

Case Summary

Children involved in Research – a Children’s Rights-based Stages Model

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1. Participation of Children in Research

The inclusion of children and their perspectives in research projects has gained international and national significance in recent years. (see *Docket/Einársdottir/ Perry 2018; Heinzl/Kränzl-Nagl/Mierendorff 2012*). Article 12 of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (see *BMFSFJ 2014/1992*) is intended to protect the child's right to freedom of expression in all matters affecting the child. In addition to such an appreciation of theoretical intention (see *Prenzel 2016*), which is reflected in international ethical standards of child research (*Bertram et al., 2015*), the current childhood theoretical paradigm of the competent child (see *Büker 2015*) is equally responsible for the increasing consideration of children's perspectives in childhood, adolescent and school research. Within this context, a gradual paradigm shift is taking place in these disciplines - away from exclusive research on children (as objects) to research with children (as creative subjects), (see *Heinzl/Kränzl-Nagl/Mierendorff 2012*).

Results from studies in which children were given the opportunity for active participation repeatedly refer to their decided arguments and differentiated perspectives on the respective subjects of research. For example, children are often experienced and described as "sophisticated thinkers and communicators" (*Harcourt / Conroy 2005, p. 567*) and as experts in their own right (see *Kordulla 2017, p.101*), and whose views are in fact corrective for the views of adults. However, the inclusion of children’s perspectives alone does not adequately fulfill the right to participate. UNICEF points out in its supplementary comments (2014) that genuine participation can only be realised if children also have the opportunity to understand the context and the possible effects of their expression of opinion. The key to genuine participation is an attitude of respect for the child's opinion. These include measures to enable and support an understanding of the child's participation, as well as the actual consistent consideration of the expressed opinions of the child in the development of future measures and steps (*ibid.*). Referring to the context of research, it can be said that currently, child-inclusive research is far from being extensively implemented in terms of this right of children to participate.

For example, a meta-analysis conducted by *Mayne/Howitt* in 2014 on approximately 500 research articles that were published in 2009 and 2012 from ten internationally recognised childhood education journals involving children under the age of eight, revealed the following: This systematic review of published literature indicated that 97% of articles included young children in non- participatory roles as objects of research (65%) and in semi-participatory roles as subjects of research (32%).

Less than 4% of studies included young children in inclusive, highly participatory roles as social actors (3%) and co-researchers (0.4%)” (*Mayne/Howitt/Rennie* 2018, S. 2f).

For the German research context, such a systematic analysis is still pending, but a similar result is to be expected in the sense that in relation to participatory involvement of the child in all phases of the research process (from planning and implementation to the transfer or to decisions on the use of the results) there is still considerable need for development. Involving children in research is synonymous with taking on the responsibility of the adult researcher to ensure that the child's right to co-determination (in the broad sense as described above) is taken into account in the highest possible way and under the given contexts in accordance with the level of development of the respective child. Especially in light of the increasing breadth of research with children, efforts to develop quality in the implementation of the right to participate are urgently needed. This concern is the focus of an international research cooperation between the Graduate School of Education at the University of Western Australia in Perth (*Christine Howitt and Fiona Mayne*) and the Department of Primary Education and Early Education at the University of Paderborn (*Petra Bölker and Birgit Hüpping*). The project ‘Children as co-researchers’ (short title) pursues the goal of using child-appropriate scaffolding possibilities with the highest possible adherence to the children's right to participation in research for pre-primary and primary school-aged children. This will be realised on the basis of a model developed by *Mayne/Howitt/Rennie* (2018) to conceptualise, compare and evaluate these internationally in German and Australian early learning centres and elementary schools. Ultimately this will contribute to the development of theory in the field of child research on the basis of the experience gained in applying the model.

In the conceptional phase of the project, *Mayne, Howitt and Rennie's* hierarchical model of children's research participation based on information, understanding, voice, and influence is used as a common, theoretical-systematic working basis and was adapted for the German research context. In this short article, this adaptation is presented as the initial result of the research cooperation, in order to create the possibility to use the model in other research projects as a planning and reflection tool, and subsequently, in an expanded community trial of its operational capability.

2. Hierarchy of child participation rights in research processes: An adaptation of the model according to *Mayne, Howitt and Rennie* 2018

In the Hierarchy of children's research participation rights model developed in Perth Australia, the degree of social participation according to Hart (1992) is combined with the rights of the child. This is then divided into four core elements, which are related to participation in research and is presented in the form of a matrix. This allows for a systematic determination and reflection of the nature and degree of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in research projects involving preschool and elementary school children.

Hierarchy of child participation rights in research processes, Mayne, Howitt and Rennie 2018

Participation Rights

Participation Level

No Participation

	information	understanding	voice	influence
8 Child's initiative: the sharing of decisions with adults	Information created by the child	Greater understanding than that of adults	Equal voice to that of Adults	Significant influence
7 Initiated and carried out by children	Greater information basis than that of adults	Same understanding as that of adults	Meaningful voice	Influence in selected areas
6 Adult initiative - share decisions with Children	Same information as that of adults	Understanding of significant aspects	Opinion/expression in selected areas	Supported possibilities of influence (scaffolding)
5 Consulted; Participation based on understanding	Meaningful information	Understanding selected aspects	Supported possibilities of opinion/expression (scaffolding)	Limited possibilities of influence
4 Assigned a restrictive role based on information	Selected information	Supported possibilities of building understanding (scaffolding)	Limited possibilities of opinion/expression	Little influence
3 Alibi - Participation	Supported possibilities of obtaining information (scaffolding)	Limited possibilities of understanding	Little voice	No influence
2 Decoration	Limited informational possibilities	Little understanding	No voice	No influence
1 Manipulation	Little information	No understanding	No voice	No influence

Fig. 1: Hierarchy of child participation rights in research projects. Translation of the Hierarchical Model of Children's Research Participation Rights based on Information, Understanding, Voice and Influence (Mayne/Howitt/Rennie 2018), by Bükler and Hüpping.

