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## **Cultural participation for, with and by children: Enhancing children's agency and learning through art education and visual knowledge-building**

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**Abstract:** This article focuses on how children's rights in society can be manifested with cultural tools and through cultural participation. The article discusses cultural participation for, with and by children based on the core ideas of a Swedish governmentally initiated strategy implemented in the 1970s. The right for children to take part in cultural activities, to be culturally active and to express themselves is based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Art education and visual activities for children in formal and informal cultural environments and the use of contemporary art will be discussed. An art-based project in collaboration between a cultural institution and preschool and younger children is described. The main purpose of the article is to analyse what impact the use of cultural participation and cultural tools has on children's collective experience and learning, as well as to discuss and contextualise the relationship between culture, preschool and school as it is influenced by global and societal changes, particularly the increasing visual impact in society through the use of digital media and multimodality. The results show how an art gallery visit and the use of cultural narratives, such as art educational activities at a preschool based on work with a picture book, create visual knowledge and contribute to children's agency and understanding of equity as one of the aims in the early childhood education curriculum.

**Keywords:** Aesthetic activities, art education, child culture, culture in preschool and school, early childhood education, multimodality, visual and media literacy, visual knowledge.

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## Introduction

Children's engagement in arts and culture is mentioned in the national curriculum as part of the institutional educational practice in preschool and school in Sweden. The early childhood education curriculum emphasises that children 'should be encouraged to feel trust in their own ability to think autonomously, to be active, move, learn and to be educated from different perspectives, such as intellectual, linguistic, ethical, practical, sensual and aesthetic' (author's translation, Lpfö98, revised 2016, p. 7).<sup>2</sup> Further, the preschool shall enable children's possibilities 'to develop their ability to communicate, document and express sensations, experiences, ideas and thoughts with words, concrete materials, visually with images as well as with aesthetic and other expressive forms' (author's translation, Lpfö98, revised 2016, p. 11).<sup>3</sup> Children's access to, and participation in different learning situations and environments as well as their aesthetic expressions, are thus linked to meaningful learning experiences.<sup>4</sup> Through participation in formal and informal educational settings and different spaces for learning, children's agency can be promoted (Kumpulainen et al., 2013). One of these spaces, apart from preschool and school, is the child culture arena, which consists of different cultural activities, affordances and possibilities, such as museums, art education programmes, visits and tutorials. Another type of space is the virtual space offered by various visual and digital media.

In earlier research, I described methods to promote the development of visual knowledge-building and learning through visual and multimodal tools. These studies describe children's activities in different creative projects, both within and outside of preschool and primary school that give children access to learning environments and monitor meaningful activities through the use of art as a cultural tool (Rusanen et al., 2011). Through communicative and participatory forms, children take part in cultural activities and visual art education in early childhood and primary school educational settings (Häikiö, 2007; Karlsson Häikiö, 2012, 2014, 2017b; Karlsson Häikiö & Ericson, 2017). Preschool as visual culture, visuality in work with documentation and the setting of learning environments are other topics of these earlier studies (Karlsson Häikiö, 2017a). In this article, I discuss how collaboration between a contemporary art gallery and a preschool that provides art education can create participatory practices for, and visual knowledge with and by, younger children in and outside of preschool, and the role of art, use of visual artefacts and visual documentation.

### *A visual ethnographic study of children visiting a contemporary art museum*

Learning environments, educational situations and cultural conditions are crucial to ensure children's participation in art education as well as the relationship between children and adults. In a preschool in a city centre of Sweden, the teachers collaborated with an art institution and its art educators. Two teachers participated in the project as well as an art curator, an art educator and a researcher (the author). The collaboration was initiated by the art curator with responsibility for exhibitions and art education since children and youngsters were identified as the target audience. The mutual collaboration was planned to include the children visiting the nearby contemporary art gallery, which at this time featured a major biennale, and the art curator visiting the preschool. At the preschool, the children and teachers worked

<sup>2</sup> Lpfö98 is the national ECE curriculum. Author's translation. Swedish original: 'De [barnen] ska få hjälp att känna tilltro till sin egen förmåga att tänka själva, handla, röra sig och lära sig dvs. bilda sig utifrån olika aspekter såsom intellektuella, språkliga, etiska, praktiska, sinnliga och estetiska'.

<sup>3</sup> Author's translation. Swedish original: 'Arbetslaget ska 'ge barn möjlighet att utveckla sin förmåga att kommunicera, dokumentera och förmedla upplevelser, erfarenheter, idéer och tankegångar med hjälp av ord, konkret material och bild samt estetiska och andra uttrycksformer'.

<sup>4</sup> Aesthetic forms in a Swedish preschool context mean working with different art expressions.

with different themes. For instance, the national refugee situation was addressed by using the children's book *A Bear called Paddington* (Bond, 1955). This illustrated story deals with complex questions about fleeing a country and being an immigrant through, described through a child's perspective, with a clumsy, loveable and clever little bear, newly arrived in England from Peru, as a leading force (Karlsson Häikiö, 2017c).

