

Article

Constructing a Socially Sustainable Culture of Participation for Caring and Inclusive ECEC

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Abstract: The aim of this research was to explore a socially sustainable culture of participation in which all members of the community can be heard, make initiatives, express their opinions, and alter their practices. We conducted the study by analysing three separate sets of empirical research data in which participation was investigated in an early childhood education and care (ECEC) context and in club activities for children aged 4–12 and the elderly. The data include children’s perspectives regarding participation, ECEC practitioners’ perspectives on a culture of participation, and children’s and ECEC practitioners’ shared project-based practices. The results show that children and ECEC practitioners were willing to commit to new practices and construct a collective ‘we-narrative’. A we-narrative created a foundation for the conceptual model of a socially sustainable culture of participation, including the prerequisites of participation in adult practices, the goal of participation in children’s and adults’ shared activities, and a tool for strengthening participation. According to the results, a socially sustainable culture of participation is holistic and dynamic, and children can have an effect on daily activities, including basic care situations, as well as part of the educational activities.

Keywords: social sustainability; culture of participation; early childhood education and care; participation; caring; inclusion

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1. Introduction

Social sustainability is one of the three dimensions of sustainable development as defined by the United Nations [1]. The other dimensions of sustainable development include environmental and economic sustainability. The term sustainable development has been defined in several ways, which focus on individual but also community-based arguments. For example, the Brundtland Commission [2] defines sustainable development as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Boldermo and Ødegaard Eriksen [3] define sustainable development as an opportunity for future generations to live together in different societies. Salonen [4] defines sustainable development as using four ethical principles: human rights, common morality, justice, and worldviews. When promoting sustainable development, comprehensive cultural change and increased well-being must be pursued [1]. Seligman [5] describes well-being through five characteristics, which must be realised in socially sustainable activities, and these characteristics are positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment.

In the current article, social sustainability refers to upholding human dignity, which becomes apparent, for example, in equality, justice, and compassion [4]). The core indicators refer to equal well-being, safety, equity, and participation [6]. Educational equality is also one of the goals of social sustainability [1]. In a socially sustainable society,

citizens can strengthen their social capital, for example, their network of relationships, and participate in decision making [7]. Social capital helps the individual integrate into society and prevents exclusion. Social sustainability, as a dynamic and changing concept, describes participation embedded in an operational culture level, which promotes communality rather than individuality. Education is considered to play a key role in implementing the dimensions of sustainable development [1]. Wals [8] sees early childhood education as a significant period when it comes to supporting children's growth in sustainability-related values. Indeed, sustainability goals were added to the early childhood education documents when it was found that early childhood education was generally missing from the sustainability development plans as a promoter of sustainability [9].

Sommerville and Williams [9] theoretically divide early childhood education studies by dividing sustainability into three categories: those that look at sustainability from a natural and environmental perspective, those related to the posthumanist framework, and those related to the rights of the child. Research on children's rights has broadly addressed sustainability from the perspectives of environmental, economic, and social sustainability [9]. In the current study, we consider social sustainability from the perspective of children's rights. Strengthening social sustainability is also about promoting the rights of the child [10]. Children have the right to take part in the debate on social sustainability, and the goals set for social sustainability apply to children because the rights of the child must be realised.

Internationally, research on social sustainability in early childhood education and care (ECEC) has been under-researched [9,11,12]. In Finland, it has been found [13] that ECEC practitioners perceive sustainable development as an alternative pedagogy, implying that social sustainability is not well rooted in the Finnish ECEC pedagogy. According to Wals [8], sustainability-related solutions for children may be more natural than for many adults. From the perspective of a sustainable future, children's ability to empathise, care, explore, and make accurate observations could help find solutions to strengthen sustainability, but as children grow older, these abilities and the holistic way they solve problems tend to diminish [8]. Therefore, intergenerational dialogue to address sustainability issues is essential; see also [14,15]. With children, this dialogue can take place by strengthening children's participation in ECEC, e.g., [16–18], because participatory activities have features of dialogue, e.g., [19]. Furthermore, in dialogue, all participants—children and adults—are learning together, so new insights emerge [20].

In the Finnish Act on Early Childhood Education and Care [21], ECEC refers to a systematic and goal-oriented entity, which consists of care, education, and teaching, here with particular emphasis on pedagogy. In Finland, the regulations and guidelines of the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care [17] define care as the provision of basic physical and emotional care. The goal is for the child to feel valued and understood and to feel connected to other people. The value base of Finnish ECEC lies in the absolute value of childhood, growing up as a person, the rights of the child, equity, equality and diversity, family diversity, and a healthy and sustainable lifestyle [17]. The principles of a sustainable lifestyle include social sustainability, which promotes the well-being of children and the realisation of human rights [17]. The United Nations Agenda 2030 [1] contains the same values regarding social sustainability.

In the present article, we address social sustainability by examining the culture of participation. Specifically, this means that we will explore how a culture of participation can strengthen children's participation while supporting the role of children's initiatives, interests, and opinions as part of action in a community. In the Finnish context [17], children's participation refers to children's positive experiences of being heard and seen, as well as to adults' sensitive interactions with children. Participation is also possible when the children participate in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of activities together with educators [17,22,23].

