

“It’s fun but at the same time difficult”: Experiences of and perspectives on children’s participation in decision-making processes in Physical Education and Health

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Abstract

Swedish compulsory school education rests upon the foundation of democracy, and the *Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and school-age educare 2011* (Skolverket, 2018) stresses that children should have the opportunity to take initiatives. Research shows that children are not able to have any influence on activities in Physical Education and Health (PEH). Usually, they have to follow the teacher’s instructions and reproduce specific movement patterns. This article discusses a research project that challenged traditional ways of teaching PEH, in order to give 10-year-old children the opportunity to have an influence on PEH. The project involved 10 circus lessons in which the children were encouraged to explore movement and put their own ideas into practice. In terms of theory, the approach is based on Hart’s (1997) Ladder of Children’s Participation. Data were collected through participant observations, video observations, interviews, and a field diary. The results show that the children participated in varying degrees and experienced attempts to increase their influence in different ways: Some found it fun and free, while others found it difficult and boring. One

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important conclusion is that influence and participation need to be practised – both by children and by teachers. Circus activities, because of the playfulness and creativity involved, may be very suited to practising influence and participation.

Keywords

Children's participation in decision-making processes, circus, democratic ways of working, Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation, Physical Education and Health

Introduction and background

Swedish compulsory school education rests upon the foundation of democracy (Skolverket, 2018). The curriculum for compulsory school emphasizes that teaching should be conducted using democratic ways of working, through which the pupils have the opportunity to take initiatives. In addition, it should stimulate their curiosity and creativity, as well as their desire to translate ideas into action (Skolverket, 2018). Swedish schools are not only governed by the curriculum but also by the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989), which became a Swedish law in January 2020. Like the curriculum, the Convention states that children shall be provided with the opportunity to be heard and express their opinions.

Despite the policies in force, research indicates that democratic ways of working are not widespread in practice. Previous research shows that pupils' influence in school is limited, and that they primarily get to influence issues such as breaks and homework – not lesson content or teaching (Elvstrand, 2015). Pupils say that they want to have more influence in school, but do not think they can get it to any great extent (for more references, see Thuresson & Quennerstedt, 2020). Limited experience of co-determination prevents children expressing their opinions when asked to do so (Eliasson, 2011). Furthermore, teachers in Swedish schools seem to have difficulties regarding relinquishing their privileged position to create space for the pupils' influence (Thuresson & Quennerstedt, 2020). The lack of democratic ways of working is also evident in the school subject, Physical Education and Health (PEH). The Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2012) reports that PEH teaching does not give pupils opportunities to influence processes and take responsibility. Instead, it follows a teacher-centred approach, which means that most often pupils follow the teacher's instructions and reproduce specific movement patterns rather than co-create and explore movement (Karlefors & Larsson, 2018; Kirk, 2010; Mattsson & Larsson, 2020). Children have no influence in sports clubs either (e.g., Eliasson, 2011, 2017), which is relevant, since research shows that leisure time sports activities and sports techniques have a strong impact on how PEH is carried out (e.g., Kirk, 2010). In other words, PEH could probably be situated at the intersection of two contexts (school and sport), in which adult decision-making takes place without influence from children.

A shift towards more critical and inclusive approaches in the field of health and physical education is needed (Fitzpatrick & Russell, 2015). However, educational change is often difficult, slow and rife with insecurity (Burner, 2018). Further, Burner (2018)

states that students need support when learning to become more active and responsible. Madsen and Aggerholm (2020) have studied teachers' didactic considerations when integrating movement activities into different school subjects. Their results show that though traditional power structures were challenged, the new way of teaching was sometimes perceived as too simple or too elusive for the pupils. Some studies indicate that some specific situations in schools offer varying degrees of participation and that pupils have different opportunities for participation: Some negotiate actively and often about influence, while others almost never get involved (Elvstrand, 2015). The amount of influence differs based on the pupils' will to participate, their social position within the group, and the abilities required to negotiate for participation (such as speaking in front of classmates). Pupils learn participation by experiencing and practicing participation situations (Elvstrand, 2015). When pupils are physically involved in the teaching, they gain other experiences than they would from just sitting in the classroom and talking about it (Madsen & Aggerholm, 2020). To conduct teaching based on pupils' experiences, needs, and conditions, the teacher must invite the pupils to be part of the learning process (Swedish Schools Inspectorate, 2012). Pupils who frequently exercise influence in the classroom believe in their role as decision makers (Elvstrand, 2015). If they do not get to exercise influence in school, they risk not being able to play an active role in society, or make their influence felt there (Elvstrand, 2015).

