Developing a participatory approach to the design and development of an outdoor learning space

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore the benefits, drawbacks and challenges of three-year-olds participating in designing and developing an outdoor learning space together with the practitioners in a childminding setting.

The study sets out the policy context of an increase acknowledgement of children's right to express their views and participate in matters that affect them. This ranged from the United Nations Convenstion on the Rights of the child (1989) to the current Early Years Foundation Stage (2012).

The study uses an action research approach and draws on the 'Mosaic'approach for listening to young children as described by Clark and Moss (2001, 2005, 2011). Research methods used included informal unstructured interviewing; the use of a digital camera used by the children; child-led tours, informal unstructured interviews with parents and discussions with the co-practitioner.

The focus of this study is the development of an allotments space into an area for outdoor learning. The study found that the children had clear opinions about what they wanted included in the outdoor space and expressed them clearly.

The study also illustrates that, even though levels of participation was generally on the upper rungs, these levels did vary from time to time. Young children are not always able to acquire the resources to implement their choices for example. Moreover, the study argues that full participation is not always possible or even desirable. Non-participation is also a choice that a child should be able to exercise, as is engagement on their own terms.

A key question that emerges from this study, is "How do we as participative practitioners react to children who choose not to participate in some aspects of decision making".

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background to the research

This study is conducted in my own childminding setting which I run together with my partner. We re-launched our setting as a primarily Forest School setting in September 2014.

We are home-based in Easton, an inner city neighbourhood in East Bristol. The Easton ward ranks 11 out of 35 on the 2015 Bristol Multiple Deprivation Ranks. We have 11 children on roll, most of whom are with us two or three days a week. Our children are from 'skilled working class' to 'middle class' backgrounds, 2 children come from BME backgrounds.

We offer the government subsidised spaces of up to 15 hours a week to qualifying two and three year olds. Currently, we have three children accessing their three-year-old funding with us.

As we are on outings most days, we only offer full-day sessions from 8.30 until either 5pm or 6pm. Hours before 8.30 can be negotiated. We look after 6 children three days a week and 7 children two days a week under the continuation of care provision. The children currently range between 13 months and 4 years old.

We aim to practice childminding with a Forest School ethos. Over the past 19 months, we have taken the children into the woods for Forest School sessions between 2 and 4 days a week. Forest School sessions vary between 2 hours and all day depending on the weather and mood of the group. We also take the Children on regular trips to National Trust parks, Slimbridge Wetland Centre, The Wild Place and the Science Museum. We take a very flexible, child-centred approach in the planning of the daily activities depending on the children's moods and interests. My partner was rated 'Outstanding' in his 2013 Ofsted Inspection. I have not been rated yet.

The topic for this research emerged from our realization that implementing Forest

School with a mixed age group that includes children from approximately 10 months old had its challenges. We found that in mild and warm weather (late spring to early autumn), the children were able to play in the woods very happily for long periods, including on rainy days. In colder weather, however, they appeared more insecure and less able to engage in child-led activities. We therefore had to shorten Forest School sessions to sometimes only 1 hour and even stopped Forest School altogether for the coldest weeks. We experimented with wrapping them up in extra warm clothing and made sure we stayed on the move. After our first winter we decided that if we wanted to remain a primarily outdoor-based setting, we needed to think of an alternative for the colder months. We eventually settled on an allotment site which seemed perfect for developing into an outdoor learning space. One year later we received the key and were allocated two adjacent sites bordering on a shallow stream and backing onto a small wooded area. The site was overgrown with brambles, but with a lot of hard work we managed to clear it by March.

In our practice, following a Forest School ethos, we take a strong child-led and child-initiated approach. As O'Brien (2009, p52) argues, child-led learning allows practitioners to see what interests the children, and they can then allow the children to work or solve problems related to those interests''. We therefore felt that is was vital to take a participatory approach in developing the allotment.

1.2 Aims of the research

This research aims to explore the benefits, drawbacks and challenges of three-year-olds participating in designing and developing an outdoor learning space together with the practitioners in a childminding setting.

In order to achieve this, the research has the following objectives:

- Work with the children to **develop specific themes** for the development of the outdoor learning area through the development a **scrapbook**. Identify:
    - Preferred play areas
    - The 'look' of the play areas

    - The materials and tools needed to develop those areas
- Develop the outdoor play area in collaboration between the children and practitioners. This includes: developing the areas as identified during their investigation; and **involving the children** in building structures using the appropriate materials and tools.
- Identify the children's **engagement**, **well-being** and **learning** during the activities from both the practitioners' and children's perspectives.
- Identify the **benefits** and **challenges** of the participatory process.

2 children's participation

2.1 Policy context

During the past two decades, focus on children's rights to be involved in decision making has increased significantly. This is largely due to the adoption, in 1989, of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989), in particular Article 12[1], and the Children Act 1989. According to the 1989 UNCRC, children have the right to express their views and to have those views given due weight in all matters affecting them. It became accepted that children's voices 'should be heard and respected to ensure that their perceptions, concerns, desires, and dreams are considered in decisions about their education and everyday lives (Nah and Lee, 2015, p2)'. Children younger than eight years of age are also given these rights related to many areas of their lives (Lundy, 2007).

Nah and Lee (2015, p2) argue that 'the right to participate contributes not only to their quality of life but also to their community'. On the one hand, young children's participation could lead to better services for those children, enhancing their quality of life and well-being by incorporating their needs and interest into decision-making processes (Thomas, 2007). On the other hand, participation in decision-making

[1] UNCRC Article 12: 'You have the right to an opinion and for it to be listened to and taken seriously.'

processes during the early years could enable young children to mature into democratically oriented individuals in adulthood (Lindahl, 2005).

In the UK, progress of children's rights in early years has to be seen within the context of the 2003 green paper Every Child Matters (Department for Education and Skills, 2003) and the subsequent 2004 Children Act.

A long-term vision emerged through the Children Act 2004 and the implementation paper Every Child Matters: Change for Children (Department for Education and Skills, 2004). This included a new curriculum framework – the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). The EYFS was introduced in 2008 to create a framework from birth to the end of reception year (Department for Education and Skills, 2007). The framework had a strong focus on the wellbeing of children and their active participation. A revised and 'slimmer' version was introduced in September 2012 (Department for Education, 2012)

Whilst there is not direct reference in the EYFS to children's rights, the framework is child-centred. Moreover, the EYFS has made listening to young children's views about matters that affect them central in early years practice (Pugh, 2015).