This article is based on a study of this collaboration in art educational practice with a starting point in observations of a visual ethnographical character (Pink, 2013; Bendroth Karlsson, 2014a). The visual ethnographic method of the study was based on the collection of children's drawings, paintings and artistic artefacts, as well as photographs and other visual and textual documentation, made by the teachers. Visual elicitation (Alpers, 2007; Fors & Bäckström, 2015) was used as the basis for unstructured interviews with the teachers based on the material. In visual elicitation, the researcher can participate in the generation of research material and interpretations. Ethnographic research is constituted by using different methods, such as an unstructured gathering of materials (Gobo, 2008). A visual ethnographic method makes it possible to follow, describe and analyse processes over time and use the visual information 'created and transformed through children's actions' (Evaldsson & Sparrman, 2009, p. 111). Photo-elicitation (Banks, 2001; Collier & Collier, 1986; Rasmussen, 2004) is described, much like unstructured interviews, as a way where 'visual and digital media are part of the ways we constitute ethnographic knowledge' (Pink, 2013, p. 1). An unstructured way of collecting visual information in research can, according to Fors and Bäckström (2015), generate other kinds of information and meaning-making by the possibility to create free personal reflections and unexpected interpretations. The visual ethnographic study is based on giving special attention to the visual material of the research and considering visual perspectives in the presentation of the results.

Ethnographic observation can be characterised as different positions between a participating and a non-participating observer (Fangen, 2014). The observations following the activities at the preschool were collected in the form of notes, photographs of documentation of the project and through meetings (and thus, of notes from dialogues) with the teachers, but also by directly observing the eight participating children at the art gallery visit. The children and teachers worked with different cultural and educational tools (Säljö, 2010) through project work (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999; Knoll, 2012; Skrövset & Lund, 2000) during one term, in which the sessions were held for two hours, three days a week, at one section at the preschool with 4- to 5-year-old children. The project consisted of different parts, one based on work with story-telling and the other of visual 2- and 3-dimensional activities, such as drawing and building sculptures with clay, wood and textiles in the preschool atelier. The research ethics of the study were based on consent from the parents for the children to take part in the study, and for the teachers and researcher to observe, document and photograph the children according to Swedish PUL-regulations (safeguarding of personal integrity and identity), and through the teachers' controlling the material of the study before publication.

### ***Theoretical positions***

From a scientific perspective on the educational research field, a sociocultural research context has recently been complemented and contested by phenomenological, social constructionist, ethnographic and ethno-methodological perspectives that have been helpful in analysing, for instance, the power relations in educational settings (Alveson & Sköldberg, 2008; Lind, 2001). Through a social constructivist and social constructionist perspective, the cultural nature of human development has been emphasised in contrast to essentialist and individual perspectives (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999;

Rogoff, B., 2003; Tomasello, 1999). In Sweden, the educational approach based on developmental psychology has been contested, and paradigm shifts in theoretical influences have led to new concepts and ways of understanding the learning process (Karlsson Häikiö, 2017a; Lenz Taguchi, 2012; Olsson, 2012). A broadened perception of learning questions the concept of a single child building knowledge about the world, and instead emphasises collective approaches that aim at empowering children not only to learn, but also to reflect on and question what they learn. Learning as an open, ongoing state of affairs, provides space for acquiring information while at the same time giving opportunities to question the information and thus building critical and reflective thinking (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010; Rautio, 2014b; Rogoff, 2003).

Social constructionist and new materialist interpretations, where knowledge is generated by complex and multidimensional processes simultaneously moving in different directions, challenges traditional and conventional ideas of knowledge development. In the analysis section of this study, I focus on how children's agency and participation can be created by using art and culture as tools in the formation of visual knowledge and learning through art experiences and art education. I consider agency to be a relationship-based social construct. Therefore, my theoretical starting point is mostly social constructionist. Due to my interest in how materiality affects art activities, new materialist and post-human perspectives complement the analysis of how art education activities constitute agency through cultural participation for, with and by children. These perspectives share a view of children as empowered, but with differences in the perception of knowledge as socially and relationally constructed (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999), and knowledge as created in intra-active relationships between child-child/child-things (Lenz Taguchi, 2012). This creates a powerful combination where the perspectives complement each other. This combination is highly relevant since these theoretical perspectives have powerfully influenced Swedish early childhood education during the past decades (Karlsson Häikiö, 2017a; Lenz Taguchi, 2012; Olsson, 2012, 2014).

## **Children's agency and the competent child**

The upbringing and cultural activities of children and youth have traditionally been based on societal values as well as the needs of parental upbringing and control (Bergstedt & Herbert, 2017; Cunningham, 1995; Hartwig, 1994). Children today are seen as social actors with their own set of needs, rights and differences (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). Pascal and Bertram (2009) claim collaborative constitution of learning children's agency as an important part of children's right to act on their own terms, give voice, have power, make choices and explore the world on their own conditions. Pascal and Bertram (2009) argue that children who learn to participate in society in their early years are more likely to develop into engaged citizens with respect for the principles of democratic values and, in this way, proclaim the need of citizenship education (Pascal & Bertram, 2009, p. 254). Research in the field of child and youth culture often focuses on questions about identity and children's involvement in cultural activities, with relevance for questions of democracy, governance, equity and social development in a broader sense.