In Finland, participation has long been researched in the ECEC and pre-primary context, e.g., [24–26], and is central in mandating ECEC policy documents [17] and those for pre-primary education [27]. The value base of the Finnish ECEC and concept of learning [17,21] require children's participation in activities to be considered. From the perspective of ECEC quality, it is also important that personnel working in ECEC monitor and utilise children's initiatives [28] while promoting mutual and equal interaction between children and adults [29,30]. However, it has been found that, in Finland [13,24,31–33] and internationally [34–36], participation has not yet become fully established in the everyday practices of ECEC centres, nor in the relationships between children and ECEC practitioners. Therefore, we argue that Finnish ECEC practitioners may comprehend participation more as a method, which is used variedly. Moreover, in Nordic ECEC, a participatory pedagogy aiming to enhance children's agency and participation has been found to occur only through free-play activities [22]. Thus, a valid question is whether participation is seen and implemented as part of the operational culture, including those aspects of social sustainability and care.

According to Turja [25], to strengthen participation, adults need to respect children's narration and show a willingness to hear children's opinions and thoughts. Participation can be thought of as a common process for children and adults, which can impact both the individual and community [26,37]. However, a study by Sairanen et al. [38] shows that children's initiatives are not the basis for planning and implementing activities in ECEC. The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre's (FINEEC) results that examine the implementation of the National Core Curriculum for ECEC also show a similar situation [13]. According to the studies by Kangas [31] and Virkki [33], the traditional adult-centred structures and working methods of ECEC have become so strong that the implementation and institutionalisation of new working practices is challenging; these results are supported by Kangas and Lastikka [39] and Kirby [34].

The studies by Sargeant [35] and Venninen et al. [40] show that ECEC centres cannot become a shared place for children and ECEC practitioners to strengthen the participation of children because of the lack of clear structures and pedagogical solutions, which support participation. One reason for this is the traditional view of the effect of chronological age on a person's role as a member of society. Adults are thought to have knowledge, skills, power, and responsibility, while minor children are considered ignorant, incompetent, and gradually growing into full members of society [41–43]. Increased knowledge and understanding through the Convention on the Rights of the Child [10], childhood research, and the sociocultural understanding of learning have undermined chronological age and strengthened social sustainability, highlighting the importance of human rights, well-being, and equity for people of all ages. These factors have broken the traditional view of children as members of society as progressively developing individuals and have increased the debate about children's participation and children as equal actors in society [43]. This paradigm shift makes it possible that when children are understood as members of a community, activities can be truly shaped by children's needs and interests.

The purpose of the current article is to explore how a socially sustainable culture of participation is constructed in daily ECEC practices. In addition, the aim is to form a conceptual model for building a socially sustainable culture of participation in ECEC, here based on the results of the study. With this research, we aim to contribute to the sustainable development of more caring and inclusive ECEC practices, which promote the participation, communality, and shared dialogue of diverse children and practitioners. The research question of the present study is how a socially sustainable culture of participation is constructed in daily ECEC practices.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participatory Action Research

The research was carried out as participatory action research with the aim of studying social sustainability, participation, and the construction of an ECEC culture of participation. Participatory action research is an approach developed by Kurt Lewin (1890–1947) in which the research process consists of the collaborative development of knowledge and critical awareness by the researcher and research participants in an attempt to lead to social change [44]. In action research, the research process cannot be planned in advance but must be able to react to changes in action [45]. In the current study, the past of the community was recognised, but the study took place in the present and sought to change the future [45]. O'Toole [46] describes participatory action research as an opportunity to give participants the space and voice to seek holistic, relational, and participatory approaches to their work. Participatory action research is a recommended method in sustainability studies that seek to change action [9]. In Figure 1, we illustrate the progress of the study and different data collection phases from 2014 to 2017.

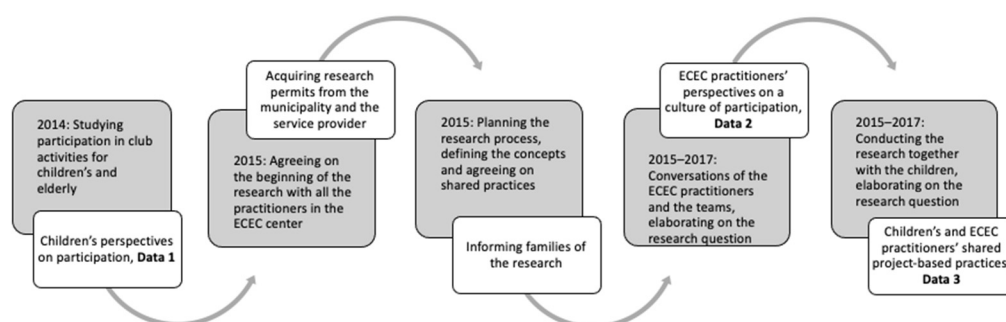


Figure 1. Progress of participatory action research design.

The researchers are always responsible for the ethical and moral solutions in the research. In this article, the researchers have followed all the general ethical principles guided by the Finnish national board on research integrity TENK [47]. In Finland, an ethical review was not required because the study did not require the use of any sensitive or harmful data [48]. Participation was voluntary for all participants. Consent for the research was received from all stakeholders.

2.2. Data

To answer the research question of how a socially sustainable culture of participation is constructed in ECEC, we analysed three separate data sets. The results of all three data sets have previously been published as separate articles [49–51] and have been part of the first author's dissertation in Finnish language [52]. In this paper, the data have been analysed especially focusing on care and inclusivity of ECEC. This paper aims to conceptualise the results and considers the participation holistically, taking account of the different stakeholders and their voice in the same manner. We present the data in Table 1.