The 2012 EYFS guidance acknowledges that effective practice involves:

- understanding that children are entitled to be listened to and to have their views valued;
- respecting what children express, whether communicating visually or verbally;
- children having and developing their own ideas, making links between ideas, and developing strategies for doing things;
- collaborating with children (in creating explicit rules for the care of the environment). (Department for Education, 2012b, pp. 7–9)

Thus, Every Child Matters and the EYFS have been central in bringing young children's rights to express their views and their preferences into early years practice. Young children are no longer seen as passive recipients of services.

2.2 Children's participation in their environment

There is a small body of literature on children's involvement in the built environment. One comprehensive guide on children's involvement in environmental planning is Hart (1997a), which I will get back to in the next section. Others include Adams and Ingham (1998) who present case studies of children and young people's involvement in environmental planning across a range of contexts in the UK, and the Children's Play Council which outlines ways of carrying out play space audits that acknowledge children 'as the primary experts in play' (2002).

Increasingly, children have been encouraged to be involved in planning changes to their child early years setting's grounds. Studies that have looked at children's views on their own play environments include Petrie et al. (2000); Smith and Barker (1999); Adams and Ingham (1998) and Burke (2002).

Alison Clark has been a key force in driving the debate around involving children in the development or improvement of outdoor space. For example, she explored with young children their understandings and uses of outdoor provision, in order to inform future plans (Clark and Moss 2005). From that study, three key themes emerged: the importance of listening to young children about their environment; the links between listening and learning; and the possibilities and challenges for research on listening to young children. Another key study aimed to explore how young children can play an active role in the designing and developing of children's spaces (Clark, 2007a). She concludes that whereas the study set out to involve young children in the design process of future spaces, some of the most enduring insights had been concerned with how young children view and experience their current environment. Understanding how young children view and experience their current environment may support practitioners in reviewing their early childhood provision with the active involvement of young children. Clark further observes that the researcher's role in the design process had been instrumental. The researcher had gathered views and experiences from different groups and made these visible to others. A further study by Clark (2007b) examines messages from participatory research about young

children's perspectives of their early years settings and the outdoor spaces in particular. The findings of this review reinforce the importance of private spaces, personal spaces, social spaces and imaginary spaces in outdoor environments for young children. Finally, in Clark (2010), she summarises her previous research and explores how young children can play an active role in the designing, developing and reviewing of early childhood centres and schools. A key objective was to explore how young children's views and experiences can inform both the planning of new provision and the transformation of established provision.

Nah and Lee (2015) examined how childen's participation can be actualized, and their perspectives respected through an action research project that engaged them in the development of an outdoor play area in a child care centre in South Korea. Nah and Lee concluded that young children were indeed capable of expressing their points of view and could contribute directly to issues that mattered to them.

Nah and Lee (2015, p4), referring to Bilton (2010); Stephensen (2002); and Tovey (2007), argue that outdoor play and activities offer more opportunities for children to exercise their rights of participation than indoor ones do. This is because educators have less authority over outdoor spaces. They go on to explain that 'in outdoor settings, children have more options about what and how to play and can try various activities, exert more control, and manipulate their environment in the absence of the strict adult-imposed constraints that govern indoor settings'.

It can therefore be argued that, as children have more freedom to make choices and determine their own and other's actions in outdoor environments, they are more likely to be more active, take more initiative, and develop a sense of agency (Tovey, 2007; Lindahl, 2005).

2.3 Hart's ladder of participation

Hart's (1992) typology of participation builds upon Arnstein's (1969) ladder metaphor. Arnstein's ladder was developed in the context of adults' participation in community development programmes. Hart acknowledges that participation may differ for

children, who often have a minor social status in society compared to adults and, therefore, there are differences in power and control in the context of children's participation (Wong, 2010). Hart has developed the framework to produce a typology of participation specifically in the context of children and adult interactions.