Aim

The purpose of this article is to explore how democratic ways of working can be increased in the school subject, Physical Education and Health (PEH). The article focuses on an action research project which challenged traditional ways of teaching PEH in order to facilitate and increase the influence on and participation in decision-making processes by 10-year-old children. The following questions are addressed:

- How can children's influence in PEH be increased, and how do they and the researchers perceive this?
- What are the children's experiences of taking part in the research project?
- What are the challenges involved in conducting teaching that strives for democratic ways of working in PEH?

The article contributes insights into and increased knowledge about PEH teaching that includes children's influence to a greater extent and that enables democratic ways of working. It also provides concrete proposals for planning and conducting democratic ways of working in PEH. Previous research has demonstrated that such democratic ways of working are lacking in the teaching of other school subjects, too. Therefore, the findings of this study are useful to teachers in school subjects and in society at large, demonstrating how children's participation in decision-making processes and their opportunities to exert influence can be increased.

Theoretical framework

The terminology for talking about pupils' influence can vary greatly (Thuresson & Quennerstedt, 2020). In this article, we use the words *democratic ways of working*, *influence*, and *participation* to describe co-determination. The concept of *participation* has a broad meaning (Thuresson & Quennerstedt, 2020), and it can be complicated in the PEH context, where it is also used to describe whether a pupil takes part in a lesson or not. However, when the word is used in this text, it is in connection with influence and participation in decision-making processes.

The theoretical approach is based on the Roger Hart's (1997) Ladder of Children's Participation. We use Hart's model as an analytical tool to operationalize power relations and to identify the extent to which the children in the project were able to influence and participate in decision-making in PEH. The model also helps raise awareness regarding what would have been required in the PEH teaching to achieve a higher degree of involvement among the children. Hart's "ladder" consists of eight different "rungs" that express different levels of children's participation in decisions. The ladder is useful for identifying when children are participating in decision-making and for discussing how adults can support children's involvement to the maximum level of the latter's capacity and desire. The eight rungs are: manipulation, decoration, tokenism, assigned but informed, consulted and informed, adult-initiated and shared decisions with children, child-initiated and directed, and child-initiated and shared decisions with adults. Hart (1997) underlines that the first three rungs are unacceptable when it comes to the participation of children and points out the importance of avoiding working at these non-participation rungs. Rungs four to eight are described below:

- 4 *Assigned but informed* is about social mobilization and often involves the assignment of children to catalyse the adults' actions by educating the children in a particular issue.
- 5 *Consulted and informed* refers to projects designed and run by adults in which children are consulted and understand the process, and their opinions are treated seriously.
- 6 *Adult-initiated, shared decisions with children* are about involving children in the entire process, to some degree, to achieve shared decision projects.
- 7 *Child-initiated and directed* refers to children's play. Adults can help play to take place without directing it; the secret is to set the stage for play. Observant adults are needed to notice the initiatives of children and allow them to happen, as well as to recognize the initiatives without controlling them.
- 8 *Child-initiated, shared decisions with adults* concerns projects led by children in which the decision-making is shared with adults. Hart states that children should be allowed to continue to direct and manage a project that they initiated themselves. If they then choose to collaborate with adults, this demonstrates

that children feel sufficiently confident and competent as members of the community so as not to feel obliged to deny their needs in order to collaborate with others.

According to Hart (1997), an important principle regarding participation in decisions is to remember *choice*. It is not necessary that children always operate on the highest rungs of the participation ladder but that each child can choose to participate at the highest level of her/his ability. In a project, a child may choose to work on different levels of the Ladder of Children's Participation (Hart, 1997).