Descriptions of childhood as well as the perception of children's rights, including the right to culture, society and places, have in recent years highlighted issues of children's agency based on new and challenging perspectives (Valentine, 2003; Wall, 2008, 2010). The inclusion of children in society is generally filtered and determined by adults (Thorne, 1987), but the power relation between children and adults has been challenged by studies that question the adult's superior and naturalised power position (Sundhall, 2012). John Wall (2016) proclaims children to have more power in society and describes adultism as a historical expression of age suppression or ageism, where the adult has been the default

example of a human being, rendering children as second-class citizens (2016, p. 12-14). In similar ways, social constructionist and post-human perspectives discuss and question power relations in preschool (Dahlberg & Lenz Taguchi, in SOU1994:95; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999).

The concept of the competent child has been a way to create new power structures in which the child is given ability, knowledge and agency, with the aim to create resistance against adult dominant power and fixed ideas of what a child is (Korpi, 2006; Rantala, 2016). Competence, a concept used since the 1980s, includes an empowering approach where the child's perspective represents a view of children as active participants with the power to act and be heard (Lind, 2001, p. 38). The concept, however, has also been criticised and problematised by researchers who see a risk of romanticising the image of the child and childhood (Olsson, 2014). Although there are opposing views on the importance of children's competency and agency, there is general agreement concerning children's motivation and activity as being foundational for their learning and growth (Corsaro, 2005).

## Promoting child culture in preschool and school

Laws, curricula and syllabi govern schools but the responsibility for school development lies on municipalities, principals and school staff. It is their task to define the cultural forms that characterise the educational practice and activities (Ds1998:58). The cultural investments in children in Sweden since the first governmental cultural policy (Prop., 1974:28) was enacted, points to the need for cultural participation: 'Cultural policy has largely been based on cultural distribution rather than cultural activation' (p. 25).<sup>5</sup> The strategy announced that different school forms would be responsible for including culture and art forms in educational programmes. Culture is described as an emancipatory force where children have the right to freedom of expression and participation in the arts and cultural life. Children's right to be creative on their own terms is also safeguarded by the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989, Articles 12 and 31). Children's culture as a subculture, a concept that emerged in the 1970s, was described by Onsér-Franzen (1992) to be differentiated in cultural documents as three different forms: culture for (where children are given access to culture), with (where children together with others create culture) and by children (where children's initiatives lead to cultural creation) (1992, p. 52).

The cultural policy concerning child culture was based on the national cultural policy objectives aimed at complementing the curricula for preschool and compulsory school that rely on a set of values based on democracy. Child and youth cultural activities were eventually subsidised, municipally and regionally, to reduce costs for all children aged 18 years or younger. The cultural initiatives were recapitulated in the 1990s as a follow-up investigation of the 1970s policy and led to deepening the knowledge of culture education work in all types of schools (Ds1998:58). In 2001, a museum education network was formed in Western Sweden. Various municipal and regional museums began to cooperate to reach their target audience, the different school forms.<sup>6</sup> In a 2009 governmental investment, *Skapande skola* (Creative Schools) (SOU 2009:16), a large number of cultural educators began to work with the so-called Series in different school forms which were also broadened to encompass six-year-olds in

<sup>5</sup> Author's translation. Swedish original: 'Kulturpolitiken har i hög grad byggt på kulturdistribution i stället för kulturell aktivering'.

<sup>6</sup> The starting process was funded by the Swedish Arts Council, (*Statens Kulturråd*). Collaboratively produced museum lessons were used as teaching aids from different in-depth themes available in the museum's activities but were also directed to different subject areas in preschool, compulsory school and on upper secondary level. The program was first presented in a catalogue, but became later on a booking system on the internet, and could be booked free of charge: [www.museilektioner.se](http://www.museilektioner.se)

preschool from 2013 and onwards (Danielsson & Sommansson, 2014, p. 96).<sup>7</sup> The municipal and regional funds were often used to give access to culture for and with children, while the Creative Schools investment aimed at activities where children's and pupils' own initiatives were put in focus (Lindqvist & Blomberg, 2016). An evaluation of this substantial governmental investment in children's own creative activities showed that, although the government financed the initiative, municipalities and regional authorities still used their own money as a supplement (2016, p. 6), which indicates that the investment has led to more cultural activities not only for and with, but also by, children.

### ***Research on child culture, experiences of art, media and multimodality***

The cultural strategy of the 1970s pointed to the importance of cultural knowledge. One of these objectives was to enhance the ability of children and youth to reflect on popular culture, mass culture and messages in the media, such as advertising, and thus relieve the 'negative effects' of mass media's influence on children (Proposition, 1974:28). In the renewed cultural strategy (Proposition, 2009/10:3), these objectives were replaced by an approach that proclaimed there is 'no particular contradiction between commercial viability and artistic quality or freedom' (p. 28).<sup>8</sup> Giroux (2000) claims that child culture constitutes a sphere where propagation and entertainment meet, and that the construction of young people's identities is largely shaped by political and educational factors influencing their lives through popular visual culture, such as videos, television and films. Media has been a substantial part of children's visual culture and the child culture arena since the 1990s, and children's ordinary life has become even more influenced by other media, such as literature, movies and television, but also by audio-visual information provided through computers, mobile phones, iPads, video games and other technology (Buckingham, 2003; Danielsson & Sommansson, 2014; Findahl, 2014).