The first data were collected in two Terhokerho Clubs of the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare, the Finnish Red Cross, and the Finnish Cultural Foundation's All of Finland Is Playing Project [50]. The Terhokerho Clubs were free-of-charge meeting places for different generations to get to know each other and spend time together. These clubs were selected for the study by purposeful sampling [53]. The clubs were easily accessible and had been active since the beginning of the All of Finland Is Playing Project, and both children and the elderly participated in activities, here in line with the project's goal. These

data focused on clarifying children's experiences of participation in the club activities for children and the elderly. In addition, data define participation from a children's perspective, in other words, to find out what children consider important so that everyone can experience belonging in the group and participate in decision making related to the group's activities. The data were collected through interviews with the children. The definition of participation [50] formed in club activities for children and the elderly developed as the action research progressed and was the basis for the second and third data collection carried out in the ECEC center. The ideas related to children's participation were found to be very similar in the study regardless of the operational environment.

The second and third phases of data collection were carried out in southern Finland in a private ECEC centre, which opened in August 2015. The aim of the second data set was to study the central elements of the practitioner's practices, which support the development of a culture of participation [51]. The aim of the third data set was to find out how the different stages of the children's and practitioners' joint activity planning, implementation, and evaluation progressed in practice [49]. The data consisted of recorded discussions, research diaries created by practitioners and the first author, and narratives based on four pedagogical projects collaboratively carried out by children and practitioners. During the pedagogical projects, a lot of material was created, including stories collected by the storycrafting method [54], photographs, drawings, handicrafts, and videos. Personnel decided together to focus on the children's participation: A lot of time was spent getting to know each other, building children's trust, and taking into account the children's initiatives and interests, such as Kirsu, an ECEC practitioner, who describes her work in a group of children under 3 years old:

It's wonderful to be in a workplace where no one looks bad when I am playing with children.

In total, 53 children and 19 early childhood education teachers and child carers were included in data sets 2 and 3 (see Table 1). All the participants were coresearchers; they participated in the planning of the different phases of the study and in the production and analysis of the material. The study inspired ECEC practitioners to develop their work with children and confirmed the children's experiences of their own ability to be experts in their own lives, see also [55], as Veera's (6 years old) attention to coresearching shows:

Veera comes to me and hopes there could be a certain day of research so that the research is not forgotten because of other things. I agree that it is a good idea. I think out loud what day would be a good one. I say that I'm not at the ECEC centre on Fridays. Veera grabs the sentence and says, 'Then it would be good. If you are not here, we can investigate what is happening here'. (Elina's research diary, September 2016)

Table 1. The research questions, data, and findings.

	Data 1	Data 2	Data 3
Article	Weckström, E., Jääskeläinen, V., Ruokonen, I., Karlsson, L., and Ruismäki, H. (2017). 'Steps together—Children's experiences of participation in club activities with the elderly.' <i>Journal of Intergenerational Relationships</i> , 15(3), 273–289.	Weckström, E., Karlsson, L., Pöllänen, S., and Lastikka, A-L. (2021). 'Creating a culture of participation: Early childhood education and care educators in the face of change.' <i>Children & Society</i> , 35(4), 503–518.	Weckström, E., Lastikka, A-L., Karlsson, L., and Pöllänen, S. (2021). 'Enhancing a culture of participation in early childhood education and care through narrative activities and project-based practices.' <i>Journal of Early Childhood Education Research</i> , 10(1), 6–32.
Research question(s)	In what ways do children feel that they are part of the group?	Which elements are critical in the development and	How do narrative activities and project-based practices promote the development of a culture of

	In what ways do children feel that they can take initiative in organising activities?	construction of a culture of participation?	participation, which supports reciprocal and listening practices emerging from children's initiatives and interests?
Participants	Aged 4 to 12 years (N = 12)	ECEC practitioners (N = 19) ECEC leaders (N = 2)	Aged 3 to 7 years (N = 41) ECEC practitioners (N = 3)
Data	Interviews (N = 8)	Group conversations (N = 4) Stimulated recall conversation (N = 1) Team conversations (N = 8) Diary notes of ECEC practitioners (N = 9) Field notes of the first leader (N = 1)	Pedagogical projects (N = 4)
Data analysis method	Content analysis	Thematic analysis	Narrative analysis
Findings	Children's experiences of participation are built on the following: Familiar children and adults Sensitive consideration of everyone Enjoyable activities Humour Unhurriedness Voluntary participation	The critical elements of the development and construction of a culture of participation are as follows: A shared understanding of the image of an active child A shared understanding of communal professional development Relational and reciprocal leadership A shared we-narrative that enables the comprehensive understanding, promotion, and maintenance of a culture of participation	The following phases show how the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the shared narrative activities of children and educators supporting a culture of participation: Initial ideas Storycrafting Narrative play Closing ceremony Recalling sessions The phases are not separate, and a project is not always straightforward

2.3. Analysis

The current paper was conducted in a triangulation process between the authors. The three different sets of research data [49–51] were analysed using several different analytical methods typical of qualitative research [56]. Content analysis, thematic analysis, and narrative analysis were used as the methods of analysis in cycle 1 (Figure 2). For the present study, the first phase of analysis was based on inductive content analysis, see also [57], to identify meanings and consistencies through patterns, themes, and categories [56]. These meanings were considered through an abductive approach. When it comes to analysis, abductivity is a process which is detective, creative, speculative, and concerns conclusions [58]. Although the abductive approach is strongly connected to the data, it does not deny the existence of a theory behind the data. Abductive analysis was guided by a sociocultural framework, childhood studies, a culture of participation, and definitions and indicators of social sustainability, here through several cycles of interaction between the researchers, theory, and the data (cycles 2 and 3). We created a framework of different theories together with the data in a creative process of 'theory matching' [59]. In the current study, through 'theory matching', we first identified the indicators of social sustainability, and then during shared meetings, we discussed and evaluated these indicators based on the theoretical background of the culture of participation and social sustainability.

