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## **Play and participation in preschool children's project activities**

### **Summary**

This article presents playful activities undertaken with children during the three years of the BRIDGING project. The authors try to show the pupils' participation expressed through play in its different types. During the implementation of the project activities, it was important to have the attentive presence of adults who showed direction and tried to always remind children as well as other partners (from partner institutions) about the purpose of the playful activities. However, the educators did not show ready-made solutions and allowed the children to express their own opinions, to be creative and to work on their own, and to have fun. The cooperation of adult participants in the project – teachers, tutors and university lecturers – enriched the project with a diverse perspective on children's activities, play and the issue of participation. The implementation of the BRIDGING project in Poland became an opportunity to develop the idea of equal involvement of adults and children. This idea has been disseminated in the local community, firstly among parents, and also among other people involved in the project through activities (including play activities) undertaken during the project.

**Keywords:** BRIDGING project, children, play, playful activities, participation, ECEC

**Słowa kluczowe:** projekt BRIDGING, dzieci, zabawa, działania zabawowe, partycypacja, wczesne nauczanie i opieka

### **Introduction**

Preschool children's interest in the world around them, their desire to explore the closest surroundings and to learn about what is new, is usually expressed through play. This kind of play-based exploration of citizenship topic took place in BRIDGING – an international

project funded by the Erasmus+ programme, in the years 2018 and 2021<sup>1</sup>. It involved four European countries working together – Portugal (the project leader), Belgium, Finland, and Poland. The project was constructed on the basis of cross-disciplinary collaboration that aims to enrich the knowledge and perspectives of children, their educators, cultural institutions, staff, and researchers through the bridging of such different paradigms. The main purpose of BRIDGING was to improve the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) practice through the participation of all of the groups mentioned above and exploration of varied public spaces in all partner countries. It was built on a project-based approach that promotes equal involvement of adults and children, respecting the ideas of both parties, sharing their work and collaborating with friends from other countries. The role of children in the project was valuable as BRIDGING actions were always in line with the children's needs and opinions: "Children's self-directed exploration of the characteristics and possibilities of their worlds is an expression and extension of their unique social selves" (Juster, Leichter-Saxby 2014: 77). Children have to be perceived as experts on their own lives and that is why adults need to find meaningful ways to not only listen to them but actually hear and respect their opinions (Zwiernik 2012; Roberts 2017). The project was rooted in a sense of citizenship (local, national, and European) through the process of collaboration and communication of grown-ups and kids as equal project participants. One of the main concepts of BRIDGING was to develop children's social skills and citizenship through their active exploration of the urban context in a playful manner. This gave a boost to "building bridges" rather than barriers so that children could improve interpersonal relationships by sharing and valuing diverse experiences, working together, and finding mutually acceptable solutions. Children were able to identify with broader social groups and they were not dependent on their immediate environment, but were active in contexts they could explore and discover (Jans 2004). As it is an international initiative, it was crucial for the country partners to enable children to gain confidence in communicating with peers in partner schools who speak a different language and may use other nonverbal and artistic ways of expression. Children together with adults (teachers in preschools and primary schools, caretakers in daycares) explored their immediate neighbourhood in cooperation with academic and cultural institutions, discussing the meaning of being a citizen of one's own city, country, but also Europe. After each phase of the project, children prepared artworks and visuals inspired by the exploration of the established topic (e.g., bridges in our neighbourhood, building cascades, interpretation of *Children's Games* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder). The project was thoroughly documented in the partner countries' portfolios which are the results of a collaborative process involving children, teachers/caretakers, parents, experts, and researchers, who were invited by the participants to contribute with their feelings, ideas and thoughts on the ongoing BRIDGING challenges. The idea of using a portfolio was a purposeful way of gathering insights

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<sup>1</sup> BRIDGING was originally planned for the years 2018–2020, but due to the spread of COVID-19 the project actions were prolonged for the year 2021.

that may help adult project members understand children and their way of working and exploring chosen topics more fully and in a broader perspective (Hebert 2001). The final result of the project was an album with photos of children's works of arts, their paintings, sketches, and insights of all "Bridgers".