Jewitt (2011) describes multimodal landscapes of different representational and communicative forms – speaking, writing, imaging, making music, moving and so forth – as semiotic means to explore social and cultural objects and phenomena and, in this way, contribute to meaning-making (2011, p. 1-14). Use of cultural and multimodal tools (Jewitt, 2011; Säljö, 2010), or expressions communicated through various linguistic, audible or visual tools, give children the opportunity to use different methods of communication and in this way enhance equity through giving children many choices to express different skills and abilities. The access to different communicative strategies, e.g. access to virtual spaces (Garvis & Lemon, 2015), promotes equality, agency and participative practice in handling challenging situations in children's daily lives. Media literacy not only concerns handling skills in the media but also the ability to understand, use, interpret and reflect upon images and new media, creating an understanding of the media's role and function in society (Buckingham, 2003). Artistic experiences complement the often one-sided impressions from media culture and offer alternative experiences through children's expression of their own thoughts of reality with different ways of using both analogue and digital media (Danielsson & Sommansson, 2014; Rusanen et al., 2014).

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<sup>7</sup> This strategy was part of a renewed cultural strategy: *Tid för kultur* (Proposition 2009/10:3).

<sup>8</sup> Author's translation. Swedish original: 'Det finns ingen given motsättning mellan kommersiell bärkraft och konstnärlig kvalitet eller frihet'.

## **Children as cultural participants – Preschool as visual culture**

Children's agency and active participation, as well as access to different institutions, situations and places, have contributed to the inclusion of children in society and given children status as citizens in their own right (Colls & Hörschelmann, 2009; Horton & Kraftl, 2006; Morrow, 2008; Schmidt, 2011). By seeing children as active subject creators, rather than objects of observation, new research methods and educational practices have evolved in the production of knowledge and understandings of children's lives (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999; Lenz Taguchi, 2012; Moss, 2014; Olsson, 2012, 2014; Pascal & Bertram, 2003). Studies of children participating in research describe the development of children's visual/spatial, bodily/kinesthetic, relational and verbal/linguistic skills, but also participation through decision-making (Clark, Kjørholt, & Moss, 2005; Kumpulainen et al., 2013; Pascal & Bertram, 2009). Recent studies of children's relationship to materials, spaces and environment, where children are giving agency to materials and documentation through the use of cameras in the production of books and maps, thus contribute to new social studies of childhood (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010; Karlsson Häikiö, 2017a; Lenz Taguchi, 2012; Olsson, 2012, 2014).

Observation and documentation are basic methods of knowledge generation in preschool, with the aim to promote children's ability to 'communicate, document and express sensations, experiences, ideas and thoughts with words, concrete materials, visually with pictures as well as with other expressive forms' (Lpfö98, revised 2016, p. 11). The requirement to document is included in the curriculum and is considered to be a professional method for making learning processes visible (Lenz Taguchi, 2012). The visual focus in the preschools' documentation practice, the use of photography and the introduction of digital media, as well as an interest in how ways of looking (Göthlund & Eriksson, 2012) affect relationships, has led to increasing research on the preschool as visual culture (Karlsson Häikiö, 2017a; Lenz Taguchi, 2012; Lindgren, 2016; Magnusson, 2017). Instead of seeing children as receivers of adult instruction, young children act as agents when offered cameras to photograph the outside world from their own perspective and on their own terms (Bendroth Karlsson, 2014a, b; Magnusson, 2014, 2017; Rasmussen, 2004).

### ***Post-human perspectives on materiality in preschool***

According to Hillevi Lenz Taguchi (2012), things and materialities interact with our bodies. In art activities and creative work with different materials, children can follow changes in artefacts, objects and materials, such as differences in types of colour, clay and visual projections, giving them a transformative potential (Häikiö, 2007; Lenz Taguchi, 2012). When the children and materials intra-act (Barad, 2003), intra-modal materialisations can arise (Karlsson Häikiö, 2017a). In comparison to Barad's term 'intra-action' (2003), interaction requires an interface between individuals – i.e. a positioning and an inherent dichotomy – where separate individualities are the starting points. In intra-action, the different agents are not separated but are at a non-polarised point of departure in an epistemological co-constitution, where knowledge is not seen as paradoxical but is created in the process of perpetual thinking or perception (Lenz Taguchi, 2012, p. 14).