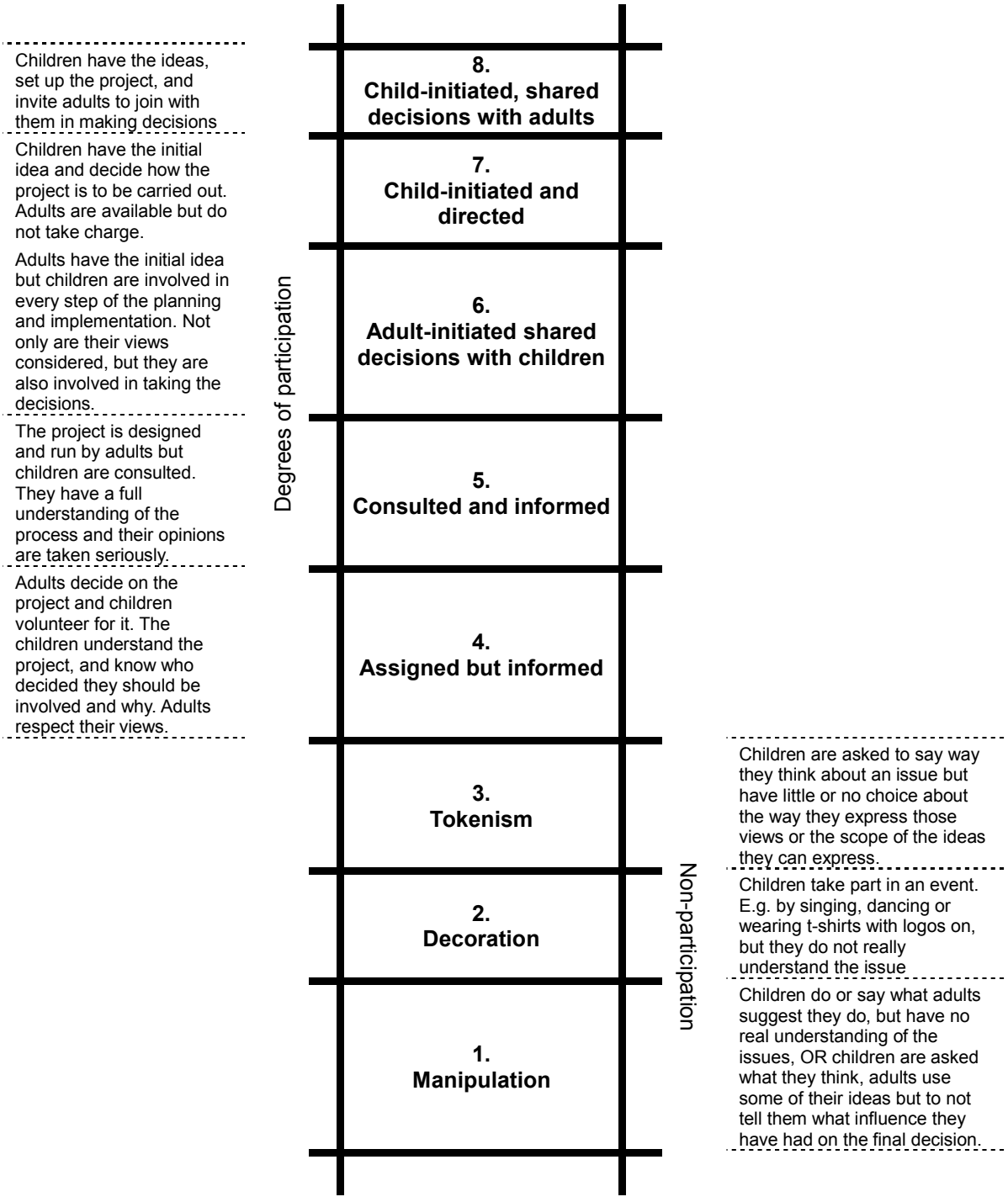

Figure 1 Hart's (1992) ladder of participation

Hart (1992) describes the different rungs of the ladder as follows:
The lowest levels of participation are situated at the bottom of the ladder, categorised by Hart as ‘non-participation. The title of the lowest rung is ‘*manipulation’*. A prime example of manipulation is a situation where children are consulted but given no feedback at all. ‘*Decoration’*, the second rung on the ladder, refers, for example, to events where children are invited to take part but they don’t understand the cause. In this case, adults do not necessarily pretend that the cause is inspired by children, they simply use the children to bolster their cause in a relatively indirect way. The third rung, ‘*tokenism’,* describes those instances in which children are apparently given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about the subject or the style of communicating it, and little or no opportunity to formulate their own opinions..

The upper rungs of the ladder depict genuine levels of participation. The fourth rung, for instance, is named ‘*assigned but informed’*. This includes situations in which: the children understand the intentions of the project; they know who made the decisions concerning their involvement and why; they have a meaningful role; and they volunteer for the project after the project was made clear to them. Moreover, adults respect their views.

On the fifth rung, named *‘consulted and informed’*, he project is designed and run by adults, but children understand the process and their opinions are treated seriously.

The sixth rung of the ladder, ‘*child-initiated, shared decisions with adults’*, can be seen as true participation. Although the projects are initiated by adults, the decision-making is shared with the young people.

Projects that are ‘*child initiated and directed’*, the seventh rung, include examples where children have the initial idea and decide how the project is carried out. Adults make themselves available but do not take charge.

On the top rung, ‘*child-initiated, shared decisions with adults’*, children think of a project by themselves, set it up and invite adults to join with them in making

decisions. It is most likely that those children who incorporate adults into projects they have designed and managed are in their upper teenage years

Hart's ladder of participation is useful as an aide to think about the design of children's participation. However, Hart (1992, p11) argues that 'it should not be considered as a simple measuring stick of the quality of any programme'. There are a range of factors that affect the level at which children participate, for example depending on their age and development. Hart further acknowledges that it is also 'not necessary that children always operate on the highest possible rungs of the ladder'. Children might prefer to perform with varying degrees of involvement or responsibility. 'The important principle again is one of choice: programmes should be designed to maximize the opportunity for any child to choose to participate at the highest level of his ability (Hart, 1992, p11)'.

Wood (2002, p. 3), commenting on Arnstein's model, argues that it is confusing because it conflates power with process. The same can be argued for Hart's model. For example, a project in which children are *consulted and informed* could potentially permit a higher degree of influence over their environment if the children's views were listened to and acted upon, than projects that are 'child-initiated, shared decisions with adults' when this is on a very small scale. Macpherson (2004) further argues that 'the effectiveness of a participation process may depend as much on personalities, institutional culture and how the process is timed' (p. 11).

3 Methodological framework

Qualitative and quantitative approaches are two ways of understanding the world. Quantitative research is the traditional scientific way of seeing the world (Punch, 2009). Quantitative researchers believe that a 'truth' exists, waiting to be discovered. They tend to believe that the world is logical and follows rational scientific laws. They would argue that, if the results of a research project are valid, they can be replicated by another researcher (Punch, 2009).

Within the qualitative approach, however, it is understood that he social world is created by our shared cultural understandings of situations (Punch, 2009). Qualitative researchers are interested in the complexity of human interactions. For qualitative researchers, within an early years setting, the interpretation of events by the researcher, the children, the parents and childcare workers are all equally important (Roberts-Holmes, 2011). One characteristic of qualitative studies is that they are rich in detail, thus in order to do the information justice, the sample size needed to be kept to a reasonably small scale (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003).

As this research focuses on the rich detail of the engagement of a group of children, I have opted for a qualitative approach with a small sample size. The specific type of sampling I decided to use was purposive sampling approach. As Roberts-Holmes (2011) describes, purposive sampling, in which the researcher deliberately chooses to sample particular setting(s) or child(ren), is common in early childhood research. This is often the case because that particular setting or child may provide a good example of what the researcher is investigating.

For this research, the focus is on my own setting and I and decided to target all the children in our setting who are 36 months and over (5 children). These children were selected because I know them well and have a good relationship with them. I also felt that they were most likely to be able to meaningfully participate in the research (both physically and cognitively). And last but not least, they had been expressing a keen interest in the allotment project.

The active participants in the study were:

Nora	39 months[2]	Attends 3 days a week
Florian	40 months	Attends 2 days a week
Joe	44 months	Attends 3 days a week
Lara	47 months	Attends 3 days a week
Nicci	48 months	Attends 2 days a week

[2] Ages as of 1st April 2016

As I wanted to follow an inclusive approach to developing the allotment site, the younger children were also actively involved in the development of the site, but not included in the data collection for the research.