## Play

All the BRIDGING activities prepared with and for children had a play manner. Children learn through play, observation and being actively engaged in their own communities. Although what is play? Is it any activity undertaken by children? Can only children be involved in play? It is quite a complicated issue and may have different definitions. Johan Huizinga, in his widely recognizable work *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, stated that play may be referred to as "a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their differences from the common world by disguise or other means" (Huizinga 1949: 13). According to Burghardt (2010), an action may be called an act of play, when it: 1) is incompatible with the function in the context in which it occurs; 2) is spontaneous, enjoyable, rewarding and may also be voluntary; 3) differs from other more serious activities in form (e.g., excessive) or timing (e.g., in childhood); 4) is repeated but not in a conventional and unchanging stereotyped form; and 5) is initiated when its participants are not under stress. As Huizinga referred to play as a cultural phenomenon, it is only fair to presume that thanks to play, people of all ages are brought closer together and may form relationships. That was one of BRIDGING's assumptions – children could play with their pupils as well as with adults. Being together with peers is vital for their learning development but also their wellbeing, as it provides social, emotional, and physical advantages (Anderson-McNamee 2010; Roop-naire 2010; Ostroff 2020; Ramsey 2020). In order for play to develop as an enjoyable, cognitively relevant, and socially adaptive skill of a young human, it requires the support of an adult. Such support helps to enhance children's play at different ages and at different stages of cognitive development (Singer 2006). Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva (2004) described findings of two research projects on effective British pedagogy in the early years. In the most effective ECEC facilities, children spent about half time on free play activities. The other half of the time spent in the educational settings should be used by adults to involve children in a planned and targeted way. The researchers found that the most effective environments combined opportunities for playing freely within an open framework, while group work required more direct instruction. The belief that play can lead to the development of social and cognitive skills such as flexible thinking, maximising performance,

problem solving skills, creativity, divergent thinking, and language acquisition, is widely recognizable (Burris, Tsao 2002; Pellegrini 2009; White 2012). In 2011 the European Commission presented an *EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child*. It focused mainly on the importance for the society of meeting children's needs for the sake of their safety, well-being, developmental needs, and right to play. The text states: "A renewed commitment of all actors is necessary to bring to life the vision of a world where children can be children and can safely live, play, learn, develop their full potential, and make the most of all existing opportunities."

## Participation

Although play may be considered one of the most natural and beneficial of the child's activities, there is still not enough stress put on the engagement of the child in the decision making process. Up to this day, children remain mostly outside the participatory processes and are not treated as partners, having little to no influence on making decisions concerning them, their future, their education, etc. It should be considered a duty of adults to ensure that children are equipped with the knowledge and skills to be effective citizens and participate in every process that concerns them (Winters 2010). "Participation means more than taking part. (...) Children's participation is an ongoing process of children's expression of opinion and active involvement in decision-making at different levels in matters that concern them" (Lansdown 2004: 5). It is the known and volitional involvement of each child, including the most marginalised and those of different ages and capabilities (including those with disabilities), in all issues that have an impact on them (O'Kane 2013). Children have the right to communicate their own views and to participate in decisions that affect their lives (Harcourt, Einarsdottir 2011). A Scottish study carried out by Applied Educational Research Scheme (AERS) found that teachers perceived engagement as participation in learning tasks chosen by them and performed in the way they expected. For children the engagement came from their active participation, autonomy and the possibility to choose. Children were enthusiastic about active and open-ended tasks, such as PE, where teacher supervision was provided from a distance (Martlew et al. 2011). With that in mind, adult participants of the BRIDGING project made it a priority to listen to children's voices, discuss their preferences, and include them in the project actions and decision making process. As an example, the BRIDGING project involved children from four countries, so it was obvious for the children to ask about each other's cultures and at the same time, share facts about their own lives and customs. Children in all four sites were asked what they would like to share and could prepare their own materials, like pictures, drawings, recipes for their favourite food, letters (in their native language), and small gifts, that were later packed and sent by the children themselves. Each time a package came to the BRIDGING partner, the children would be the ones to open it and explore what was inside. They would discuss

the contents and plan the next gift for another partner. But most importantly the activities were organized in a playful manner. Children were always excited and had fun during each and every BRIDGING activity.