In Barad's onto-epistemological theories, the dichotomy between nature and culture is contested (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010; Magnusson, 2017; Rautio, 2014a, b) and emphasises younger children's activities in- and outside of preschool and their intra-activity (Barad, 2003) with each other, materials and environments. Post-human research is critical of the dialectical nature of a reflection discourse and instead makes a rhizomatic interpretation of knowledge creation, where learning occurs through unexpected intertwined processes (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988; Olsson, 2014; Åsberg, Hultman

& Lee, 2012). Olsson (2014) describes how teachers continually deconstruct and reconstruct the work process by critically examining the material through rhizo-analysis while adding and replacing materials during the process. In this way, it is possible to create a method to analyse and visualise, for example, power perspectives in educational activities. A rhizomatic approach offers a more open-ended model of analysing the project material in which the interpretation of the documented material is made through an analysis based on relationship-based and process-ontological procedures (Olsson, 2014; Lindgren & von Vulpen, 2016; Åsberg, Hultman, & Lee, 2012).

### ***Promoting visual knowledge and learning***

Evaldsson and Sparrman (2009) claim that there has been a long absence of studies 'about what children themselves do with the material culture that is part of their lives' (2009, p. 108), and that research on children's visual cultures often focuses on how children relate to visuality. Visual literacy, or visual competence, means making sense based on visual information (Wagner & Schönau, 2016). Visual events (Illeris, 2009) can form a starting point for creating meaning in educational settings or other areas of knowledge. Children producing visual artefacts for different communicative aims can be emphasised for the purpose of developing communicative skills through producing visual narratives for social and democratic purposes, or for citizen education. The generation of visual knowledge is not limited to visual activities in education. Multimodal and digital competencies are often used as means of forming visual or media literacy, as well as general competencies within educational or other disciplines, and can thus have a broader, multidisciplinary role (Marner & Örtengren, 2013).

New materialist (Barad, 2003) research challenges the modernist interpretation of aesthetics as connected to ideas of beauty. Instead, an interpretation is offered where experiencing art, as well as being engaged in artistic activity, is connected to creative and explorative meaning-making (Lind, 2010; Lindgren & van Vulpen, 2016; Olsson, 2014). Art education experiences and activities, used as cultural and didactic tools in visual art education are used to empower children's visual capacity and knowledge-building. Lindgren and van Vulpen (2016) studied the impact of materiality and spaces in an encounter with children in a preschool class (six-year-olds) and an art exhibition. Lindgren and van Vulpen (2016) describe human-material relations in art education activities and offer alternative ways to describe children's agency regarding art. Art education situations can be controlled by adults or by institutional expectations or manners that offer very little space for free movement or initiative for children. The researchers "want to show how aesthetic art qualities and relational-material exploration can become active elements in children's (and adults') meaning-making of art events" (author's translation, 2016, p. 104). Lindgren and van Vulpen describe art institutions as potential spaces for the creation of artistic-aesthetical-material relationships and discuss institutionalised art events brought to the preschool as a 'looking practice that will serve as a reflection of what happened in the spaces of the art museum – being made present through the photographs' (author's translation, 2016, p. 117).

### **Art museums as places for participation**

As early as 1988, Lindberg problematised different poises of art education as dilemmas and positions where art education mediates an approach to experiencing art, emanating from a traditional and 'right' way, pre-set by conventional views of art and education. In a Nordic study, Aure, Illeris and Örtengren (2009) describe three art education strategies where the primary concerns are learning about art, in connection to seeing art experiences as part of raising children in society. The second strategy focuses on the individual art experience itself taking place between the observer and the artwork. The third



strategy is relational and based on communication and active participation (Aure, Illeris, & Örtengren, 2009; Bendroth Karlsson, 2014b, p. 51).

Austring and Sørensen (2006) give examples from contemporary art practice in Denmark (2006, pp. 56-57) and describe contemporary art as provocative, in the sense of dealing with ethical perspectives. Austring and Sørensen state that art, through its content, can offer a basis for educational discussions with ethical and existential dimensions and with a capacity to function on a symbolic level (referring to Langer, 1969). Austring and Sørensen claim that art affects us on both personal and subjective levels, and on a collective level as part of cultural heritage. Rusanen (2007) states that one role of education is to enforce children's knowledge of cultural heritage, noting that, in Finland, the impact of art and culture, as well as arts education has become stronger in educational practice since the 2000s. Cultural institutions play an important part in this change which also is visible in the Finnish curriculum according to Rusanen (2007, p. 101-108). Rusanen et al. (2014) define art education practice not only in children encountering artworks but also in children's daily environments that offer encounters with art and are filled with art in the form of experiences or objects surrounding us, such as architecture or artefact design (2014, p. 10-17).

Rogoff (Kadhim, 2013) writes about expanding the concept of visual culture and including art spaces as shared spaces with social benefits, where the museum can be considered as a space for co-production and interaction. Rogoff regards museums as places of transformation where experiences, depending on the educational outset and including both content and form, can change thoughts, views and assumptions about ourselves, others and the outside world, and thus be part of a widening experience of learning. Bendroth Karlsson (2014b, 2017) gives examples of art education practices where children meeting artworks are combined with art practice in the atelier of the museum, thus creating a setting for interactive practice and dialogue where the children's perspectives and experiences of art are the core of the art education practice. Making space for children's perspectives on art gives them the opportunity to develop as human beings through art (2017, pp. 6-7).