Research design and methodology

This study is based on action research. Action research strives to be close to practice (Rönnerman, 2018), and the researcher aims for investigation and change (Wood & McAteer, 2017). Action research allows the inclusion of a greater diversity of voices (Anderson et al., 2007). Critical reflection regarding the practice is central in action research and involves a problematizing approach that raises questions and searches for alternative perspectives (e.g., McAteer, 2013), and it often starts from one's own practice (Wood & McAteer, 2017; Zeni, 1998). There are different directions in action research (e.g., Kemmis et al., 2014; Rönnerman, 2018). This study applies *practical action research*, which enables teachers to develop reflection on and the understanding of educational practice and to test their values (e.g., Kemmis et al., 2014; Rönnerman, 2018). However, the study can potentially be seen as belonging to other action research directions, such as critical action research, which is permeated by such themes as emancipation, change, and freedom from injustices (e.g., Kemmis et al., 2014; Rönnerman, 2018). Nonetheless, we (the authors) do not believe that to be the case because, according to Rönnerman (2018), the participants should then be involved in all phases of the research process. In our study, the children were not part of all the steps. Relatively little action research has been undertaken in physical education, and previous research on the subject has mainly focused on students as objects (Robinson, 2013; Rossi & Tan, 2012).

This project started with the formation and transformation of teaching methods. The first author, a trained PEH teacher, has extended experience of the circus and formulated an alternative teaching method. The authors wanted to go beyond the traditional teacher-centred format of PEH and investigate together with the children how teaching could be conducted in a co-creative way, in which the children are offered opportunities to influence the teaching. Circus activities were chosen as lesson content because such activities foreground playfulness (Purovaara & Damkjær, 2012). Price (2012) states that circus arts, or "circo arts" as he calls them, involve children in activities that can lead to the exploration of movement. Circus activities in PEH are rare in Sweden. For example, juggling is an activity that is considered outside the category of mainstream sport (Nyberg et al., 2020). Further, Kriellaars et al. (2019) point out that

children can challenge themselves based on their ability when doing circus because it contains a wide variety of progressions for many movements.

The authors planned the project together. Then the first author collected the data. During the collection of the data, the two authors frequently discussed the data collection process. Thereafter, the first author made an initial empirically grounded analysis. Hart's model was introduced by the second author, and then the authors jointly carried out the analysis and the writing of the article. The project involved 20 multilingual children (6 girls and 14 boys), aged 10 years, attending a public school. Data were collected through participant observations, video observations, interviews with the participating children, and the writing of a field diary.

An action research project is very unpredictable compared to many other types of studies (McMahon & Jefford, 2009). After the first meeting with the participants, the first circus lesson was planned and conducted. The plan for each circus lesson was flexible, working as a guide that could be modified based on how the project developed, rather than as a strictly established plan. Consequently, each lesson was formed based on what happened in the previous one and on the children's responses. These different phases were all part of the classic action research spiral described, for example, by Kemmis et al. (2014) and Rossi and Tan (2012), which contains the following four recurring steps: plan, act, observe, and reflect. In this project, the research process took place iteratively and was present in every part of the empirical data collection. For example, the analysis was performed in a cyclical process. Throughout the study, the first author kept a field diary. The diary was used to document classroom activities and encourage description, interpretation, and reflection. In addition, thoughts and feelings of importance to the writer were documented (cf., Anderson et al., 2007). The circus lessons were documented through participant observation and video and audio recordings that were made simultaneously. The camera was positioned so that most of the gym hall (and the activities in it) was caught on film. The first author started the camera before the start of the PEH lesson, and it stayed on during the whole lesson. Ottesen's (2013) observation guide was used: focusing on the room, the participants, what they said and did, the activities and the relations among the children and between them and the first author. Following Ottesen's (2013) recommendations for participant observations, the first author strived for a balance between distance and involvement as a participant. She captured a detailed picture in the field and again during watching the video recordings. The observations and experiences of the author were dictated, transcribed, and put into the field diary. According to Molbæk and Kristensen (2019), video observation for triangulation can contribute to nuancing the meanings ascribed to the practice of teachers. Thanks to the video observations, it was possible to capture various aspects that may have otherwise been missed. The participant observations and the video observations complemented each other, and the two authors worked back and forth between doing and reflecting, in the sense that the reflection affected and influenced the doing. The total length of the video-recorded material was eight

hours. Each filmed circus lesson varied between 40 and 55 minutes, except for one that had captured only 25 minutes of the lesson due to the video camera being turned off by accident.

