mostly attracted boys. The girls complained repeatedly about the lack of meaningful activities, but were reluctant to join in activities together with boys. Excluding boys clearly enabled the girls to participate more freely.

The data used in this article includes interpreted interviews of each girl (n=7, G1-7), one interpreted group interview of all girls, and my field notes. At the end of the project majority (4) of the girls were 16 years old, the other three girls were 14, 15 and 17. The girls had come from three different African countries and stayed in Finland between 7 and 13 months. My co-operation with the girls started in September 2011 when I asked them to start the project with me. After that, I met the girls approximately once a week for five months. The girls participated in defining the problem, planning the action and analyzing the process and their role in it. The end-project which the girls chose was a camp with different activities. The individual interviews, which followed the project, focused on the girls' personal conceptions of participation in the reception center. I analyzed the interviews using content analysis, through the lens of participatory education and critical pedagogy.

Broadening the concept of youth participation

Perhaps the most influential model of children's participation is presented in a book *Children's participation* by Roger Hart (1997). Hart emphasizes the importance of considering the developmental phase of the child; the “high point” of participation does not mean eliminating the adults' presence, but a shared decision power between adults and children. The child's role has to be appropriate

to the level of understanding of the child, and also suitable to the different activities and situations. (Hart 1997, 40–48.) Lansdown (2005, ix, 23) notes that the level of understanding is not uniformly linked to age; information, experience, social and cultural expectations and levels of support contribute to the development of children's evolving capacities, which should be considered when guiding the child to exercise his or her participatory or other rights. This is especially important with unaccompanied minors. Many of them have had responsibilities in the past exceeding the capacities of a child of their age. Participation which is incompatible with the capacities of a child may hinder the child's wishes to be in an active position in his or her life (Lansdown 2005).

Hart's ladder, as many other models of children's participation, has been criticized for being too vague to provide a theoretical basis for forging an agenda for children's participation (Kirby & Woodhead 2003, 242; Thesis 2010, 343), and also for assuming that the conditions to participate are uniform for both genders and all youth (Honkasalo 2011, 123; Kivijärvi & Herranen 2010, 58). Participation is usually defined to meet the needs of the mainstream youth, ignoring the special conditions tied for example to ethnicity, gender or residential status of the youth. Many studies (e. g. Matthews & Limb 2003; Turkie 2010) show that most adult-organized attempts to promote youth participation favor older and more articulate adolescents, that is, those children most resembling adults, and also those who come from a certain socio-economic background (Mason & Bolzan 2010, 130). Other studies (for example Pachi & Barrett 2012; Sener et al. 2012; Petrovicova et al. 2012) suggest that different ethnic groups prefer different forms of participation, and that those differences should be acknowledged when promoting youth participation.

Developing “tailored” participation methods for different ethnicities is not an option in reception centers; not only would it be practically impossible with several ethnicities, it would also be ethically problematic. Assuming that all youth from the same ethnicity want the same kind of participation would mean imposing “top-down” certain participation techniques on them, which rarely works (Feldmann-Wojtachina et al. 2010). Therefore, in-

stead of asking what each ethnicity wants, a more relevant question is how the offered opportunities can be made culturally sensitive, so that they would be in reach and equally inviting for all ethnicities and both genders, without a requirement of assimilation. Traditional methods of youth participation can be unobtainable or unwelcoming for asylum-seekers, because the emphasis is on assets which are often stronger among mainstream youth, such as verbal fluency or knowledge of the local democratic practices (Matthews & Limb 2003, 180; Turkie 2010, 263–265).

It is justified to ask where active participation falls in the hierarchy of needs of the children and adolescents in the reception centers; perhaps all effort should be directed to supporting more basic daily survival skills and the children's well-being. Prevalence of various mental disorders is high among refugee children and adolescents (de Anstiss et al. 2009). Unaccompanied minors and those who are still in the process of seeking asylum have a higher risk of distress and mental disorder than other refugee children (Drury & Williams 2012, 279; Thomas & Lau 2002; Montgomery 2011, 477). However, the literature does not seem to provide consistent prevalence rates; large heterogeneity persists in findings from different studies (Fazel et al. 2005). Many refugee children are extremely resilient, resourceful and capable despite the difficulties they face (Williams 2006). The fact that all research seems to agree upon is that *"the vulnerability of separated children lies precisely in their separation from their family environment"* (FRA 2010, 85), which is the most traumatic experience a child can have (Helander & Mikkonen 2002, 12). Anxiety, frustration and depression increase as the asylum process and time away from one's family lengthens (Mikkonen 2002, 27).