In our analysis, we found that participation is not an individual method, but rather, it is an approach. Participation did not appear to be a static or permanent operating culture, but rather as something dynamic and changing according to the situation. Instead of looking at participation as hierarchical models moving in relation to different levels [60,61], participation appeared as a multidimensional climbing wall, where the interrelationships of different dimensions of participation vary in different situations and in different children, see [37] (cycle 4).

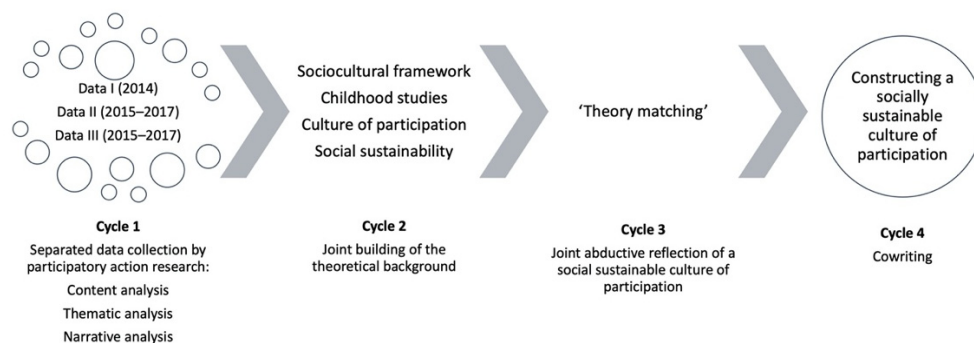


Figure 2. The triangulation process.

Research triangulation was conducted to ensure that analysis was based on a valid understanding and previous knowledge, as well as to test consistency of findings [56]. In the triangulation process, we used three different data collection processes, multiple theoretical perspectives, and the know-how of three researchers. This triangulation played an important role in offering a deeper understanding in analysing the data and finding emergent themes of the socially sustainable culture of participation.

3. Results and Discussion

The aim was to study how a socially sustainable culture of participation is constructed in the daily ECEC practices. In addition, the current study attempted to create a conceptual model based on the practices of how a culture of socially sustainable participation in ECEC can be built. The present study explored children's perspectives on participation, ECEC practitioners' perspectives on a culture of participation, and children's and ECEC practitioners' shared project-based practices.

Based on the results, a socially sustainable culture of participation requires practitioners to take conscious action (see the triangle in the middle of Figure 3) to strengthen participation, from defining a common understanding of the children to a long-term commitment to promoting children's participation through their own activities. After this, it is possible to achieve the goal of participation formed based on the definition of children (on the left in Figure 3) and, on the other hand, to make full use of project-based practices as a tool for participation (on the right in Figure 3). The goal and tool of participation, in turn, reinforce the underlying 'we-narrative'. Next, we take a more in-depth look at the elements of the model of a socially sustainable culture of participation and role of the different elements in building a socially sustainable culture of participation.

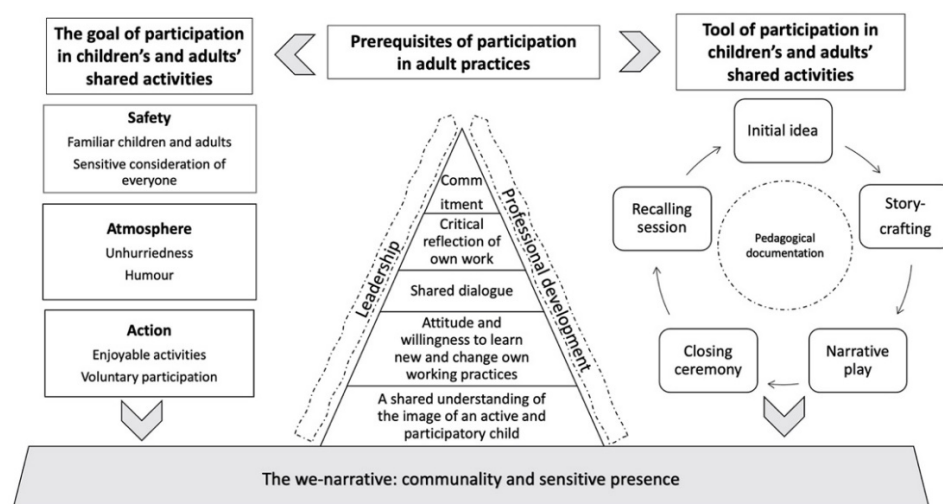


Figure 3. The model of a socially sustainable culture of participation.

3.1. The We-Narrative as the Foundation of a Socially Sustainable Culture of Participation

The results show that the model of a socially sustainable culture of participation is built on a we-narrative. The we-narrative serves as the basis for building an operational culture in which, in the beginning, the active and sensitive presence of actors is central. It does not arise by itself, but rather, it develops and increases through the strengthening of participation in accordance with the model of a socially sustainable culture of participation. In we-narratives, Tollefsen and Gallagher [62] also recognise the possibility of stabilising and deepening collective action and creating shared agency. Like the key benefits of social sustainability identified by Padovan [7], we found that the we-narrative expands from participation to the creation of shared narratives. Shared narratives commit to work towards collectively agreed-upon goals. As the following quote illustrates, the we-narrative conveys confidence in the work of others and a desire to commit to common goals:

Hanna (ECEC practitioner): Well because it starts with so many little things: throwing yourself into the moment, doing things together, looking for opportunities.

Anu (ECEC practitioner): Like those kinds of small things. But the very thing that WE are here, and WE do, WE go, and WE survive and so on.