Semi-structured group interviews with the children (three to four in each group) were conducted and audio-recorded on two occasions: halfway through the project and at the end. The children were interviewed in groups to allow them to seek support from each other and to encourage discussions between them, which allowed the subject to be deepened (e.g., Johansson, 2013b). Moreover, interviewing several children at the same time helped to even out the structural inequality between adults and children, because the children had an advantage in terms of numbers (Johansson, 2013b). Further, the interviews were conducted when the children and the first author had known each other for a while, which according to Ennis and Chen (2012) can enable the neutralization of power relationships. All interviews were conducted in rooms connected to the subject classroom. In the first interviews, 19 children (6 girls and 13 boys) participated, and the interviews lasted 28–54 minutes (185 minutes in total). The final interviews involved 11 children (4 girls and 7 boys), and they lasted 22–32 minutes (82 minutes in total). The loss of participants in the final interviews was due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Few children attended school. Qualitative research generates a superfluity of messy data and the data analysis starts already when conducting the interviews and field observations (Hastie & Glotova, 2012). In this study, the audio-recorded material was transcribed, the authors translated the text into English and corrected sentences in terms of grammar. The data collection and analysis took place simultaneously and iteratively in all occurring steps of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. The steps helped the authors to narrow down the data and decide what to use for this study. The authors re-viewed and re-listened to the recordings and re-read the transcriptions from the interviews and the field diary looking for patterns (e.g. Hastie & Glotova, 2012). They focused on ambiguities, contradictions, conflicts, and things that arouse curiosity or surprise (e.g., Johansson, 2013c). When the authors had grouped the data into two themes, they chose names which reflected the content. For this article, the authors selected different vignettes, examples, and quotations to illustrate the material.

Ethics

The research project follows the ethical requirements for research laid down by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017) and the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union* (2012, art. 8, para.1, art. 24, para. 1 & 2). It was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority. Fictional names are used for all participants, and the material collected during the project is stored in accordance with the university regulations. The project was carried out during school time. Participation in the research study was voluntary, but taking part in the PEH lessons was mandatory. This led to many questions and considerations regarding ethics and how to conduct

the project. Research involving children can be conducted either *on, together with, or by* children (Johansson, 2013a). In this study, the research was conducted together with and on children. Children are considered a particularly vulnerable group of persons when involved in research (Wright & O'Flynn, 2012), and there is an imbalance in power relations between children and adult researchers (Ennis & Chen, 2012; Starkey et al., 2014). The guardians provided informed consent for their children's participation. Starkey et al. (2014) describe how the power dimension of research with children also involves their right to participation, yet children's perspectives are seldom requested or acted on by adults (Enright & O'Sullivan, 2012). In this study, the authors strived to equalize the power imbalance and increase democratic ways of working for children in school. Further, the authors believed it was relevant to highlight the children's own perspective on their participation in decision-making processes. Therefore, they found it important that the children also filled out a form of informed consent to give them a choice in the matter of participation. However, it is up for debate whether asking for written consent from 10-year-olds may lead them to see their participation as more binding. The authors tried to prevent that by explaining and emphasizing that it was voluntary to participate in the research. In addition, they paid attention to whether the children seemed comfortable during participation in the circus lessons and the interviews. An example that at least some children did not feel forced to participate is that one child decided to not participate in an interview.

Results

The analysis of the empirical material resulted in the following two themes: (1) reproduction and/or invention and (2) realizations of ideas.

Reproduction and/or invention

The theme "reproduction and/or invention" presents examples of the first author's attempts to conduct teaching that aimed to increase children's influence in PEH. The theme also problematizes the children's different perspectives: Namely, there were different degrees of participation in decision-making processes involved in the assignments and exercised in varying degrees by the children.

During the circus lessons, the first author strived to increase the opportunities for the children to exercise participation. In line with Hart's (1997) emphasis on the importance of *choice*, the first author wanted to provide inspiration, ideas, and examples of new and different ways of moving. Therefore, she always began the circus lessons by offering the children different suggestions as to what to do and how to do it. Through doing so, she hoped that the children would be able to explore and exercise their influence in different ways. Visual support, in the form of pictures, was also used, and aimed to provide inspiration of how to move, for example throwing behind your back or catching under your leg. The following vignette is an extract from the

first author's field diary after watching the video recording of the ninth circus lesson, which focused on hula hooping:

I say, "I like this trick, above my head", and then I spin the hula hoop on my hand straight up above my head. "And then you want to rest a bit," I say and lie down on my back. One of the children makes loud snoring noises. Then I say, "and then you want to stretch a little," and I put the hula hoop on my foot and spin it while I lie down. The children have their eyes fixed on me and look very attentively. When I spin the hoop on my foot and lie down, they shout, "oh my god, wow!", and someone starts applauding and several others join, so it becomes a spontaneous applause. Maya stands up and tries to spin an imaginary hoop on her foot. Kira raises her hand to ask something. I make a sequence with the hula hoop where I sort of spin it in front of me and then step through it, throw it up in the air, and jump backwards. The children become enthusiastic: "Oh wow!" And Maya again makes some movements where she is. She waves her arms like an octopus. "Do it again!" some children say to me.