Lars	13 months	Attends 3 days a week
Flora	23 months	Attends 2 days a week
Ian	25 months	Attends 3 days a week
Nicola	27 months	Attends 3 days a week
Rueben	30 months	Attends 2 days a week
Connor	30 months	Attends 2 days a week
Alma	31 months	Attends 2 days a week

As this research is part of a continued process of investigating and evaluating our practice with a focus on improving our practice, I have adopted an action research approach.

Action research is a cyclical process of 'think – do – think' to research and create change (Mac Naughton and Hughes, 2008, p1). Mac Naughton and Hughes (2008) describe the action research cycle phases as:

1. Choosing to change;
2. Planning for change;
3. Creating the change;
4. Sharing the lessons.

The intention was that this research would roughly go through one action research cycle.

3.1 Involving children in research

Over recent years there has been a major shift in research involving children. While a range of research is still conducted *on* children, much of the recent research involving children is focused on research *with* children (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008).

These days, children are seen as ‘persons in their own right’ (Prout 2000, p. 308). They are deemed to be competent social agents actively shaping their own experiences as well as the experiences of those around them (Clark and Moss, 2001). As they are experts on their own lives (Clark and Moss 2001; Lansdown 2005a) they are viewed as competent to share their views and opinions.

In a Safe the Children report, Wilkinson (2001, p4) sets out very clearly why researchers might involve children in research.

- **Participation is a right**: The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child places in law the right of young people to have their opinions on matters that affect them taken into account in accordance with their maturity.
- **Participation can lead to better knowledge of their views and priorities**: Involving children and young people helps illuminate key issues and concerns about their lives, their priorities and perspectives.
- **Participation can lead to effective action**: Where children and young people have been centrally involved in a research process, they can be more effectively involved in decision-making and follow up action.
- **Participation can empower children and young people**: Inviting children or young people to describe some aspect of their experience in drawing, spoken or written words or though action, can increase their skills and provide a sense of empowerment. By letting children decide what is important to them we have the basis for a joint analysis based on a more equal power relationship between adults and children.

3.2 A Mosaic inspired approach

There are many methods used in participatory research with children. For example drawings, diagrams and maps; role play, drama and song; photo taking and video making; children’s diaries, recall and observations; storyboards; and semi-structured or unstructured interviews.

This research draws on the ‘Mosaic’ approach for listening to young children as described by Clark and Moss (2001, 2005, 2011). The method uses both the

traditional tools of observing children at play and a variety of ‘participatory tools’ with children. These include taking photographs, book-making, tours of the outdoor area and map-making. ‘The Mosaic approach enables children to create a living picture of their lives’ (Clark and Moss, 2005, p13). Also, part of the Mosaic approach is to involve adults in gathering information in addition to gaining perspectives from the children, such as observations, reflective discussion, focus groups and interviews with practitioners and focus groups and surveys with parents

In this study I have attempted to bring together a range of tools that may give a detailed impression of the children’s perspectives.

The first tool is *observation*. As Clark (2005, p14) points out, ‘observation is an important first step in listening to young children’s views and experiences. The younger the children involved, the more important observation becomes for increasing the researcher’s understandings of children’s perspectives. I observed the children throughout our time on the allotment and took written notes.

The second tool used was *informal unstructured interviewing*. Rather than developing a formal interviewing schedule, I asked questions that arose naturally during the day.

A key feature of the research methods used for this was the use of *a digital camera*. A digital camera was made available for the children to take photographs. At the beginning of each session I showed the camera to the children and asked them to take pictures of all the things they liked best on the allotment. I told them they could come and get the camera whenever they saw something they wanted to take a picture of. During the session I reminded the children of the camera, particularly those children that I had not witnessed taking any pictures. The children tended to take the camera and used them in groups of two or three, chatting and often laughing about what they were photographing. The children made their own choices about what to photograph and were able to pick out things that were important to them or intrigued them at that moment. The children regularly asked to view the pictures on the camera throughout the session,

Photo 1 Camera accessible to the children on the research tree

One of the benefits of using the camera method was that the children enjoyed taking the photographs and learned how to use a camera. Another benefit was that the children could look at their and their friends' pictures as soon as they were taken: This developed an ongoing discussion throughout the day.

I also used the 'child-led tours' tool. Tours are a participatory technique that facilitates children to convey their local knowledge about their immediate surroundings (Hart, 1997)'. We invited the 5 children with their parents to the allotment on a Sunday. Each child had their own time slot. I asked the child to show their parents around the allotment and show them what they have been doing over the past three weeks and what they have enjoyed. I gave the parent the audio recorder, which they hung around their necks. This tool played to the children's strengths as natural explorers and knowledgeable guides (Clark, 2005, p. 16). Asking them to show their parents around made sure that the children felt comfortable to speak freely. It also made use of the children's enthusiasm to show their parents 'their' space.

Informal unstructured interviews with parents built up a more detailed understanding of the children's experiences. Most days at the point of drop-off or pick-up, I talked to the parents about what their children had told them about their time at the allotment. This was a useful tool to tease out any differences in perspective of what the child had told us and what we had observed, and what the child told their parents at home.

Finally, *discussions with my co-practitioner* (my partner) throughout the day was essential to check consensus or differences in my interpretation of my observations.

On reflection, several methods that I had intended to use did not work. For example, I had hoped to do some evaluative artwork with the children at the end of the day, based around what they had enjoyed that day. But due to our long sessions on the allotment, tiredness of the children and an earlier pickup of one of the key children, this did not happen. I had also planned to make a scrapbook of photographs with the children. Unfortunately, given that the research timeframe was only three weeks, and that the 5 children attend the setting on different days, we did not get round to do this. However, given that the children regularly looked through their pictures on the digital camera itself, I gained a reasonable insight into which pictures they were most interested in and managed to capture their dialogue.

Another challenge that I had not anticipated, was children being ill and one child being term time only, and therefore losing valuable research time. Similarly, we lost a few research days to heavy rain.

As researcher/practitioner, I acted as ‘‘committed facilitator, participant, and learner’’ rather than as neutral observers (Arieli, Friedman, & Agbaria, 2009). I did not only observe but I also participated in the activities involved in the development of the allotment area. Specifically, I participated in the project by providing potential project ideas for the children, supporting them in thinking about the necessary resources and tools for the projects; taking them along to get the resources, as well as taking the lead in developing the more complex projects. Even more importantly, as one of their key carers, I supported them with play, learning and personal and emotional care throughout the day.