Promoting participation does not suggest that other means of supporting well-being should be excluded. The challenging life-situation of the unaccompanied children should be acknowledged, and the participatory actions should meet their special needs. It is also important to remember that not all unaccompanied minors are traumatized or have mental illness; assuming that all of them are permanently vulnerable and in need of special protection may lead to further problems. Although the

need of protection is obvious for unaccompanied minors, previous studies (Lansdown 2003; Marshall 1997) show that children considered as vulnerable feel that the protection which exceeds their needs can harm their development and lead to anxieties about what is being said behind their backs. Limiting the autonomy of children promotes a self-fulfilling cycle of helplessness (Lansdown 2005, 24, 35). Supporting participation in little steps, following the evolving capacities of the child can work as a key strategy through which all children, traumatized or not, can learn to transform their relationships with adults, trust their capacities, exercise their rights and become active citizens (Ray 2010, 63). They learn that they have capacities to do things on their own, and that help is available from the adults around them.

Participatory action research (PAR) with unaccompanied minors

Participatory action research (hereafter PAR) is a multidisciplinary and multiform research method with varying applications, in which the researcher uses intervention to help the participants find suitable techniques of action to achieve desirable goals (Costello 2011, 5; France 2007, 89; Rodríguez & Brown 2009, 23). In my research, the goal was to find meaningful activities to fill the waiting time of unaccompanied girls in the reception center, and to promote youth participation in their terms. According to Molano, (1998, quoted in Swantz 2008, 31) what is common in all forms of PAR is to *"walk shoulder to shoulder with ordinary people rather than one step ahead"*, including all participants as equal co-researchers in all stages of the process. However, critics note that these goals make research challenging; for example involving participants as equal co-researchers means that they can raise issues they want, possibly leading to a situation in which the goals of the research are not met. A very practical issue is that many may choose not to participate fully in research, even if there would appear to be direct benefits in doing so. (Doná 2006, 24; Pain & Francis 2003, 53.) As the researcher, I was indeed faced with these dilemmas. But as the goal of our PAR was to enable participation in

the girls’ terms, we could understandably not have a certain activity-level as a prerequisite for it.

Our PAR included an observation period in which I observed the daily life of the reception center, followed by weekly meetings with the girls, getting to know each other, learning co-operative skills and planning and realizing our project. Afterwards, we evaluated the process together; we discussed the girls’ role in action, and also how similar projects could be applied in the daily life of the reception center in the future. Our meetings were vivid and dynamic; the girls moved in and out, introducing new issues constantly. Instead of challenging the continuity or development of the research process (see Doná 2006, 24) this was the kind of participation the girls wanted. Participatory approach was essential to get the girls interested in getting involved in research work, despite the fact that some had had negative experiences in the official interviews which are part of the asylum process. The voluntariness of the project, and also the promise that it would not include anything that everybody would not agree upon, most probably encouraged the girls to participate.

PAR aims to present counter-narratives of people who are rarely heard in scientific research: those who are affected by some kind of marginalization (Fals-Borda 1990, 79). It is justifiable to call the girls both “silenced” and “marginalized”, although the overuse of such terms has been criticized (e.g. Laine et al. 2011, 24; Järvelä 2005, 44). The girls are marginalized in Finland because of their residential status and ethnicity and because they live in male-dominated living units in the reception center. In addition to the obvious language barriers, the complicated asylum process may also play a role in “silencing” them, as I discuss further. Instead of imposing specific research techniques, the researcher in PAR should respect the skills and the wisdom of the grassroots communities, filling the distance between subject and object. The researcher works as an “animator”, contributing her knowledge and experience in the process, combining it with popular, tacit knowledge of the participants. (Fals-Borda & Rahman 1991.) The girls and the counselors had justified views on how the research should be conducted, so the plan of the project was re-written many times. Listening to each other made PAR a shared learning experience:

it taught the girls, the counselors and me, both professionally and personally, something new in every step of the process. It also helped the girls to use their potential and find necessary resources to create youth-led activities. (Huttunen et al. 1999, 113–114; McIntosh 2010, 27.)

Research findings: Why try to transform something temporary?

An important topic of our discussions was the need to be critical and aware of the reality in order to be able to change it for the better. PAR focuses on the acquisition of knowledge on injustice, as well as skills for “speaking back” and organizing for a change (e.g. Cammarota & Fine 2008, 5; Fitzgerald et al. 2010, 300). According to earlier research, asylum seekers in Finland may associate all Finnish people to be part of the same system with the immigration officials, making them reluctant to “speak back” or do anything which could harm their position (Ekholm 1994; Suoranta 2011, 126). This was evident in our PAR as well; as one of the girls noted, *“Sometimes when you ask them (unaccompanied minors) how their life is, they are afraid to answer. They don’t want to say anything bad about your country”* (G3).