The circus lessons were permeated by concerns about the extent of the children's participation: How much influence did they have? Reflections on showing the children skills and movements like in traditional teaching were documented in the first author's field diary. As Burner (2018) clarifies, insecurity is a natural part of change, and the first author experienced uncertainty regarding how co-creative and participating the children were when reproducing tricks. Therefore, the first author continually pointed out and reminded the children that what she was showing them were only suggestions as to how to do things. Throughout the 10 circus lessons, the children were encouraged to explore and investigate other ways of moving and doing things. The first author showing her own skills might seem contrary to the idea of helping the children participate and invent new movements, but her showing examples functioned as a strategy to help the children come up with ideas and to train having an influence on proceedings. Below there are some examples from the video observation of the ninth circus lesson, mentioned above, of how the children worked with the assignment to explore hula hooping:

- Noor and Fatima try to spin the hoops on their arms while at the same time doing dance steps with their feet.
- Andrzej and Lucas throw their hoops to each other.
- Dominik asks the first author to show him a specific trick, which she does and helps him to get the hula hoop in the correct position.
- Fahad shows the first author a skill that he has invented, and she tries it. She deliberately fails, so he has to show it and instruct her again.

- Pablo shows Dániel a trick involving spinning the hoop on the hand and arm, which Dániel then tries.
- Maïssa has picked up another hula hoop, so she has two now.

Exploring the hula hoop functioned as planned: The children tried several ways of moving and using the hoops.

Another exercise, called “What can it be?”, turned out to be much appreciated and, according to the children’s wishes, was therefore repeated in several lessons. A circus prop, for example a juggling club, was used in different ways to shape something else, such as a guitar, a pair of binoculars, or a cane. Compared with showing examples aimed at reproducing or inventing skills, as described above, “What can it be?” was more challenging, because the children were given more freedom and responsibility to come up with ideas themselves and perform them individually in front of their classmates, who then guessed what it was. It was always possible to ask the first author or a classmate for advice or suggestions on what to stage, which some children did. When “What can it be?” was performed during the last circus lesson, the children were free to choose between different circus items, or use several of them, as one child suggested. The structure of this exercise, as well as the organisation of exploring the hula hoop described earlier, were marked by not being determined, which differs from traditional activities and ways of using the material in PEH. Moreover, the children’s choices regarding participation in decision-making concerning “What can it be?” were focused: The children were not forced to perform anything but could choose to do so (several times), could choose what to stage, and could ask for advice if desired. It became clear that they sought to exert influence in different ways and to different extents.

In the interviews, the children announced that they liked this free way of producing ideas and taking initiatives on their own. Other words they used to describe their experiences and opinions were “fun” and “freer”. Three of the girls reflected on it in the following way:

The first author: And I usually ask you to test, for example, different ways of throwing things, and then I wonder how it feels when I don’t decide how you should throw, but say try to throw in different ways? How does it feel?

Kira: Not that you have to, but only if you want to, and it’s fun to also try new ways to learn.

[...]

Maïssa: I think it’s very good because you can do as you want and try new things, so that you don’t have to continue with the same thing all the time even though you already know it. You get to try new things.

[...]

- Kira: I think it's quite fun that you kind of don't say, kind of ask if you want to learn anything, so sometimes you can try to do different things but sometimes you don't really know what to do, what to do so then it's good, then it's good to ask you because then you can show what we can do.
- Teresa: Because you also give suggestions.

Meanwhile, some reflected on producing ideas themselves as a challenge:

- Tomas: It's fun but at the same time difficult.
- Lucas: Yes.
- The first author: What is difficult then?
- Tomas: To sort of find your own way and test some ways that you have also done, it is difficult to come up with as well.

Three boys expressed that they found the way of working boring and tricky and wanted the first author to decide what they should do. For instance, Fahad described how they do not know what to do and said, "I think you should decide 100%".

The fact that the children experienced and exercised influence in different ways was evident, for example, during the hula hoop lesson, when Emir did not want to take part in the activity. He asked the first author if he could have a skipping rope instead, which he was allowed to. According to Elvstrand (2015), it is easier to exert influence if you are used to it, if you want to do it, and if you feel comfortable asking questions and speaking out loud or have a high social status in the group. We saw the same patterns in our project: Children who asked questions asked many and initiated ideas, whereas others seldom spoke up or hesitated to participate.