### The project actions

For the purposes of this article, activities undertaken in Poland should be considered and presented in two groups depending on the institution in charge. Some of the activities were prepared by the kindergarten (children and their teachers), whereas others were initiated by BRIDGING partners from the university. However, this division is arbitrary, as all members of the project cooperated closely. Children's participation in the decision making process and their voice being heard (Maybin 2013) during each playful action were the main and common factors throughout the whole process.

Starting this description with activities that were conducted in the preschool as a part of the first project theme: "Architecture in my city" in November 2018, children participated in architectural workshops organized by the National Institute of Architecture and Urban Planning. They learned about the profession of an architect, and were introduced to the new conceptual category of "mock-up models". What is more, the process of producing bricks in the past was presented to them. As a result of the workshop, especially the part of it that concerned building decoration, children created their own mosaic designs using various materials – beads, pompoms, and pebbles. At the end, they designed and constructed a building of foam bricks. Moreover, inspired by the architectural training, children made several models of the most important buildings in the kindergarten's closest neighbourhood. This play activity went beyond the framework of the workshops. The discussion that was subsequently raised by children after the experience, led them to the conclusion that the most characteristic urban element of Warsaw is the subway. One of the questions that appeared during the group task was: *What is the other specific element of our neighbourhood?* Children who commute to preschool by car, pointed to traffic jams as a key cityscape element, which was illustrated by using toys and making sounds in a free play activity (Iacoboni 2009; Ledin, Samuelsson 2016).

It is worth mentioning that the Polish part of the BRIDGING project is somehow determined by the character of one of the project partners – the kindergarten. The partner preschool is an inclusive educational institution, which means that children with special needs are also the participants and main actors of the BRIDGING project (Glassman 2000). There were numerous opportunities to give voice to the children with special needs. For instance, Adam – a boy with a passion and Down syndrome, inspired and invited us to share his artistic adventures. He painted various pictures with the use of poster paint. When the work was ready or sometimes in the process of working, he was explaining to his individual carer the meaning of a particular illustration. During the time of the project, there was an exhibition of his works of art organized in the preschool. This event opening

was accompanied by music played by the preschool teacher. The exhibition described here was an opportunity to integrate the whole kindergarten community as among the invited guests there were children's parents, their families, teachers, and by all means – pupils, the author's preschool mates. All parties could participate in this unique experience on the same basis and have the same rights to freely share their thoughts and feelings on the artwork of their friends. Inclusion of children with special needs in every kindergarten's activities and individual work with them is possible because of the number of Polish preschool staff and their qualifications. There are 10 teachers, 5 teachers' assistants, 7 specialists including: psychologists, speech therapists, physiotherapists etc. who give support to all children in kindergarten. However, for pupils with disabilities, these specialists give the chance to participate in all actions taken up in the preschool.

Even though the partner preschool is located in the capital of Poland, one of the subjects that was taken up as a part of the BRIDGING project was "Nature in my city". Children had the opportunity to visit a small forest placed nearby observing how nature changes through different seasons of the year. During one of the walks, pupils noticed different conifers, their characteristics and collected various cones. That way "The Pinecone Project" emerged from children's ideas during one of their trips. Children explored the shapes and textures of the cones, finding out where the seeds were hidden and how they got out and of course – played with them. Cone study led to organizing an experiment: children observed how the cones perform in water or in a very dry environment (on the radiator). They worked on a mind map of the Pinecone Project during the whole process and the final result of the project was its presentation to the other groups of pupils, teachers and parents in kindergarten.