Gulpinar and Hernes (2017) describe art museums as arenas for learning and meaning-making from visual experiences. They state that the relationship between the artworks and the exhibition room play a role in children's experiences of art and art museums. Gulpinar and Hernes (2017) refer to the artist Joseph Beuys' ideas of the inner process and thinking of art as important in art experiences as well as in production with different art forms (2017, p. 38). They have described art education projects in Norway that studied children's individual and collective experiences of art in the performance research project *Blikk for Barn*.<sup>9</sup> The interaction with artworks and the experience of visiting the art museum is of educational interest, more than teaching the 'right' ways to behave or interpret art (Gulpinar & Hernes, 2017).

## **An art education project in preschool with a contemporary art gallery**

In earlier research (Karlsson Häikiö, 2014, 2017b), I described how conversations about images can be used as tools for interaction and dialogue in collaboration with art institutions and how contemporary art is used by art museums and galleries as a tool for learning through the production of tutorials for preschools and schools. The art education work described below has its starting point in eight four- to five-year-old preschool children's visit to an art exhibition. The project arose from a request by the local contemporary art gallery, wondering if the teachers were interested in a project that would deal with children's meetings with contemporary art through interactive visits accompanied by art educators. The

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<sup>9</sup> Funded by the Norwegian Research Council and Høgskolen in Oslo and Akershus.

project focused on the children's experiences of art and how emotions can be expressed through artworks.

At the preschool, the teachers used process-based project work over a longer period, following the children's thoughts and questions and thus creating possibilities for in-depth learning through collaborative reflection, dialogue and creation with different materials and communicative forms. The aim was to work with art, starting with the children's hypotheses, reflections and reasoning about equity and differences through story-telling, as well as creative work with visual tools, such as drawing and constructing. In their planning material, the teachers stated that the children should have the opportunity to 'encounter art as well as story-telling and pictures in illustrated books' with the aim that, through processing different forms of communication, children's language development would be enhanced, along with issues of equity 'with an aim to open conversations and reflections that make the children think about people's different conditions and opportunities in society, and how we can influence, collaborate and understand each other'<sup>10</sup> (Documentation of project aims', PowerPoint, Autumn 2015).

The developmental goals of the project work were connected to the curriculum (Lpfö98, revised 2016, p. 4, 7) with an aim to enhance the children's linguistic and communicative abilities emphasising every child's right to give voice and to express themselves from an equity-perspective.<sup>11</sup> Since the use of picture books is a proven way of working in preschool through the combination of images and words (Boglund & Nordenstam, 2010; Dominković, Eriksson, & Fellenius, 2006; Karlsson Häikiö, 2014), the teachers chose to work with the picture book *A Bear called Paddington* (Bond, 1955). Also, the curricular aims of equity could be addressed since the theme was based on being a refugee, which linked to current events in a way that the children could understand. The project was conducted in various ways, such as reading the story about Paddington and writing letters to him, building a mail box where the children could put messages and questions, communicate with the fictional bear Paddington through story-telling while circulating a talking-stone and having conversations about images, drawing and painting 2-dimensional pictures, making and constructing 3-dimensional sculptures, singing songs, looking at short films on the internet, listening to music, using dramatisation eurhythmics and play, and using searching games and roleplay.

### ***Children interacting with artworks***

At the contemporary art gallery, the art educator introduced the children to a game where they were supposed to search for traces of the fictional bear Paddington. The children were encouraged to create a hide-and-seek search in the exhibition rooms with different artworks in the form of an imaginary play. In the picture book, the bear was chased by a museum curator wanting to stuff and exhibit him in a museum stand. This incident was then used by the art educator to create interest in the art exhibition by imagining that the bear had fled from one of the empty stands in an artwork by benandsebastian, *The Museum of Nothing* (2012-2014).<sup>12</sup> The children created the search game within the exhibition spaces and, at the same time, looked at the exhibited artworks and randomly stopped at some of them. In this

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<sup>10</sup> Author's translation.

<sup>11</sup> See aims for Language development/communication and equity: Sw. 'Människolivets okränkbarhet, individens frihet och integritet, alla människors lika värde, jämställdhet mellan könen samt solidaritet med svaga och utsatta är värden som förskolan ska hålla levande i arbetet med barnen', Lpfö98 reviderad 2016, s. 4 and 'Förskolan ska lägga stor vikt vid att stimulera varje barns språkutveckling och uppmuntra, och ta till vara barnets nyfikenhet och intresse för den skriftspråkliga världen', Lpfö98 reviderad, 2016 s. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Presented at the International Biennale of Contemporary Art, GIBCA.  
<http://www.gibca.se/index.php/sv/gibca-2015/konstnaerer/benandsebastian>

way, the art educator could see what interested them and stop at these works to tell the children about them, based on their questions. For example, the children were interested in Yladom-Boakye's painting of two black women dancing, *Just Above the Cloud* (2015).<sup>13</sup> The children and the art educator stood in front of the painting and made dance movements like those shown in the painting (Picture 1) and freezing their movements just like the women's movements are frozen in the painting.