Vertically, there are the eight stages of young people's participation in society, differentiated from Hart (1992) and known as levels of participation. These are used to determine the level of participation in research projects. On the lowest three ranks of the ladder, separated in Fig. 1 by the horizontal black line, there are (1) manipulation, (2) decoration and (3) alibi participation, the false forms of participation (non - participatory). These occur, for example, when children are involved in political demonstrations as poster carriers without understanding the context, at public events in the form of song and dance performances merely as a decorative adornment or when children are selected by adults to speak in a podium discussion, without allowing them to deal with their contributions in terms of content. In the worst case, children in such alibi settings experience that participation can be a semblance (see Hart 1992, S. 10) In the lowest sections of the chart, the children have little or no agency (agency, see also this term also Bükler 2015); they are denied the right to self-determination. It is only from the fourth stage that we can speak of (increasingly complex) levels of genuine participation in the sense of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. These exist when children in participation settings have a role assigned by adults, but understand this on the basis of information (4), if the children are explicitly asked for advice in certain projects and their opinions are taken seriously (5) and if they are not only heard but included in the planning and implementation of projects and in the necessary decision-making processes (6). The two highest degrees of participation are characterised by the fact that the project initiative is initiated by the children, which reverses power relations in the generational relationship between children and adults: they pursue and realise their own ideas (7) and share their decisions in their own opinion with adults (8). This highly idealised level recalls the project method in the original, Deweyian sense.

Hart's levels of participation are used in the *Mayne/Howitt/Rennie* model as a level description to describe the relationship between self- and third-party options, as well as freedom of design and control for the children and adults involved in a research project, and thus the quality of the implementation of the project's implementation of children's rights to participate in research can be determined in a systematic way. The latter is based on the statements in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 and on the statements made by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2006 on the implementation of children's rights in early childhood by the authors in four key participation rights (*Mayne/Howitt/Rennie* 2018, p. 6).

Figure 1 shows the children's right to information, understanding, voice (say) and influence on the horizontal axis of the model. According to *Mayne/Howitt/Rennie*, these elements have a hierarchical connection. Information forms the basis for the understanding of research intentions, goals, and methods, and its only this understanding that enables the children to elaborate their opinion on the subject; expressing each issue in question and having a significant influence on decisions that result from the data provided by the children. The nature and degree of redemption of children's rights to

participation in research are essentially determined by the two dimensions of understanding and agency. Both dimensions are largely in the hands of adults in research projects: The levels of the model describe different ways of providing information (from missing, greatly reduced, selected, consciously adapted in the form of pedagogical-didactic scaffolding to the child's understanding horizon, to the complete and from the information as provided by child researchers themselves) (first column), the understanding to be reached by the child in its specific starting position (second column), the way in which opinions can be expressed and experiences verbalised (third column) and the nature of the influence, and the ability of children to take on decisions (fourth column). The darker the fields are coloured, the higher the degree of expression of the dimensions of understanding and agency, and the more consistent is the implementation of child rights for participation.

A classic interview guide, for which the parents and in the best case also the child in written form have given a declaration of consent, would be located in this model at about level 4: The child itself receives only the most necessary information about the research project and, in its assigned role as the responder, has restrictive options for expressing its opinion and can not have direct influence on decisions that result. At a higher level, children are already involved in the planning of research projects. In an Australian research project, three-year-old children were involved in the evaluation of an early childhood science program, gaining a clear understanding of its meaning through an interactive narrative and video-supported story approach, (*Mayne/Howitt/Rennie* 2016) and had a clear understanding of the importance of their participation. From the point of view of helping the researcher (as protagonist of the story) to solve his problem, the children were involved in all phases of the project up to minor influence through the report to the Science Centre. At the same time, their participation experiences were consistently recorded in an age-appropriate manner.

3. Possible uses of the model

In *Mayne/Howitt/Rennie's* model, the participation levels of Hart's ladder are linked with the right of the child to participate in research, as presented in the matrix. The adaptation presented here has been slightly shortened compared to the English-language original and has been freely translated in some places in order to make it user-friendly for the German-speaking context. The model is based on the conviction that the right to participation is not only fulfilled by the act of participation, but also includes the right of the child to a conscious, framed learning and experience process in the field of participation competence. While elementary and primary school pedagogy have already developed different concepts (see *Prengel* 2016, *Betz/Gaiser/Pluto* 2010), the didactic-pedagogical idea for the context of research is new. The model presented here can be used as a structuring aid for targeted scaffolding measures to support children in such a personal and collective learning process. At the same time, it can serve as a basis for the consideration of the participation rights of the child. The quality of the implementation of children's rights to participation in research is not determined by the achievement of the highest levels in the model. This would be Utopian and would not be appropriate for all research settings. Rather, the quality is determined by the way in which the possibilities of understanding and agency are given, taking into account the age and stage

of development of the child and the circumstances prevailing in the research project and how these can be maximised. This presupposes that the adult researcher is prepared to postpone the generational disposition in favour of the child's agency. This in turn implies a fundamental, critical reflection of the child's image and likewise the researchers and the design of the research process as an interactive process with the child (see *Eckermann/Heinzel/Kreher* 2016) as well as with the persons involved in their environment (parents, educational specialists and teachers).

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