Realizations of ideas

The theme realization of ideas presents examples of how some of the children's ideas were translated into action. It involves the first author inviting the children to partake in co-determination and planning upcoming circus lessons based on their suggestions and desires. These suggestions were performed either by the first author or by the children. The theme problematizes power positions and the need for shared power between the first author and the children to enable participation in decision-making.

In the beginning of the research project, the children had various preconceptions about a circus. Many thought of clowns and several animals. Circus costumes were brought up during the interviews halfway through the 10 circus lessons. Thanks to those interviews, the first author was able to get a feeling of how the children experienced the circus lessons so far and listened to their suggestions to enable and increase

their influence on the remaining lessons. For example, one girl named Noor asked to wear circus clothes. The following conversation took place in another group:

Dominik: Why don't you bring those giant feet with you? Shoes?
Mikkel: Yes, such clown shoes! Like Pippi [Longstocking]!
The first author: I actually don't have any, but would you like to dress up?
Dominik, Mikkel,
Dániel and
Muhammed: Yes.
The first author: It can also be part of the circus.
Dániel: What I wanted was for you to wear it.
Dominik: Do you have a clown nose?

These wishes and suggestions led to the planning and conducting of a circus lesson with costumes and an animal theme. The first author brought 25 different outfits, and when the lesson started, she met the children dressed as a clown. Spontaneously, she decided to transform her voice and got into clown character, which is described below in an extract from the field diary after reviewing the video recording of the eighth circus lesson:

I ask what we did last week, and the children explain. Throughout the whole gathering part of the lesson, I stay in character and keep my clown voice. I say that I have brought costumes and that we will dress up, that there are animal costumes and other costumes. I say, "sometimes circuses have animals, but we have no animals: we *are* the animals". Then some children laugh. I tell them we are going to dress up and move around the room. "How does a clown climb a rope?" I say, and Mikkel stands up and pretends to climb with large leg and arm movements. "Or how does a camel do a forward roll?" I ask and the children laugh.

While in costumes, the children were active in their exploration of movement. For instance, someone jumped on all fours in a monkey costume on the thin mats, which were part of an obstacle course, and Noor developed a character based on the fur jacket she had picked from the pile of costumes. Collaborations between the children arose, exemplified, for example, when Pablo took off a clown wig and shouted, "Who wants this?" and Maïssa, standing on a balance board, stretched out her hand and received it. Further, Teresa stood on the crash mat and held up a hoop that someone dressed as an elephant jumped through. During the lesson, there was space to explore and try things out in different ways, to different extents. Another example of the different degrees of participation, which the previous theme touched upon, were the two boys, Malik and Hassan, who chose to wear their usual clothes instead of costumes when taking part in the lesson. The first author, who also wore different outfits throughout the lesson, tried to help with suggestions of costumes or movements when, for example, Kira

seemed inactive, watching her classmates. Further, conflicts arose between children regarding whose turn it was to wear specific costumes. Throughout the circus lessons, not all of the children's ideas were heeded and realized, such as the desire to try a trapeze or the suggestion of a competition as to who could balance a peacock feather the longest.

When the children asked the first author to perform, she was motivated to get on stage and showing her skills. She also saw it as a way of implementing the children's ideas and heeding their suggestions. A challenge for her was to take a step back to create space for the children to take the position of experts. When working with balancing peacock feathers during the second circus lesson, one child asked the first author if she could balance it on her chin. "Yes," she responded, "but you should have a go!" She reflected in her field diary that "for me, that was new in circus, not to show my skills directly but instead to let the children's knowledge and exploration be completely in focus. I wanted them to show me different ways to balance". By doing this, the traditional ways of PEH teaching – in which the pupils are expected to follow pre-established movement patterns shown by the teacher (Karlefors & Larsson, 2018; Kirk, 2010; Mattsson & Larsson, 2020) – were challenged. It also opened up the opportunity for the first author to learn new skills herself, inspired and taught by the children. This example could be seen as invention, thereby belonging in the previous theme as well, but it is included in the theme realization of ideas because it indicates the first author's wish to encourage the children to translate their ideas and creativity into action themselves.