Here, the we-narrative, as a strong, internalised, and communal way of thinking and narration—as well as community-based activities—is a visible and concrete part of a socially sustainable culture of participation. When the we-narrative is implemented, the goals set based on children's initiatives, interests, and needs ensure the operation is in accordance with the values and concept of early childhood education as defined in the principles of the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care [17] and quality indicators for ECEC [30]. In doing so, the diversity of all members of the community are taken into account. The dimension of social sustainability is reflected in the increasing social capital generated by the we-narrative and increasing opportunity for children and ECEC personnel to participate in decision making. Adherence to human dignity by promoting human rights, common morality, justice, equality, and compassion is well illustrated in the intertwining of the values associated with the social sustainability of the United Nations [1] and value base of ECEC [17] within the we-narrative.

We found that the we-narrative does not mean a constant consensus but an understanding of the different ways of maintaining a socially sustainable culture of participation through reflection and dialogue. Reflection and dialogue involve all members of the community, allowing ECEC practitioners to take advantage of children's ways of looking at the world and solving problems without the constraints or presuppositions. Hence, children are also seen as genuine change makers in issues related to sustainability [63].

Our results indicate that the we-narrative illustrates the personnel's commitment to community and sensitive togetherness with children as a common concern and is reflected in the speech, action, and atmosphere of the children and practitioners. In the we-narrative, children and adults are equal initiators and active agents in the community. As in Sargeant's [35] study, the current study shows that from a decision-making perspective, however, the agency of children and adults is still different because of the responsibilities of the adult. When we-narratives are present, adults can listen to children and other adults and seize upon and support their initiatives. Typical of the we-narrative, initiatives allow children and adults to come up with ideas and throw themselves into collaborative project-based practices without knowing the outcome. A socially sustainable culture of participation can also be said to be a culture of presence in which the sensitivity, emotionality, and situational presence of personnel are essential [64].

3.2. The Prerequisites of Participation in Adults' Practices

The results show that a change in the operating culture requires an attitude and desire on the part of the ECEC practitioners and managers to learn new things and be ready for shared dialogue and critical reflection on their own activities. The change begins in small steps by defining a shared image of the child and agreeing on concrete practices to support the implementation of the image of the child. Thereafter, all members of the community are required to commit to complying with this. In a changing world, the need for change can sometimes be rapid. As the studies by Granrusten [65], Kokotsaki et al. [66] and Uhl-Bien [67] show, without a manager's support, a long-term process of changing the operating culture is not possible. In a socially sustainable culture of participation, leadership is defined by the manager, personnel, and children, and good leadership provides an opportunity for the entire community to set goals for action and, thus, commit to jointly setting goals [65,67]. Leadership is formed relationally among community members, with leadership being present in the community, despite the manager's occasional physical absence.

In the current study, it was found that a socially sustainable culture of participation in which attitudes towards continuous development and improvement are positive engages personnel, increases the well-being of the entire community, and leads to high-quality pedagogical activities. Connors [68], Granrusten [65], Kirby [34], and Kokotsaki et al. [66] have also come to the same conclusion. Similar to the findings of Connors [68] and Schoenmakers [69], the present study confirms that the personnel's own experiences of participation in the work community increased their ability to take into account children's participation in ECEC structures, pedagogical solutions, and learning environments. The change in operating culture must also be considered from the perspective of children, like Jonna (ECEC practitioner) did in the previous example:

Jonna: We also have children who were able to handle it (getting dressed) but who didn't like to be hurried. But we should give them the time they need. For some children, being together on a one-on-one basis (with an adult) so that you share this time and focus on getting them dressed to go outside gives them self-confidence. Also, it is this individual time when you get the chance to guide the child in getting dressed without hurrying.

As in Roos's [32] study, the current study indicates how children have adopted the traditional adult-centred structures of ECEC, the strict rhythm of the day, and the rules created by hurry and adults as part of the ECEC centre's operating culture. The fact that although children may not immediately be able to be active and take the initiative or new opportunities to participate in decision making and how, at times, this may lead to confusion, wildness, or chaos does not mean that strengthening children's participation is not important. Through their own activities, the personnel can show the importance of the children's initiatives, thus inspiring children to communality and encouraging them to take the initiative in other situations as well. The children's point of view is well illustrated

by Veera's (5 years old) words when she was asked to pick up leaves for a caterpillar to eat: 'I've never been outside the fences after eating and taking naps'. The effects of the new operating culture are quickly visible in children, and in turn, this inspires the personnel to continue to develop their ways of working.

A socially sustainable culture of participation is based on the definition of participation as outlined by the children. This is consistent with the social sustainability of ECEC highlighted by Grindheim et al. [63]. The definition made by children includes six aspects, and their realisation can be seen as a goal of a socially sustainable operating culture. As shown in Figure 3, the six aspects are as follows: familiar children and adults and sensitive consideration of everyone in terms of safety, unhurriedness and humour in terms of atmosphere, and enjoyable activities and voluntary participation in terms of activities.

3.3. The Goal of Participation in Children's and Adults' Shared Activities

Our results demonstrate that as a starting point for successful participation, safety requires familiar children and adults, as well as the sensitive consideration of everyone (see Figure 3). When all the members of a community (children and adults) know each other by name and appearance, it is easier to take initiative, ask for help, and become close to each other. This affects the children's experiences of emotional safety in which the children feel they are valued. Furthermore, it was found that through the children's and practitioners' shared activities, opportunities for a common we-narrative were created, see also [70], in which they got to know each other's thoughts and ways to act and react.

Another finding related to safety was the sensitive consideration of everyone. In the everyday life of ECEC, reconciling individual and community goals can sometimes be challenging. The National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care [17] requires the preparation of an individual ECEC plan for the child. Based on the present research, it can be concluded that a child's individuality is realised when their interests and needs are considered as part of the group's activities and when the child becomes involved in planning, implementing, and evaluating activities with other children and personnel. In that case, active agency will also be realised, e.g., [34,71]. When children's initiatives and interests are constantly taken into account, equity is also easier to achieve.