Picture 1. Photograph: Tarja Karlsson Häikiö

They also stopped at Pia Roenicke's works using dried plants, *The Pages of Day and Night* (2015) (Picture 2).<sup>14</sup> Here, the art educator told the children how the artist produced the artworks, how to press plants and how the children could do this themselves.



Picture 2. Photograph: Tarja Karlsson Häikiö/Preschool documentation  
(The picture is a collage of several photographs).

The children continued to look for traces of the disappeared bear and ended up in a room with a video by the artist Simon Starling, *El Eco* (2014), based on an art project in Mexico City where a person stands in dance positions. The children watched the video and reproduced the dance positions (Picture 3), in this way commenting on the video work with their bodies.

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<sup>13</sup> Lynette Yladom-Boakye, Paintings, oil on canvas. Retrieved from <http://www.gibca.se/index.php/sv/gibca-2015/konstnaerer/lynette-yiadam-boakye>

<sup>14</sup> Pia Rönnicke, 60 photo engravings. Retrieved from <http://www.gibca.se/index.php/sv/gibca-2015/konstnaerer/pia-roenicke>

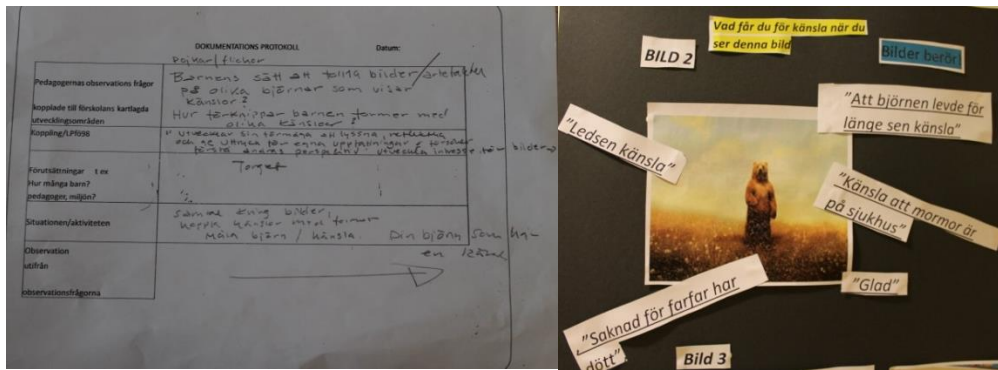


Picture 3. Photograph: Tarja Karlsson Häikiö  
(The picture is a collage of several photographs).

Since the art gallery visit occurred at the children's own pace of viewing the works, they were given freedom to choose or to opt out. The visit to the exhibition also became a game where they could choose to play the search game or watch the artwork, or both. The children could relate to the earlier work made at the preschool and the story about Paddington. By being active and exploring the spaces on their own conditions, agency is created (Pascal & Bertram, 2009). The children also encountered different kinds of analogue and digital artworks. They were offered freedom of movement within an art education framework that opposes the traditional and common obstacles in art institutional contexts, as described by Lindgren and van Vulpen (2016). This shows how an aesthetic-material-relational meaning-making took place on the children's own terms through simultaneous and interwoven art experienced within the space of an art institution (2016, p. 119).

### *Art education activities at the preschool*

At the preschool, the children used different materials to show their impressions of the visit to the art gallery and what they thought had happened to the bear. Later in the project, the teachers used pictures of artworks of bears, sculptures that expressed emotions in different ways because the children's interests changed during the project – from the story of Paddington to hypotheses of bears in general – and dealing with emotions of loneliness, sadness or being lost. In this way, the emotional theme in the project led to how the aims in the curriculum were processed and the fulfilment of the project's aims of, e.g. language development, understanding of equity and linking to the creation of an understanding of the situation of others, such as the refugee situation. The project documentation states the focus questions for the teachers' observations of the ways the children interpreted visual materials and artefacts showing different emotions of bears (Picture 4). The connection to the curriculum is described in the documentation as aiming to 'develop [the] ability to listen to others', 'reflect and express the child's own perceptions' and 'try to understand others' perspectives', as well as to 'develop interest in images'.



Picture 4. Photograph: Tarja Karlsson Häikiö/Documentation at preschool (The picture is a collage of several photographs).

The documentation of a conversation about an image of a lonely bear shows traces of the work-in-progress (Picture 4), where ‘children’s ways of interpreting images and artefacts of different bears that show feelings’ deal with different emotions: ‘a sad feeling’, ‘feeling happy’; loneliness, togetherness, and belonging: ‘the bear misses his dead grandpa’, ‘the feeling is that the bear’s grandmother is in hospital’; and time and place: ‘the bear lived a long time ago’, and so forth.

