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Children's right to participate – Pitfalls and possibilities

Children's right to participate comes to the fore both internationally and nationally. Taking Norway as a point of departure, both the Kindergarten Act and the National Curriculum document emphasize children's right to participation. Moreover, children's participation is a prioritized area in a national research program, as well as in a nationwide strategy intended to strengthen early childhood practitioners' competence. The fact that this right is articulated in several national documents is, however, no guarantee that the right will be realised in the everyday lives of children in early childhood institutions.

In the presentation I will explore some critical issues or problems which influence how this right might be understood by practitioners and researchers in the field. Such understandings create premises for what kind of space there is for children to participate as subjects. Issues which will be discussed are views of children and views on democracy along with questions regarding diversity and difference. Other crucial issues are implementation pressures such as, top-down directives regarding methods and/or programs, and thinking emphasizing prescriptive didactics. I will point to how playfulness and humour can be seen as prerequisites for children's participation in early childhood settings. The argument is that the ways these issues are understood and dealt with might lead to pitfalls as well as possibilities regarding the realisation of children's participation in early childhood institutions. In order to be aware of the pitfalls some central tenets regarding early childhood theory and practice have to be reconsidered.