All the data gathered by each method was categorized. The audio recordings were transcribed and after several readings the text was coded by hand. My pictures and the children’s pictures were also organised and categorised, as well as my notes and reflective journal. The data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Creswell, 2008), following transcription of all of the audio and video recordings.

Then, the results from all the methods were read together and compared to see if there were some common themes. The following themes emerged:

- Engagement in choosing the projects
- Engagement in the development of the projects
- Engagement in play
- Ladder of participation

3.3 Ethical considerations

In contrast to doing research with adults, where gaining informed consent from the participants is essential, young children are not considered to have sufficient age nor maturity to provide informed consent to research participation (Dockett, 2011). Such consent must be provided by a parent or guardian. However, research that adopts a participatory approach must also seek children's agreement to participate in the research. 'This will take the form of assent, rather than consent (Dockett, 2011, p233)'.

Informed consent was obtained from all 12 children's parents. The information about the research was included in our weekly newsletter of 13.03.2016 (sent electronically through our Babies' Days system), with a link to the consent form (Appendix 1).

Following guidance set out by Shaw, Brady and Davey (2011), the explanation included:

- what the research is trying to find out;
- the purpose of the research;
- who is carrying it out;
- exactly what will be asked of participants – for example, completion of questionnaires, one-to-one interviews, discussion groups
- how the information they provide will be recorded – for example, written record, audio recording, filming etc.;
- what will then happen to the data (including data protection issues);
- what degree of confidentiality and anonymity is afforded;

- how the information will be analysed (for example, whether results are to be aggregated, individual quotations used);
- how the findings will be reported (for example, written report or presentation);
- who will see the results of the study;
- the potential benefits of the study for participants or the wider community.

Parents were informed that taking part was not compulsory and that they could withdraw at any time without any consequences. I also stressed that their and their child's details would be anonymised. Parents were then asked to sign a hard copy at drop-off or pick-up.

Every morning, when children attended who had not been with us since the start of the research, I took those children aside and explained the project to them in simple terms. I made sure they listened to my explanation and that they gave me a clear indication that they were happy to participate. I also explained that taking part was not compulsory and that they could withdraw at any time without any consequences. I had made wooden cookies with their names and their age for each child. To communicate consent, they were asked to put their cookie on the research tree. On some occasions a coat rack functioned as tree in the living room.

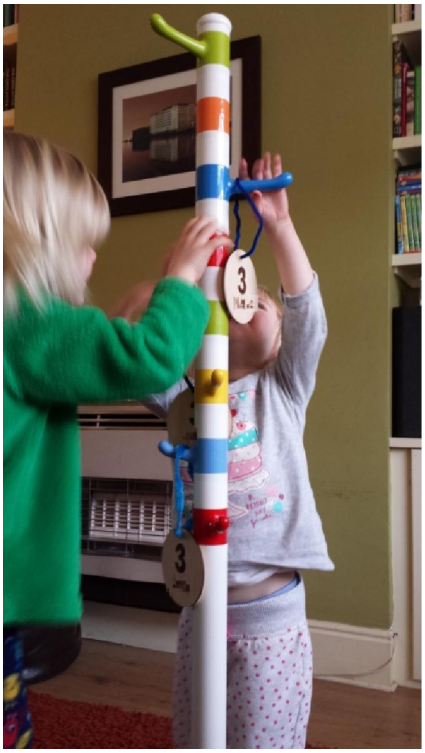

Photo 2 Nora and Lara hang their name cookies on the research 'tree' to indicate assent

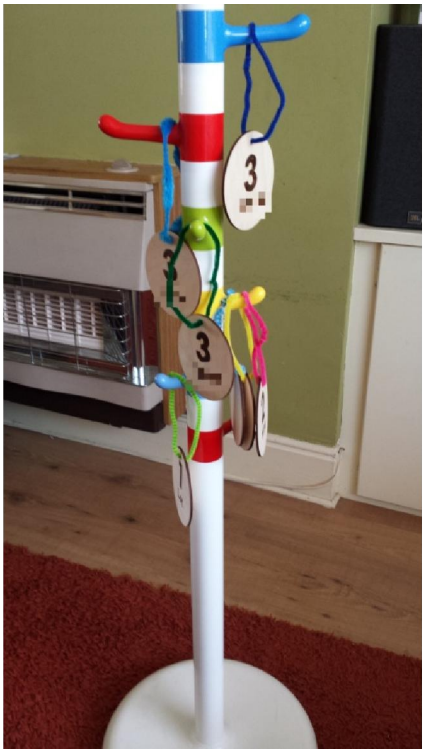

Photo 3 Everyone's cookies on the 'tree'

Photo 4 Everyone's cookies on the research tree

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The children were given the opportunity to verbally reaffirm or withdraw their assent at the beginning of each session in the manner outlined above. It was more difficult to get assent from the youngest children. I decided to take their their happy mood as assent. As Harcourt and Conroy (2005, p574) point out, 'with very young children the researcher can never be sure that the children have completely understood the request'. Therefore, during the sessions, I remained sensitive to pick up on any of the children's cues to see if they might withdraw their assent. Cues could include: 'refusing to engage with me; becoming abnormally quiet; turning away and crying (or sounding distressed); or refusing to engage with any materials used in the study (Mukherji and Albon, 2009, p46)'.

A process of familiarisation is particularly important when doing research with young children. 'The inclusion of a familiarisation period in conjunction with an overall reflexive approach can give the child control of the research context and their role

within it facilitating their ability to actively consent to take part or not (Barley and Bath 2014).' The children involved in this study have been in our care ranging from three months to 19 months. They have also been involved in discussions about the allotment (outdoor learning space) and have visited the site several times during the groundworks. We have therefore already engaged in a long familiarisation process before the official start of the research.

The data was stored electronically on a laptop, which is password protected.
Any hand written notes were written up on a laptop at the end of the day. The written notes were destroyed. Photographs, video and audio recordings were stored in a Dropbox account, access to which is also password protected. After completion of the project, all data was stored in the password protected Dropbox account and deleted off the laptop.

One ethical consideration emerged that I had not anticipated in the setup of the research. One of the 3-year olds involved in the research is my own daughter. She is integral to our setting and is firm friends with the other 3-year olds. I found very little guidance on researchers involving their own children in research. I eventually decided to follow the advice provided by Oregon State University (n.d.).