The teachers followed the curriculum directions for documentation through ‘systematically and continuously planning, following up, evaluating and developing the educational work’ (Lpfö98, revised 2016, p. 16).<sup>15</sup> They also involved the children in the documentation through mutual dialogues as well as discussing the project in a weekly follow-up of the process and engaged the children in deciding the next step in the project work. In this way, the children were involved in the decision process (Clark, Kjørholt, & Moss, 2005) and also in the steering of the work in a direction where the learning process became mutual between the children, with the adults as co-constructors (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999). At the end of the visit, the children made a drawing together on the floor of the art gallery and participated in documentation, e.g. using cameras to take pictures of their drawings after the visit to the exhibition. This kind of work can be described as a rhizomatic (Olsson, 2012) and open-ended work process, letting the project take its own course and progress in different directions, including continual documentation analysis. Involving the children in the documentation process opened up for different perspectives and ways of looking (Göthlund & Eriksson, 2012), thus creating interpretations based on the children’s observations and choices to describe the events. The children’s use of visual documentation thus became a factor in contesting traditional power relations, creating agency for the children.

The project described above was based on a relational perspective and on communication between adults and children and the children’s active participation. The interaction of the children, the teachers, the art educator and the art gallery as a space for experiencing and learning, the artworks and different expressive forms, together with the children’s emotive responses, reflections and activities, led to meaning-making. The art gallery as a space for experiencing and learning, the art education activities and use of analogue as well as digital visual tools, visual artefacts and visual documentation at the preschool, contributed to the visual knowledge-building and learning. The art gallery and the art educator’s approach turned the contemporary art exhibition into both a learning space and a place for participation and child culture. The aims of the project work on language development and different ways of communication and equity were achieved in the project results through existential conversations

<sup>15</sup> Author’s translation. Swedish original: ‘systematiskt och kontinuerligt planera, följa upp, utvärdera och utveckla det pedagogiska arbetet’.

reflecting on different conditions and opportunities in society, through the children expressing themselves and communicating with different visual and cultural tools. According to Arthur Efland (2002), art can help in widening the conception of the self in relation to the outside world since artworks mirror the time, place and culture in which they are produced. In the project, experiences through storytelling and encounters with contemporary art paved the way for collective experiencing and learning through both formal and informal spaces for participation in the preschool and the art gallery.

## **Final conclusions and further comments**

The results of the study exemplify and discuss how educational institutions – not only preschools and schools but also cultural institutions, such as art galleries, and museums – form arenas for engagement and participation for children and how children's perceptions of their life-world and learning can be expressed in different educational environments. The results of the study show how the use of art and visual tools, visual artefacts and visual documentation, promote agency and participation for children through the involvement of their perspectives, thus contesting a traditional child-adult dichotomy. Since one of the aims of traditional educational practice is fostering children, the core values are based on the adults' control and dominion over children. Giving space for children to act, feel, engage, involve themselves and make decisions about activities in formal and informal educative settings based on children's participation, such as visiting art museums, challenges not only the image of the controlled child but also the role of the adults to have power over the educational goals and learning of children.

The educational setting of the project work describes a rhizomatic and open-ended way of working with multiple offerings of possible understandings, based on art experiences that stand in contrast to educational settings where adults control the children's focus to a certain kind of pre-set interpretation. At the art gallery, the preschool children encountered different kinds of analogue art works, such as paintings and installations, and digital art works, such as photographs and videos. In the activities at the preschool, the teachers used multimodal mediating tools to create linguistic, audible and visual experiences (Pascal & Bertram, 2009) by using analogue tools such as illustrated books, drawings, paintings and constructing, and digital tools such as photography, digital art, and other technologies. In this way, the children were able to improve their visual and media literacy and acquire visual knowledge based on the project work, aimed at enhancing language development and reflecting issues of equity based on the learning aims of the curriculum.

In the study, both social constructionist and new materialist theoretical perspectives were used to analyse and highlight the knowledge-acquisition of children as socially and relationally co-constructed (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999). In the art education project, the art gallery and preschool offered different educational settings for knowledge creation in intra-active relationships between child-child and child-objects as co-constitution (Lenz Taguchi, 2012). In the project work, the use of different communicative forms, both analogue and digital, contributes to the collective learning process and meaning-making through exploring social and cultural objects and phenomena (Jewitt, 2011). Agency is promoted by including the children in the use of cultural, visual and multimodal tools (Jewitt, 2011) and narratives, and through creating human-material relations (Lindgren & van Vulpen, 2016) in the meaning-making of art events. By being active participants, the children are empowered to see themselves as active subject creators and as visually competent in explorative meaning-making processes (Lenz Taguchi, 2012; Lind, 2001) through settings of art-based visual events (Illeris, 2009).

Thus, the learning process of the children follows the third strategy for art education encounters in museums, as described by Aure, Illeris, and Örtengren (2009). From an educational perspective, the

relational project approach – based on communication and active participation and chosen by the teachers – points to a view of knowledge that opposes the idea of individual development in interaction with other children. Instead, the aim is to present a view of the collaborative constitution of learning, in which the children are parts of a collective entity that creates mutual transformations in understanding through relationships, intra-actions between art objects and children in the search game and the creation of visual knowledge in the visual and multimodal preschool activities. The art education activities offer mutual learning between adults and children by alternative ways of looking and dealing with power relations. In this project, multi-sensual and visual experiences are highlighted as means to create knowledge through the use of visual and cultural narratives as well as ethical issues based on the aims of equity in the curriculum.

## Author presentation

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