Concluding discussion

The contributions of the study are manifold and include implications for the practice of, and, research into, PEH as well as the complexity of the encounter between theory and practice. We show that Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation is an applicable model to try to understand what participation might involve in a school subject. As an operationalizing tool, it also functions to raise awareness regarding what is required when conducting PEH teaching to achieve a higher degree of involvement among the children. Even so, the use of Hart's (1997) model is complicated, due to the different degrees with which children participate and their experience of participation. The same exercise or situation often involved several grades of participation, and the extent of individual influence and co-determination depended on whose perspective was being considered.

In this section we will start with a discussion of how different PEH exercises offered children and adults opportunities to take part (or not) in the decision-making process. We claim that the exercise "What can it be?" belongs to the sixth rung, *adult-initiated, shared decisions with children* on Hart's (1997) Ladder of Children's Participation, because the conditions for the exercise were negotiable. The first author established the framework of the exercise, and the children were able to influence which item(s)

were to be transformed and into what. Moreover, the child performing could decide whether they wanted an idea from others and also which classmate was to make the guess.

Regarding the costume lesson, we consider it to belong to the seventh rung, *child-initiated and directed*, because it emerged from the children's ideas. Central, too, according to Hart (1997), is the involvement of children's play, which in the lesson was expressed through imagination regarding the movements of animals and the development of characters. However, if we take the perspectives of the two children who did not want to dress up, then it may be that the activity belongs to the fifth rung, *consulted and informed*. From these children's angle, the lesson might have been considered as designed and run by the first author. Nevertheless, we consider it participatory, because the children were consulted and their opinions were treated seriously, regardless of their choice concerning involvement. That said, the costume lesson oscillated between several rungs depending on the point of view. We suggest it also made it up to the eighth rung, *child-initiated, shared decisions with adults*, because the first author followed the children's playfulness through interaction and supported them when needed.

The fact that not all suggestions by the children, such as for example competing in balancing peacock feathers, were heeded and realized can be discussed in terms of whether the non-realization of some of the children's suggestions corresponds with the upper rungs on Hart's (1997) ladder. The invitation to produce suggestions that were later neglected can be considered as the third rung, *tokenism*, which according to Hart (1997) is unacceptable in relation to children's participation. At the same time, ideas that were not translated into action were still expressed, and the children who presented the suggestions can be interpreted as agents exercising democratic ways of working. In that case, we argue that having an influence can be about raising your voice. Further, neglecting to implement some of the children's ideas brings up the question whether the children needed to present ideas acceptable to the first author – the “right” ideas which the first author found suitable and also wanted. If so, the first author's way of handling these initiatives was inadequate. The children had to be able to consider the first author's assessment of their initiative. This might hamper the development of democratic ways of working.

The use of Hart's (1997) Ladder of Children's Participation as a tool for understanding roles of children and adults respectively in a decision-making process helped us identify practices that were more or less helpful in supporting children's participation. As Elvstrand (2015) maintains, pupils learn participation by practicing and experiencing participation situations. Conducting PEH teaching in the way pointed out by the first author – that the instructions were suggestions, and the children were encouraged to explore other ways of working – we consider to be a simple technique for helping the children to exercise influence. Involving pupils and their bodies in the teaching provided experiences other than just talking about it in the classroom, in line

with Madsen and Aggerholm (2020). Further, Burner (2018) argues that children need support when learning to become more active and responsible, and in this study some children needed support to produce ideas and others needed the freedom to put their ideas into practice and the space to do so. The results of this study contribute to the research into PEH and point to the importance of acknowledging the views of children regarding their experiences of being part of a research project and regarding teaching that aims for increased influence in PEH. We argue that training in participation in decision-making processes is required, and we want to highlight the need to conduct teaching in which all children get to practice participation continuously. As Thuresson and Quennerstedt (2020) state, teachers seem to have difficulty regarding relinquishing their privileged position to make it possible for pupils to have more influence. When the first author demonstrated skills, she called them “suggestions” and encouraged other ways of doing things, which helped to even out inequality. The first author’s drive to perform, eagerly encouraged by the children, might have positioned her as a kind of idol – a circus star to look up to. Such admiration instils power; therefore, it was essential for the first author to step back and put the children and their explorations and performances at the centre. In accordance with Eliasson (2011), we believe that limited experiences of co-determination were a reason some of the children found it difficult when their opinions were consulted. As shown in Madsen and Aggerholm’s (2020) study, pupils may perceive a new way of teaching as too simple or too elusive. In our study, some children stated that it was tricky to come up with ideas, and their desire for the first author to decide everything may imply that the new way of teaching was perceived as ambiguous. It can be questioned whether limited participation in decision-making was an outcome of limited experience with exerting influence, or an expression of the habitual way of organizing PEH teaching. It is possible that one obstacle to participation in decision-making is that the child then feels responsible for the outcome to a higher extent than if the teacher makes all decisions.