We would like to indicate that children's initiatives could also lead to innovative solutions in the educational institution. Pupils in our partner preschool were really into looking out of the kindergarten windows. That was the way in which one day the discussion started with questions: what are the advantages of having windows? What are they for? Children observed and named the things they noticed. There were birds outside, children could watch them and feed the birds in winter. The children's interest led to the purchase of a camera to watch the life of birds in the nesting box. Using a screen placed on the wall in the preschool hall, all children were able to observe the changes that occurred there (the laying of eggs by the birds and then the subsequent raising of chicks, etc.).

Another group of activities were taken up by the academy, however with strong cooperation with the partner kindergarten. At the beginning of the project, partners from the university decided to present the campus of the University of Warsaw to children and explain the work of an academic lecturer and researcher. The two oldest groups (5 and 6 year olds) were invited to the auditorium in the building of the Old Library. The monumental interior and classic design made a great impression on the young project participants. The children were really curious and wanted to know more about the university. Together with the teachers and academics they talked about some important numbers, for instance: the number of lecturers (nearly 4,000) and students (more than 40,000) teaching and learning

at the University of Warsaw. The Nobel Prize Winners (6) who studied at the presented academy as well as archival photos were also discussed and it is worth mentioning that the sight of the horse-drawn carriage set up in front of the academy in 1896 was the greatest surprise for children. They were also interested in the traditional university attire – the special cap and toga worn by the speaker. What is more, the academic partners were asked by the pupils why adults are obligated to attend school.

“The Warsaw mosaic” was the next proposed playful project. The title was in reference to the variety of possibilities waiting for people coming to Warsaw from abroad. The children took part in a discussion about the places and institutions dedicated for foreigners. The children could discuss the meanings of such words as e.g. embassy, airport, temple. The pupils’ duty was to put the puzzle-picture of the place together and match it with the appropriate name of the institution or location. Children worked in groups; however, none of the groups had the right (matching) word in the envelope. They had to communicate and swap – places or envelopes to complete the task. Everybody succeeded, some of the groups requested help from an adult, which, in fact, was an additional interesting experience that also required communication.

The third general topic in the BRIDGING project referred to the issue of inclusion. Children prepared and conducted an interview. The interviewee was a man with special needs, who was involved in the project from its very beginning. Asking questions and taking photographs was the children’s responsibility. At the end of the task pupils prepared an album with photos, pictures and short descriptions of the interview. Every child (not only from the group that organized the event) could take the album home to present it to the family and share the experience with them.

## **Conclusions**

The activities presented above are only a few of many that were undertaken in the BRIDGING project by children in cooperation with adults – teachers and lecturers, where all parties were equal participants of the experience. Pupils had the opportunity to plan the process, prepare materials, use them independently, as well as summarize and evaluate their project actions, but most importantly they had a lot of fun conducting the activities. They were highly motivated by the fact that they could be decisive, and that those decisions would impact the outcomes of the project shared with children from other partner countries. All of the undertakings had a playful manner. They were enjoyable and fun for children, but with the involvement of adults, they were also cognitively valuable. Possibly one of the most important advantages of play is the potential it has for creating a participatory learning environment because of its inclusive and interactive qualities which, when used effectively, can influence the play participant in creative ways (Colucci, Wright 2015). The activities in the BRIDGING project were play-based so that they were in line with the children’s abilities and activities that are natural to them. They were designed specifically

in response to the central theme of the project, which was citizenship. All project actions were altered to the children's age (in Poland all child participants were attending preschool, which means they were between 3 and 6 years old). The BRIDGING project was aimed to support play-friendly activities that were used to meet children's natural needs, empower them as active participants in local and international contexts but also to adjust and survive in a complex social world (Köngäs et al. 2021). Even though the children were of such a young age they did have the capacity to foster the participatory abilities. The skills fostered through play contributed to children's meaningful and collaborative participation in the decision-making processes. The authors of this text noted that play-based activities have a great potential for children's development in becoming active social agents in their self-development (Uprichard 2008). Such an approach undertaken by other educators may have a great impact in searching for new methods of working with children and giving them the opportunity to have the impact on their own educational process.

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