In the current study, pedagogical documentation, e.g., [72,73] by recording or visualising children's initiatives ensured that everyone's voice was heard. In ECEC, some children present their thoughts even when in a large group, while some want to share their ideas in a smaller group. Moreover, in the current study, it was evident that ECEC practitioners are required to be sensitive to nonverbal initiatives. The importance of nonverbal initiatives is also highlighted by Gubrium and Holstein [74] and Puroila et al. [75]. Here, an initiative can be movement, gaze, sound, or drawing instead of speech.

When developing the culture of participation, an unhurried pace and humour among community members was found to be significant for the ECEC atmosphere. An unhurried atmosphere arises from emotional presence. Everyday ECEC life is full of changes, and the rush is easily predominating. Haste and resources are seen as obstacles to many issues, which should be the focus, including the promotion of children's perspectives [40] and the success of social sustainability [4]. The current study confirms Roos's [32] results that hurry is about attitude and work organisation. The results also confirm Ahonen's [64] research in which, through unhurried listening, ECEC practitioners communicate to children that they are significant, important, and produce joy around them. The current study shows that an unhurried pace increases everyone's well-being, and well-being is an important part of a socially sustainable operating culture. The results of Hännikäinen [76] also show that adults enjoy spending time with children.

From the results, it is clear that humour, joy, and kindness create communality; see also [77,78]. When looking at humour, it is important to distinguish whether a child intends to be joking or take the initiative and reflect. A child's initiatives can be considered by ECEC personnel as funny insights, which can be laughed at during the personnel's break time or with a group of children, even though they might be important initiatives

for the child to want to be heard without humour. Similar to Sargeant [35], the current study shows that children's full participation cannot be achieved as long as children's initiatives are not taken seriously and taken into account. Karjalainen and Puroila [77] consider whether the mutual clowning of children loses its meaning if the worlds of children and adults are brought closer to each other. Based on the current study, children's mutual joy and humour do not only arise with an adult-defined counterculture, nor do they end when the adult enters the space. Instead, children and adults create a common we-narrative, which includes joy and humour as a form of togetherness. An adult who understands a child's humour will also be invited into the jokes more often than others, just as a playful adult will be invited to play. As Karlsson's [79] and Lastikka and Karlsson's studies [80] show, the active use of the storycrafting method creates a common space between the children and adults in which the presence of an adult does not interfere with the creation of joy.

According to the definition of children, in addition to safety and atmosphere, the results demonstrate that enjoyable activities and voluntary participation in relation to ECEC activities are crucial when it comes to participation. Enjoyable activities are created through joint planning. As Thomas [37] points out, children need to be aware of the opportunities and ways to participate in planning joint activities. This is also reflected in Rilla's (10 years old) response:

Elina (researcher): In your opinion, who does the planning here in the Terhokerho Club?

Rilla: I don't know. Maybe all the adults when they come to the meeting before the Terhokerho Club.

Rilla: Maybe in that meeting, if children would join, they could say all kinds of favourite things and funny things and nice things and stuff that adults might not agree with; maybe then the adults could carry out the children's wishes.

Moreover, the results show that voluntary participation in activities is important for the children. In the tradition of Finnish ECEC, a group of children often do the same things at the same time. However, the full implementation of the objectives of the National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care [17] requires small-group work. Children's interests, individual needs, and the goals set for pedagogical activities based on the children's individual ECEC plans guide the way in which activities are carried out in small groups, and there are many ways to participate in joint activities, here taking into account the child's interests and needs. The same observation is made by Mockler and Groundwater-Smith [81] in their study.

In addition to voluntary participation, doing things together requires the presence of adults. In strengthening participation, the ways of involving children in adult practices (children's meetings, voting, etc.) are often considered. In addition, our results demonstrate that adults should approach children by participating in the children's voluntary or self-initiated activities and play. Hence, strengthening the participation of children should be transformed into enhancing the participation of adults in the world of children. The active participation of children does not release adults from action but changes the form of adult activity. Because reciprocity in activities and interactions is critical, initiatives may come from one or more children or adults. Project-based practices allow initiatives to be taken forward to accommodate the interests of several children and the goals set for pedagogical activities in children's individual ECEC plans. Webb [36] points out that there is no need to constantly seek consensus in action.

3.4. *The Tool of Participation in Children's and Adults' Shared Activities*

Our analysis shows that it is important that ECEC practitioners position themselves as adaptable because the decision or outcome is usually unknown. From the perspective of a socially sustainable culture of participation, participatory activities have the features of dialogue (e.g., [19]). In line with dialogical learning, learning in a socially sustainable

culture of participation is reciprocal: the child learns from other children and adults, and the adult learns from children. As in the current study, Isaacs [20] also argues that dialogue does not need to follow a predetermined set of rules, but it requires the courage to step into the unknown. In this way, the adult communicates to the children that they do not know and know everything themselves, but they are learning together with the children. It does not matter to children when it comes to taking the initiative or action itself or whether it is realistically possible to implement the plans. The adult, on the other hand, reflects more on the realism of the implementation and may prevent the child from bringing out their own interests, which the adult finds impossible. When children design and implement ideas, nothing is impossible because many things can be done imaginatively and playfully, and the necessary materials can be made by oneself, replaced with another object, or be invisible and imaginative materials.

