The overall aim of the projects is:
- To increase children’s participation as a human right
- To ensure children’s right to actively engage in matters that relate directly to them
- To develop the knowledge about children’s participation
- To enhance the awareness among teachers and adults of the importance of child participation
- To define methods that lead to child participation in education and in everyday life
Motive for this project
Children are not listened to enough in preschool (or school). How can we encourage teachers to transform their working methods towards a pedagogy which leans on the children’s ideas, needs, wishes and experiences? How can we strengthen child participation in the outdoor environment?

Background
The teachers set up the framework for the outdoor play. The physical environment is mostly decided by adults, as well as what kind of material that is available. The teachers have limited influence on the design and layout of the playgrounds.

Recent research has reported about young children’s participation and their ability to actively contribute to conditions and debates that affect them. Child participation, consequently, is emerging in the early years as a marker of high quality practice in early childhood education.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child lends global legislative weight to children’s participation, as a human right and recognises the capability of young children to actively engage in matters that relate directly to them.

Democracy and learning
Participation and influence by preschoolers have aspects which encompass both democracy and learning. Small children are dependant upon adults’ ability to understand their ways of reflecting and understanding the world around them. That is why the perspective of small children has to be listened to and interpreted by their teachers. Participation is not only about interviewing children and listening to what they say; it is rather about actively involving children in matters that relate directly to them.
Teachers and children made maps in various ways

The different maps and the observations tell about what is happening that very day and what is important for the children. The children tell about their own maps. Working together with maps gave teachers and children possibilities to develop a new common language, which has increased the children’s influence.

Grass, grass is nice. Fence, fences so the kids can’t get out. Look! I have drawn two girlds on a swing. This is you and this is me.

Girl, 5 years, telling while drawing
Methods to get access to children’s experiences

Walk and talk
Children guide the adult on the playground, telling about favourite places, their play and also about what is boring and scary. They use their bodies to tell us things, moving, running to the places they talk about, and also inviting us to bodily try their games and places.

Video recordings and photos
If you want knowledge, position yourself with the children in the context. Video and photo documentation were useful tools, opening for a later dialogue between children and teachers about the children’s experiences. The observations were also used for stimulated recall among the teachers.

Many children named a tree as their favourite place.
Communication through art

By combining aesthetic expressions and listening to the children’s thoughts and solutions, teachers get access to the children’s perspectives, thoughts and knowledge.

Children made drawings, built clay models and took their own photographs.

Drawing of a play frame with multiple functions with lianas for swinging, a trampoline for jumping and a tunnel.

A photo showing the favourite place at the preschool yard. Many children tell about the importance of swings.
Power and Gender
Some observations led to teachers becoming aware of the hidden structures in the outdoor environment. With a closer look, teachers saw that places are used differently by the children; sometimes according to age and gender, other times according to the children’s special interests.

During the tutorial sessions, teachers asked themselves: *Have we tried enough to reveal the stereotyped gender roles and power patterns?*

Professional development
The perspectives expressed by small children have to be listened to and interpreted by their teachers. Participation is not only about interviewing children and listening to what they say; it is rather about actively involving children. Awareness among teachers about the importance of capturing the children’s interests and experiences is a prerequisite. Close knowledge about the children enables teachers to take advantage of what concerns children in their daily practice.
**Action research**
The project was using action research, where OMEP defined the aim and some of the methods in the project. In action research, the main target group – the children and the educators – has an active role. They bring experiences from their daily lives, which serve as starting out points for discussions with the advisor. Participation is also a prerequisite for action competence, one important embedded goal in education for sustainable development.

The researchers introduced some concepts and theories for discussions. Joint lectures and cross-preschool seminars, focus groups discussions and continuous tutored sessions supported the processes in the preschools.

The educators and the children did many observations and documentations of various kinds. They developed different ways to use maps to record how the playgrounds were used, when, where and by whom. Maps were drawn by architects, by the teachers and by the children. Three dimensional models, paintings and drawings were other ways for the children to tell about their outdoor play.

The teachers were asked to have informal talks and interviews with the children about their play and learning outdoors. Walk-and-talk, photos and video recordings were also used.

**Children's perspectives**
The involved preschools all tell about that the project has led to new knowledge about the children’s perspectives on their play and play ground. Major steps have been taken to make sure that the daily routines and the multiple preschool rules give possibilities for the children to come up with ideas, to critical thinking, to participation and to influence the daily life in their preschools.
A close child perspective

The teachers have changed their view on children. By actively listening to the children, they now know a lot more about the children’s play and their preferences. Thus, rules have been ruled out and routines have changed. Instead of saying NO to suggestions that challenge the daily programme, teachers have consciously decided to say YES to most suggestions – and documented and reflected on the effects of this affirmative pedagogy.

Children in this project showed that they want to and actually do participate, but the adults, both architects and teachers do not have good enough tools for listening and interpreting the expressions.

To be continued...

A report and a film are produced about the project. 2010 the project continues at the preschools with the OMEP project on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). The children have been interviewed on their thoughts, comments and understanding of the OMEP 2010 Congress logo. The next step is asking for and implementing the children’s ideas for sustainable development.

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