Criticism requires awareness of the reality. In PAR, the researcher should learn about the participants’ reality through a comprehensive pre-work, such as an observation period. One finding of my observation period was that unawareness is the girls’ reality. Some girls felt they did not get enough information about something as essential as the stages of their asylum process or the possibilities for family reunion. Rules of the living unit were unclear to some, and the functions of the society at large were unclear to all the participants. *“At the moment I don’t know Finland well. Not yet. --- I wait for a police officer to tell me what I should do, what I cannot do. What is my right, what is my responsibility. Now all is difficult because I don’t know.”* (G5) However, the girls did not want to use our weekly meetings to learn about asylum process or Finnish society, although that possibility was mentioned. They wanted to do something fun and girl-like, and as planners of our project, they had the power to decide so.

I assumed expressing criticism would be as customary for unaccompanied minors as it is for all teenagers, as Mikkonen (2002, 19) also claims, especially when given a change to voice one's criticism. However, the girls told me that the reception center was only a place to wait, and therefore changing anything would be pointless. All their hopes were in the future, which they had no control over. Many girls also agreed that they had nothing to complain about in their daily life; although they did not know about the procedure or the future, the life in the present worked well and they were taken care of. Unlike the other girls, one girl saw the paradox in claiming everything was good, arguing that "*Life is never perfect. Something needs to be always done to change things*" (G3). Significantly, PAR does not have to be radically transformative; it also acknowledges that finding ways to participate within the system can sometimes be more rewarding than rebelling against it (Swants 2008, 31).

Cross-cultural, multilingual dialogue

An equal dialogue between the educator and the educated is one of the corner-stones of education towards children's participation. According to critical pedagogy, educators are constantly faced with complicated decisions concerning justice, democracy and competing ethical claims (Kincheloe 2004, 1); the counselors' activities in the reception center present their views of the world and the place of the unaccompanied minors in it. Intercultural dialogue helps to interpret one's own cultural meanings and to learn that own culture is only one among others, which is required knowledge for cultural sensitivity in all encounters (Bennett 1993, 24-26, Räsänen 2007, 24).

In addition to the language barrier, the girls also mentioned other reasons which hindered an adult-child dialogue in the reception center. First of all, many girls noted that they did not want to share their deepest feelings with the counselors because the counselors were there to help with their daily life, not to carry unnecessary burden. One girl wondered if the counselors had enough love to spare: "*It is difficult to talk about this (missing one's family), because they have their own children. It must*

be difficult to share their love between their own children and us. So it's difficult to speak about this." (G6) Another girl noted that the counselors could not know how they felt, and that is why she did not even want to explain her feelings. According to Buber, (quoted in Värri 2000, 67) empathy, or knowing how the other person feels, is not necessary in dialogical encounters. On the contrary, trying to project one's own feelings onto others eliminates the concrete presence of the self and the other from the present encounter. Assuming to know how the other person must feel and react in some context implies that all individuals feel and behave a certain way, which materializes the other. For example assuming inaccurately that all unaccompanied minors have had experiences which have resulted in permanent vulnerability can be harmful (see Snellman 2012, 14). Buber (1993, 39) claims that a dialogue is possible if the participants are valued as authentic and original, and if they can live a shared experience also from the point of view of the other.

Cultural views of hierarchy between youth and adults affect the dialogical relations in the reception center. What "youth" means is not universal; its interpretation and enactment differ across cultures and contexts. In some cultures youth participation, for example the habit to express own views and to show signs of assertiveness, can be seen as disrespectful social deviance (Twum-Danso 2010, 134). One girl wondered why I talked about "child's voice" as a good thing; she had had a pot of food poured on her head for being too loud at a dinner table in her home country. Dissonant realities of the participants might make a dialogue very difficult (Ellsworth 1997, 15-16; see also Järvelä 2005, 40) but it is worth the effort. Trying to include the "silenced voices" in a dialogue is a step towards a multi-voiced society in which people are not lead to adopt a certain way of being to participate and to be accepted (Vuorikoski & Kiilakoski 2005, 310).

The girls did not mention power when discussing dialogue, but it was implicit. Although over-emphasizing unequal power-relations has been criticized by scholars because it may distract the attention away from the possibility of co-operation, these relations should be addressed in order to achieve an equal dialogue between the partici-

pants (Ellsworth 1997; Vuorikoski & Kiilakoski 2005, 310). Many interviewees argued that they did not even want to have decision power; they felt that the adults knew better what was best for them. One girl very maturely pondered that *“I don’t think children should be allowed to decide on things. – School for example. If someone doesn’t want to go to school, she shouldn’t decide. The adults have to help in that situation. You have to consider so many things (in decisions like that), like the age of the child.”* (G1) None of the girls had raised any issues in monthly unit meetings, although all children are given a chance to do that. The girls doubted whether the propositions would have any influence or claimed that they did not have anything important to say.