The study also contributes to the practice of PEH and offers tools for change based on collaboration, dialogue and interaction with the children. We want to underline the importance of oscillating between teaching and reflection. The method used – the video recording, the watching of the video, the field diary – gave the researcher an opportunity to reflect about her teaching and develop it. Thanks to that, the elements of children’s participation in the decision-making processes could be increased. We believe that it is important to integrate research with practice and give teachers (time) opportunities to observe their own practices and develop reflections on children’s participation in decision-making processes and then to go back and teach again. In this study, the different degrees of participation among the children became visible when presenting the project’s results. Some children’s actions are more highlighted, and some are cited more, because those children shared and expressed their experiences and thoughts to a greater extent. This raises the question of how the circus lessons could have been designed to enable a higher degree of participation in decision-making for

all of the children. If the research project had continued, the lessons could have been conducted in smaller groups to make it easier for children to speak in front of others, and some exercises could have been organized so the children explored or staged movements in pairs instead of individually. If this had been tried out, new reflections would be needed to inform further development. Some precautions are needed too. The children could have been consulted as to the design and structure of the obstacle course that the first author herself had put up before the eighth circus lesson. Because of short lessons and safety restraints due to large groups of children, increasing children's participation in decision-making processes can be challenging for a teacher.

The study contributes to the practice of PEH in another way too. The introduction of a new movement culture, in this case circus activities in PEH, enables the teacher to develop new patterns. It might have been possible through other activities as well, such as football, but because children and teachers think they know more about football, we believe that a new movement culture opens up opportunities for change in relation to children's participation in decision-making processes. We argue that circus activities are suitable for exercising democratic ways of working in PEH. Playfulness is central in the circus (Purovaara & Damkjær, 2012), and we believe that playfulness invites creativity in the movement culture. Through costumes and imagination, different motions can be explored and discovered. Through circus activities, movement can take place in ways that deviate from what children most often meet in PEH and leisure sport activities. Through non-predetermined ways of doing and moving, creativity can be generated and contribute to opening up new worlds in PEH. Through conducting teaching in which instructions and demonstrations of how to do things are presented as just suggestions, democratic ways of working can be practised in PEH. The children in our project described producing their own solutions either as fun and freer or as boring and tricky. An important result in this project is that democratic ways of working need to be practised, not only by children in terms of taking initiatives and exercising influence, but also by teachers in terms of sharing power. Accordingly, children should get many opportunities to practice participation. As Hart (1997) states, choice is important in relation to participation, and so we suggest that teaching in which children get to exercise influence should offer diverse levels of participation. Through the inclusive approach that Fitzpatrick and Russell (2015) recommend, teaching can be conducted in ways that allow the children to practice and exercise influence. Then, hopefully, what is stated in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations, 1989) and the *Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and school-age educare 2011* (Skolverket, 2018) – the child's right to participation in decision-making processes – can be complied with and achieved.

Limitations

The limitations of the study concern the fact that the children were not part of the whole research process. Even though the project focused on the voices of the children, it is

through the adult researchers that their perspectives have been interpreted and channelled. Wood et al. (2019) state that the sharing of research results often takes place within scientific journals and seldom in other forums or in multimodal ways. Thus, children that take part in an action research project rarely benefit directly from the findings, even though the goal is often to improve teaching (Zeni, 1998). To increase children's participation in decision-making processes, the researchers could have involved them in the analyses, the presentation of results, and the drawing of conclusions. Doing so could have added a deeper understanding of perspectives and experiences.

Circus activities may help evolve PEH teaching, namely through increasing democratic ways of working in PEH. However, the democratic potential may be lost when doing research because of who is able or not able to participate in research. Due to failure to receive informed consent from all guardians, the circus lessons could not be conducted in a second school, as planned. Language became a barrier for participation. Providing accessible information is necessary to minimize the likelihood of research involving only those who master the language; otherwise, some children are not reached, and their voices are not heard. This is generally problematic in research and particularly in a study aiming to increase democratic ways of working.

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