In the current study, project-based practices, in which storycrafting and other narrative methods carried the activities forward, became a preferred way for children and adults to act (see Figure 3). As Puroila et al. [75] state, there should be space for children to narrate throughout the day, and adults should learn to understand the fast changes in storylines and multilayered stories, which characterise children's narration. Narration is also evident in children's play. In the current study, play was found to be an enjoyable way for children to act. When play is a central part of children's daily lives, Bae's [82] view reinforces that adults need to perceive and actively participate in children's play to better understand children's thoughts and issues, as well as the relationships between children. The task of ECEC practitioners is to observe play, prepare the necessary tools for play with children and, thus, enrich play, play with children, and utilise play as a tool for playful learning, bringing in the key issues for children's growth, development, and learning. The content and methods for narrative play consist of collaboratively planned activities, which are constantly built on and renewed by the initiatives of children and adults. This requires adults to have strong pedagogical skills and a will to plunge themselves into children's narratives, which could also be seen as a rewarding and positive new challenge in work. The following is an example of the beginning of the Ship Pansy project:

The Ship Pansy project started with storycrafting. Anu (educator) said to the children, 'Once upon a time there was a ship ...'. The children immediately seized the idea and came up with the main characters on board. They also explained what the characters looked like, how the ship looks, what's to be eaten, what kind of sport exercises and games are played and where the characters sleep, what they do on the ship, etc. Anu just wrote everything down exactly with the phrases the children used. One of the children came up with the name for the ship.

Our results show that the objectives set by ECEC practitioners for pedagogical activities were achieved through jointly constructed and long-lasting narrative play. The pedagogical goals related to narrative play were, for example, mathematical skills, food education, researching together, and manual skills. In the present study, skills related to emotional and social development particularly appeared to require constant practice. Goals became group activities when documented, and they were discussed with the children. With the joint planning of children and adults, the goals become part of a narrative play without, however, overdirecting children's voluntary or spontaneous activities.

It is important to complete the pedagogical projects together. From children's perspectives, adventure, celebration, exhibition, or publication related to the project at the end of the project is important and enjoyable for the children and brings the group together once again around a common theme. These recalling sessions are a way to conduct a joint project evaluation for children and adults. In the recalling session, the children and ECEC practitioners held a discussion using pedagogical documentation generated during the project, such as storycrafted stories, diaries, drawings, photographs, recordings, and video clips. In this way, the children and practitioners allowed the children and educators

to return to the emotions and things learned and plan new shared projects. The recalling sessions helped practitioners evaluate whether different methods and learning environments have been utilised in a variety of ways, both outdoors and indoors.

The findings illustrate that project-based practices become visible through documentation as a form of support for the involvement of children and personnel. Here, pedagogical documentation refers to the joint production of information about children's lives, development, interests, thinking, learning, and needs, along with the activities of a group of children in a concrete and diverse way, for example, with pictures, notes, and recordings [73]; see also [72]. From the perspective of learning, pedagogical documentation can be used to look at what has been learned and what kinds of future goals are set together. A lack of understanding or insufficient competence in pedagogical documentation has led to pedagogical documentation not being used to monitor learning, set goals, and evaluate, leaving children outside these processes [73,83,84]. As found in the current study, if successful, pedagogical documentation reinforces the we-narrative between children and adults, bringing individual experiences into learning and community.

4. Conclusions

The present study has identified how a socially sustainable culture of participation in the ECEC context is constructed in the daily lives of ECEC centres. The data helped us look at the construction of participation from the perspectives of both children and adults. We consider human rights to be a significant factor in this paper, as they are also understood as inclusive of issues of cultural and institutional diversity. The children's rights and opportunities in participation are always context- and culture-dependent and related to the values in their community and living environments. According to the ECEC national guidance documents [17,21], children's participation and their possibilities in terms of different social efforts are discussed and shared with the guardians.

The findings show that children and ECEC practitioners are willing to engage in new practices and create a collective we-narrative. The we-narrative creates a foundation for the conceptual model of a socially sustainable culture of participation; the model includes the prerequisites of participation in adult practices, the goal of participation in children's and adults' shared activities, and a tool for strengthening participation. Furthermore, a socially sustainable culture of participation is holistic and dynamic. Constructing a socially sustainable culture of participation in the ECEC context is emphasised differently according to practices, time, and age groups. Changing the working culture requires conscious and committed efforts to strengthen the opportunities for participation in an ECEC centre's pedagogical choices, the relationships between children and adults, and the ECEC practitioners' daily decision making. These issues should be considered when developing the operational cultures and leadership in each ECEC community, for example, by providing in-service education.

From the perspective of social sustainability, it is important that action enables cultural change and increases well-being. As Sargeant [35] notes, children's participation and the culture of participation are not technically accomplished, nor do they directly transfer power and decision making from adults to children. Rather, a socially sustainable culture of participation is an approach, which is shaped by the relationship between children and adults, in which power is distributed differently in different situations [85]. The current study has offered new insights, such as holistic and dynamic perspectives, providing opportunities instead of blocking, and the we-narrative into the development of a socially sustainable culture of participation in which participation and social sustainability are intertwined in ECEC care and pedagogy.

In a socially sustainable culture of participation, the relationships between children and ECEC practitioners promote the opportunities for the active participation of all actors [1,79,85,86]. A socially sustainable culture of participation is linked to a relational approach in which all community actors have a role in building community action and shaping the knowledge, which prevails in the community [34,69,86]. Relativity here refers to

the interactions between people or, more broadly, to relationships with the environment and animals, as Tammi et al. [87] comprehend the term. Relationality manifests as a cultural and social phenomenon in which the members of a community are subjects belonging to or not belonging to something, e.g., [88]. Collectively produced knowledge creates the structures for social interdependence and facilitates participants' commitment to jointly defined goals [65,67,69]. For this reason, the individual and others cannot be separated in communal activities, but the position of the participants changes from the individual *me* to the communal *us* [67,89]. Viewed from a children's perspective, a socially sustainable culture of participation is linked to a sense of belonging, acceptance, children's well-being, and democratic participation [90–92]. Thus, it is crucial that the image of a child is clearly defined in the guiding documents and is commonly understood in education policy.