- My partner gave consent for her participation in the research
- I checked my interpretation of the data collected on my daughter with my partner, who is my co-worker.
- I was unable to have another member of the study team obtain consent and collect the data as I was the only researcher involved.

4 Data analysis

4.1 Outline of the project

The research project took place over a three week period, from 4th April 2016 until 22nd April 2016. Prior to the start of the research, my partner and I had been working on getting the allotment ready for development for 6 months. This period involved

primarily clearing the site from brambles and leveling the ground in some areas. We had also commissioned a tree house to be built around a large tree on the site. Besides the tree house, the site was a blank canvas at the start of the research. All the children had been on a recent exploratory visit to the site.

The allotment site is a 10 minute walk from our house, which is our registered childcare setting. The plot is approximately 250 m2. It is situated on a slope and is flanked on one side by a small wooded area. This area steeply inclines up to a nature reserve situated on an old viaduct. On another side it borders on a shallow stream. The soil is heavy clay that gets very slippery when wet.

Photo 5 The allotment area prior to the start of the research

The fact that the project is taking place on an allotment did provide some parameters to what was possible to develop on the site. Under the allotment rules, we have to cultivate 75 percent of the plot. We were granted permission for the tree house on the understanding that this was part of the 25 percent. We took the view though, that as we had reclaimed a large strip of land that had not been cultivated before, we would be able to be a bit more imaginative with the site.

Before the official start of the project, we had already made a trip to B&Q and asked the children to choose fruit and vegetable seeds to grow on the allotment. Also, another group of children had come with us to the Scrapstore to choose two crates full of scrap for loose parts play on the allotment.

4.2 Participation in choosing the projects

Throughout the three weeks, we provided the children with a series of photographs that depicted a range of projects that might be possible to develop on the allotment. The projects were inspired by an on-line search of 'natural' outdoor learning spaces, including Reggio Emilia settings. I did not intend this to be an exclusive list of projects. However, given that the space was a blank canvas and the children were not familiar with a similar setting, I felt that it was important to provide the children with some initial inspiration.

The projects depicted on the photographs included:

- Planting vegetables
- Planting flowers
- Building dens
- Making a water wall
- Create a balancing set-up
- Making a fairy garden
- Making a bug hotel
- Making a scare crow
- Making a mud kitchen

Photo 6 Selection of photographs of allotment project ideas shared with the children.

The children were very enthusiastic every time I put the photographs out. They were very able to look through the pictures with great concentration and each choose their favourite project. In the first week, there was a clear consensus to develop a mud kitchen, a water wall and a fairy garden. As the projects progressed, the children chose to plant sunflowers, wildflowers, more vegetables, create a balancing area, a bug hotel and a runnerbean tunnel.

The children's choices highlighted the importance of allowing the children to make decisions about which projects to develop. At the start of the research we had preconceived ideas that they would choose to build dens and a scarecrow as some of the first projects. However, these had still not been chosen after three weeks.

Photo 7 A selection of the projects chosen by the children

Photo 8 Top row: projects chosen by the children; Bottom row: projects not (yet) chosen by the children

Besides choosing the projects from the photographs, the children came up with their own ‘projects’. The days on the allotment were primarily filled with child-initiated and child-led play. These were generally more of a transient nature. Even before any of the children had chosen to develop a balancing area from the pictures, several children had initiated the idea of using pallets and planks of wood and arranged them so that they could use them as balancing beams.




Photo 9 Creating a balancing area

Similarly, one day, the children heard us talking about chickens on another plot. They had been fascinated by the different types of worms that they had found on the site. Florian initiated a search for worms and the other children got involved. They spent over half an hour filling small buckets with worms and other insects before we all went for a short walk to the plot with the chickens. At first instance, this does not sound like a development project as such. However, the children effectively broadened their allotment space and brought the chickens, which are a 5 minute walk away, into the

definition of their learning space. We have since visited the chickens several times.

Photo 10 The children's chicken adventure

4.3 Participation in the physical development the projects

Following our Forest School ethos, we value process over results. We also followed our usual practice of allowing the children to be involved as and when and however much they wanted. Once the children had identified a project, we sat down with the

children who wanted to engage to think about what we needed to develop the project.

Before we could start planting flowers and vegetables, we went on a trip to the Bristol Wood Recycling Project (BWRP) to buy raised beds, which the children helped chose. We also visited B&Q to collect soil improver and compost. On the allotment, the children chose what they wanted to grow and helped plant the seeds following Mike's instructions. This was a project that the children came back to throughout the three weeks. They showed high levels of interest, asked about the plants and spent a lot of time watering the seeds.

The mud kitchen development process went slightly differently. It was a firm favourite as the first project to start. Again, we ventured over to the BWRP and decided together which pallets would be suitable for building a mud kitchen. However, back on the allotment the children were not very interested in helping to build it. Two of the children made an effort to give some input as to where they wanted to mud, but then asked us to build it, which we did. Once completed, it was immediately a key gathering point and remained a favourite play area throughout the three weeks.

The fairy garden developed very slowly over time. It started off with a bike tire that one of the children had found and it grew from there. The garden was designed by the children from start to finish, without any involvement from the practitioners. After being furnished with a few pebbles and stones on the first day, children started turning up with new items that they or their parents had made or found at home. The fairy garden became the first point of call for many of the children when arriving on the allotment. They would sit round and rearrange the items and add any new items. Also during the day, children would regularly sit round the fairy garden chatting.

The next significant project was the water wall. The children had already shown a great deal of interest in water play, using the water in the water buckets. At home, the children helped look for suitable items for on the wall (including in the recycling bag) and decided what would be suitable. On the allotment Nora and Rueben were very keen on helping secure the (pallet) wall by hammering stakes in the ground with a

mallet. They also made the decisions about how the water should flow and what pipes they wanted to use.

The balancing area grew organically from the start. Initially Lara, Joe and Nicci built balancing bars by arranging planks of wood on top of pallets in different arrangement. Once they spotted a picture using tires, they decided that that was what they wanted. In order to get the tires, the three children came along to a tire shop and chose different sized tires. Back at the allotment, Nicci, Lara and Joe insisted on moving some of the tires from the van to our site by themselves.

During the last week, Nicci chose to build a bug hotel. For practical reasons, Mike and I chose the location of the hotel and placed a pallet on the ground. Lara, Nora, Joe and Ian studied several pictures of bug hotels and decided to start with a layer of sticks. They searched on the site for suitable sticks, often eliciting help from the adults to get to what they wanted.