A dialogue is needed between the children and the counselors, but also among the children. During my observation period, as well as throughout the meetings, I could see how the group dynamics affected the behavior of the girls. The older girls who lived in the more independent living unit, had stayed longer in the reception center and had other children from the same language group were the ones who spoke significantly more than the new-coming, younger girls who were the sole representatives of their language group. Discussing the suggestions, including the views of all the girls and calculating the budget made the meetings educational. Some had to compromise to find suitable solutions for the majority: *“I felt bad because the movie we planned first didn’t work out, because it was such a good idea. It was a shame because everybody wanted to do it first but then they changed their minds. --- I didn’t want to go to the camp but in the end it was a good idea and it was fun.”* (G4) An increased dialogue and a strengthening sense of community was visible in the end of our project, when the girls, even those who had barely spoken to each other before the project, organized a completely girl-led, multilingual play at the camp without any help from the adults.

Steps towards participation and independence

Although the goal of our project was to enable participation in the present, the discussions about the

girls’ role and possibilities for a real change were focused on the future. All the girls saw the reception center as an intermediate stopping point on their way to residency and adulthood, so they valued a good daily life over active participation or transformation. *“Everything is good, life is good. Here you get what you need. This is a good place to wait for something, and that’s what we all do.”* (G3) Unaccompanied minors are in a transitional stage not only because of their age, moving from childhood into adulthood, but also because of their residential status: they have fled from the country of their origin but are not yet in the new society (Alitolppa-Niitamo 2003, 18–21; Suoranta 2011, 42).

The girls acknowledged that the present, intermediate phase can be used productively to help their life in the future: *“We will live here (in Finland) all our lives; we have to learn for ourselves. You don’t learn if somebody shows you every time, it is not learning. You become lazy. --- The counselors do a good job, they help everybody in the beginning, and then they leave you alone. It’s good for the future. --- Children get a good life when they learn to do things by themselves.”* (G3) The skills which the girls thought they would need in the future were mostly practical; how to cook an omelet or to buy a bus ticket. The girls valued the fact that the counselors provided more help in the beginning, but in the end required the girls to do the task on their own: *“When we take care of ourselves and our businesses, we grow. We learn things that we wouldn’t learn otherwise. If somebody always takes care of our own things, it doesn’t help us.”* (G6.) Although the limited possibilities to use the girls’ participatory rights in the present were often mentioned, many girls saw their role as more active in the future *“We (G3 and G4) want to live here first perhaps for a year. Then we join (a local youth parliament, which we discussed earlier). Then we know what is not good in (their home town), and what to do”.*

Conclusion

In this article I have introduced some of the findings on my study of youth participation among unaccompanied minor girls in a reception center. One of the most interesting results of my study is that

not all unaccompanied minor girls wanted active, transformative participation, as the term is commonly understood in scientific discussion in the Western academia. Most of them preferred security and strong adult guidance over having their own views heard and the power to decide on matters concerning them. The girls argued that providing care and guidance was the counselors' job, and receiving it the girls' right. Although protecting children and enabling them to participate are often presented as opposites (Woodhead 2010, xix), they actually depend on each other. Children need support from adults to find ways to participate and to protect their own rights (Ray 2010, 70–71). The girls of my study felt that demanding their rights, particularly the right to be taken care for by reliable adults, is meaningful participation in their situation.

Although the girls felt that “important” and “complicated” tasks and decisions should be left to the adults, they felt able to take responsibility for daily chores more than they were required. The importance of sufficient adult presence and support was often mentioned. Although the counselors cannot replace the parents, they are the closest adults for the children at present. As one counselor noted, sensitive antennae are needed to understand the level of independence and participation a child wants each day. If a child shows interest in participation, she should be supported in it. But it should also be accepted that the next day, the same child might want more security, a place under an adult's arm on the couch. Understandably, the needs and wishes to participate differ from time to time, but also between each individual girl.

The girls valued organized activities which took their minds off of negative things. Adult-led activities are usually not considered to be participatory as such, but many activities could be modified by adding an educational aspect to them. Involving children in planning, taking their suggestions seriously, calculating the budget and realizing the plans together are examples of scaffolding participation. Not only would this help to produce activities which the residents truly want, but it would also give them a feeling that their views matter, and that they have the capacities to contribute in organizing activities which influence their lives.

Above all, acknowledging the special needs of the children in promoting participation means that participation should not be mandatory. After experiencing possible traumatizing events, or having to take responsibility for tasks exceeding the capacities of the child, he or she may not want to take additional responsibilities. Many children want to be told what is good for them, and they should be allowed to feel that they are looked after.

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