The results indicate that children should not be excluded from development, which is related to teaching, growth, and care in ECEC, but it is important for adults to become familiar with the ways which are natural for children to act and learn; this strengthens social sustainability and children's participation. In warm interactions with the caring adult, the child is allowed to bring forward their needs from their own point of view and also feel sympathy and compassion towards others; see also [93–95]. If it is challenging for the child to identify theirs or other's needs, an adult who knows the child well can support the child in this. Our study has clearly shown that for children, a caring, communal, sensitive, and safe ECEC environment with familiar adults and shared activities builds a place where care is at the heart of the ECEC pedagogy, see also [8,96], and that follows the indicators of social sustainability [6].

The we-narrative found in the current study includes the same features as has been found in a caring community: co-operation, connection, support, and joy [96]. These are all related to the social aspect of sustainability [5]. In Finnish society, individualism is more apparent than collectivism, e.g., [97–99], meaning that in an individualistic society, people rely more on themselves than others. In the Finnish ECEC curricula, both collectivistic and individualistic aspects are found, but more individualistic rights are emphasised [100]. We argue that, in the future, more emphasis should be put on communality, collective caring, and compassion because we see that to build a sustainable future, we need each other. Furthermore, more research should be conducted on studying education for sustainable development as a value, holistic daily ECEC pedagogy and well-being, not as an alternative pedagogy [13].

The research results were immediately tested in the work community, and the personnel experienced ownership of the action research [101]. According to Juuti and Puusa [102], ownership strengthens the sustainability of change. Because the entire work community was involved in developing the operating culture and because the desire to change practices and develop as a professional was because of the inner desire of the personnel, the results differed qualitatively and were relevant to the participants [55]. Moreover, from the perspective of social sustainability, the results were more impressive when the participants were able to promote communality and well-being through their own activities [7]. Leadership proved to be a particularly important factor in the rooting of new learned and reflective practices; indeed, the prerequisites for participation are formed in the open and reciprocal dialogue between the ECEC leader and practitioners contributing to genuine distributed pedagogical leadership and change in thinking and practices [103]. Hence, in the future, more emphasis should be put on the development of ECEC practitioners' and leaders' understanding of shared meaning making, active agency, and attitudes towards change to enable transformative action and a process-oriented approach in which practices are transformed together through everyday actions; see also [104]. The opportunities for this kind of development should already be included in preservice education, as well as within in-service education.

The results of the current study indicate that participation is closely connected to inclusion. The same conclusion can be drawn from the ecosystem model of inclusive early

childhood education [105] and from the research of Lastikka [106]. We see that inclusion is a framework in which everyone's voices are heard and considered as significant [107]. Moreover, we agree with Lee and Recchio [104] that inclusion does not mean a certain place or a specific strategy but a holistic way of thinking. The same applies to a socially sustainable culture of participation: it is not a method but a holistic and dynamic way of seeing children and adults as active actors and part of the inclusive community. In terms of limitations, the used data for this study were rather scarce and were gathered in the Finnish context, which may have impacted the interpretation of the results. However, the aim was not to find one precise way to build a socially sustainable culture of participation [108], but rather to identify the main features of the phenomenon and to look at them in relation to previous research.

Inclusive ECEC pedagogy prevents social and educational exclusion [109], increases children's and their families' experiences of inclusion and participation in ECEC services [104,110], and has a positive effect on children's development [111]. Inclusive learning environments are seen as significant worldwide [112], and the principle of inclusion has been outlined in the updated National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care [17] as well. Thus, a socially sustainable culture of participation supports the inclusive learning conditions and environment to focus on issues, which highlight equality, respect diversity, and social inclusion.

All children should have the opportunity to participate in ECEC together, regardless of their need for support, disability, or cultural backgrounds. In the future, more emphasis should be placed on rethinking diversity, see also [113,114]; diversity should be seen as being part of everyone's resources, not as a weakness touching only minority groups. However, inclusion does not mean ignoring the special characteristics of children but planning activities which take their particular needs and ways of participation into account. Whether the teaching takes place in a smaller or larger group, it is essential to pay attention to children's views and experiences of belonging to the community. Participation has also been criticised because the decision making and responsibility it brings have been thought to be harmful, especially for young children [79]. According to Lansdown [115], children's participation is misused if they are placed in decision-making structures created by adults or if children are exploited to advance the interests of adults. Instead, children should be able to have an influence on things that happen close to themselves in a way typical of their age [115]. Thus, children should not only be seen as future adults but as people and community members who have the opportunity to participate in their lives as active agents according to their own starting points and levels of development [116]. For this reason, their participation cannot be dismissed by pleading the protection and incapacity of children [117].

Furthermore, we see that an inclusive operational culture promotes participation, equality, and equity in all activities. This kind of socially sustainable culture of participation and inclusion appreciates and promotes children's, personnel's, and families' initiatives and opinions. It also promotes participatory approaches and methods, as well as the conscious development of structures [17,49–52,104]. A socially sustainable culture of participation and inclusion can promote equality and justice while preventing exclusion and helping to fully implement Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child [10] and understand the child as a subject of human rights. For this reason, the current study can offer important understanding and transformative pedagogical practices to look at the ways to strengthen children's participation, support inclusion, and ensure social sustainability in ECEC.

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