As a last project within the scope of the research period, the children chose to build a runner bean structure. They helped us put the sticks in the ground and held them to enable Mike to tie the tops. They made a unanimous decision that the entrance should be on the side, so that it turned into a tunnel-type structure.

One activity which was vital to the safety of the allotment site turned out to be one of the children's favourite. As the allotment turned into a big slide when wet due to the clay soil, Mike had started bringing in buckets full of woodchip to cover the soil. A large pile of woodchip was situated a short walk from the site. Soon, most children could regularly be found walking back and forth to the pile, collecting woodchip and spreading it over the allotment, at their own initiative.

4.4 Engagement in play

Not only did the children make decisions about which projects they wanted to develop, they also made their own decisions in terms of *whether* they wanted to engage in developing the projects at all. Most children decided to dip in and out of

various projects, sometimes running off to play only to return half an hour later. Similarly, some children were more interested in certain projects than others. One of the children, Florian, was keen to be involved in choosing which projects he wanted to see happen but was not keen on engaging with the actual implementation. As a rule, he would stand at a distance watching the project evolve, occasionally giving some directions. He would, however, very soon join in with the play that engaged once the project was completed.

Throughout all sessions on the allotment, the children exercised their right to chose their own play. Whilst that often involved climbing on the tree house or playing in the mud kitchen, it also frequently involved making physical changes to the space. This ranged from moving pallets around and stacking them; piling tires on top of each other to build a climbing frame, move sticks around; dig holes in the ground and make hills elsewhere. So in effect, they were making decisions relating to shaping their own physical space.

4.5 Ladder of participation

This study shows that during the three weeks of the allotment development various levels of participation were at play.

Firstly, the children did not participate in the decision to develop an allotment site into their outdoor learning space. The children are used to spend time in the woods, which has now been reduced since the development of this new site. So in effect, this process can be seen as '*manipulation*'.

Choosing projects from the predetermined pictures. on the other hand, can be identified as '*adult-initiated, shared decisions with children'*. The pictures were put forward by the researcher/practitioner but the decisions regarding which of the projects was implemented sat firmly with the children.

Many of the projects, in fact, can be typified as '*adult-initiated, shared decisions with*

children'. These include the flower and vegetable planting, fairy garden, water wall, the bug hotel and the runner bean structure.

The development of the mud kitchen could be identified as '*consulted and informed'*, even though once finished it was one of the favourite spaces on site. On the one hand, we could have left the mud kitchen until the children were interested in building it. But on the other hand, they had indicated that they were very keen on a mud kitchen and that they wanted us to get on with it. So in that respect, it could perhaps also been seen as '*adult-initiated, shared decisions with children'*.

Three initiatives can be situated higher on the ladder. The balancing area was an example of genuine participation, *'child-initiated and directed'*. The children developed the area at their own initiative and asked help from the adults for getting the necessary resources (e.g. tires). Similarly, even though they were inspired by the adult's actions, the children themselves chose to transport woodchip from the pile to the allotment. They figured out which vessels to use (they decided that wheelie buckets and small carrier buckets were most suitable) and how to best get to the pile and back. Finally, incorporating the chickens into their extended learning space can also be seen as *child-initiated and directed'.* The children initiated the idea, supported by the adults.

4.6 Benefits from participation

4.6.1 Benefits for the children

The pictures taken by the children, alongside the audio recordings from the 'parent tours' and informal discussions with parents show that the children feel a deep level of ownership over the allotment space. Many of the children's pictures feature the mud kitchen, the planting area, the fairy garden, the water wall and the balancing area. Similarly, those were also the areas that the children proudly showed their parents round and talked about at home. Nora had been so enthusiastic about the fairy garden that her parents decided to build one together in their own garden. Moreover, whilst the children talk about our home setting as 'Mike and Charissa's

house', they refer to the allotment as 'our allotment'.

Photo 11 A selection of the children's pictures

The children also had real opportunities to communicate and make their opinions heard. Equally they could at times make the decision not to get involved at all. This did lead to some children being fully immersed in their own play, without interruptions. From the discussions, it appeared that those children,who did not always participate in the projects in the conventional way, did not to feel left out. They were, for instance, equally enthusiastic showing their parents around on the tour.

Moreover, similar to Nah and Lee's (2015, p.12) finding, 'the children had opportunities to develop communication, negotiation, and cooperation skills and to consider others, which are crucial abilities and skills for young children in a democratic society'.

4.6.2 Benefits for the setting

An obvious benefit for the setting is creating a learning environment that meets the needs and desires of the children that it serves. It has also given the practitioners, including myself, renewed faith in a child-led approach, which values process over product and allowing children to take things at their own pace.

An unexpected benefit of the process has been increased parental participation. The children's enthusiasm has catalysed a heightened parents involvement with the children's learning environment. Parents provided various resources, including fairy garden ornaments, mud kitchen materials and plants.

4.7 Challenges

A few challenges did emerge however. Allowing children control over the development of a learning environment takes time. Some days the only 'development' we would do might be planting a few sunflowers. So it is essential we let go of any drive to achieve an outcome within a specific timescale.

We also realised that full participation is not always possible. For example, the allotment rules state that we need to cultivate 75 percent of the area. This meant that we continuously have to be creative in channelling the children's choices into 'acceptable' outcomes without diminishing their decision.

4.8 Reflections on the research design

In hindsight, the research design was somewhat ambitious for a short term project. I decided to move away from looking at the children's well-being during the sessions and primarily focus on their ability to participate in the decision making and

implementation.

The children did have a voice through their photographs, the choices they made and the informal discussions we had on a daily basis. I was somewhat disappointed that I did not manage to incorporate some evaluative art work in the study, which I will take forward into my practice. Similarly, making physical scrapbooks with photographs of the children's experiences could have been a beneficial tool to facilitate more focused discussions.

5 Conclusion

This study documented the process of young children's participation in designing and developing an outdoor learning space together with the practitioners in a childminding setting.

The study reveals that the children had clear opinions about what they wanted included in the outdoor space and expressed them clearly. Sometime through language, sometimes through action. The findings of this research are substantial with prior research arguing that children are experts on being children and their own lives (Clark and Moss, 2001; Einarsdottir 2005) arguing therefore that their views and experiences should be sought and respected.

The study also illustrates that, even though levels of participation was generally on the upper rungs, these levels did vary from time to time. For young children, adult support is vital to facilitate participation and real choices. Young children are not always able to acquire the resources to implement their choices for example. Moreover, the study argues that full participation is not always possible or even desirable. Non-participation is also a choice that a child should be able to exercise, as is engagement on their own terms. Following Hart (1992, p11) 'the important principle is one of choice: programmes should be designed to maximize the opportunity for any child to choose to participate at the highest level of his ability'.

A key question that emerges from this study, is “How do we as participative practitioners react to children who choose not to participate in some aspects of decision making”.

This study was a pilot study and the process of development of the allotment will therefore continue. The participatory process started with this study will be taken forward in developing many more aspects of the outdoor learning environment in participation with the children.

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7 Appendix 1 - Consent letter Children

To .....

As you know, I am a student on the Post-Graduate Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) programme at the University of the West of England in the Department of Education. As part of my course I require to undertake research with children to further my professional development. In order to do this I am seeking the agreement of all the parents and the children.

I am focusing my research on the development of our allotment. The aim of this research is to explore the benefits, drawbacks and challenges of three-year-olds participating in designing and developing an outdoor learning space together with the practitioners in a childminding setting

In order to do this, I will:

- Work with the children to develop specific themes for the development of the outdoor learning area through the development a scrapbook. Identify:
    - Preferred play areas
    - The 'look' of the play areas
    - The materials and tools needed to develop those areas
- Develop the outdoor play area in collaboration between the children and practitioners. This includes: developing the areas as identified during their investigation; and involving the children in building structures using the appropriate materials and tools.
- Identify the children's engagement, well-being and learning during the activities from both the practitioners' and children's perspectives.
- Identify the benefits, drawbacks and challenges of the participatory process.

I aim to actively involve the children in the research. This means working with the children to gather data, including: facilitating the children to take photographs; discussing their interests with them; child-led tours around the area; and facilitating artwork based on the day's activities. Mike and I will also observe the children and make an assessment of their general engagement and wellbeing. I will also collect our own photographs, audio recording and video materials as a basis for discussion. All the data will be stored on a password protected laptop.

Even though the research focuses on the three-year olds, all children will be involved in the development of the outdoor learning space. They are also likely to feature in photographs or other recordings.

I the later stage of the research I also intend to ask you, as parents, to answer a few questions about your child.

It is important to note that real names of participants and the setting will not be used to protect identities. The children's faces will be made unidentifiable in any photographs included in the report. The study will be read by tutors and shared with course colleagues and may be presented to an academic audience. If you would like further details about the study then please ask me or my supervisor:

I will also be asking your child if they are happy to be involved. Your child will only be included in the study if you and your child are comfortable with this. The children will be given the opportunity to verbally reaffirm or withdraw their consent at the beginning of each session. You or your child can opt to withdraw from the study at any time without the need to give a reason.

Charissa de Zeeuw
07957 209057
chdezeeuw@googlemail.com

Supervisor contact details:
Ali Shaw

EYTS Programme Coordinator
Ali.Shaw@uwe.ac.uk

If you agree that your child be part of this study then please sign below.

I agree that my child is involved in this study.

Child's name:.....

Name: ……..

Signature …….

8 Appendix 2 - Consent letter Parents

As you know, I am a student on the Post-Graduate Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) programme at the University of the West of England in the Department of Education. As part of my course I require to undertake research with children to further my professional development. In order to do this I am seeking the agreement of all the parents and the children.

I am focusing my research on the development of our allotment. The aim of this research is to explore the benefits, drawbacks and challenges of three-year-olds participating in designing and developing an outdoor learning space together with the practitioners in a childminding setting

In order to do this, I will:

- Work with the children to develop specific themes for the development of the outdoor learning area through the development a scrapbook. Identify:
    - Preferred play areas
    - The 'look' of the play areas
    - The materials and tools needed to develop those areas
- Develop the outdoor play area in collaboration between the children and practitioners. This includes: developing the areas as identified during their investigation; and involving the children in building structures using the appropriate materials and tools.
- Identify the children's engagement, well-being and learning during the activities from both the practitioners' and children's perspectives.
- Identify the benefits, drawbacks and challenges of the participatory process.

In order to gain your view on your child's experiences on the allotment, I would like to

conduct an interview with you based on your child's activities. I would really appreciate it if you were willing to join me on the allotment during the weekend of 23/24 April during a time slot of your convenience.

It is important to note that real names of participants and the setting will not be used to protect identities. The study will be read by tutors and shared with course colleagues and may be presented to an academic audience. If you would like further details about the study then please ask me or my supervisor:

You can opt to withdraw from the study at any time without the need to give a reason.

Charissa de Zeeuw
07957 209057
chdezeeuw@googlemail.com

Supervisor contact details:
Ali Shaw
EYTS Programme Coordinator
Ali.Shaw@uwe.ac.uk

I agree to participate in this study.

Name: ……..

Signature …….

9 appendix 3 - Consent letter Co-practitioner

To .....

As you know, I am a student on the Post-Graduate Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) programme at the University of the West of England in the Department of Education. As part of my course I require to undertake research with children to further my professional development. In order to do this I am seeking the agreement from all participants.

I am focusing my research on the development of our allotment. The aim of this research is to explore the benefits, drawbacks and challenges of three-year-olds participating in designing and developing an outdoor learning space together with the practitioners in a childminding setting

In order to do this, I will:

- Work with the children to develop specific themes for the development of the outdoor learning area through the development a scrapbook. Identify:
    - Preferred play areas
    - The 'look' of the play areas
    - The materials and tools needed to develop those areas
- Develop the outdoor play area in collaboration between the children and practitioners. This includes: developing the areas as identified during their investigation; and involving the children in building structures using the appropriate materials and tools.
- Identify the children's engagement, well-being and learning during the activities from both the practitioners' and children's perspectives.
- Identify the benefits, drawbacks and challenges of the participatory process.

As you will be involved in gathering data and will be featured in the report, I would like to ask you for your agreement to be involved.

It is important to note that real names of participants and the setting will not be used to protect identities. The study will be read by tutors and shared with course colleagues and may be presented to an academic audience. If you would like further details about the study then please ask me or my supervisor:

You can opt to withdraw from the study at any time without the need to give a reason.

Charissa de Zeeuw
07957 209057
chdezeeuw@googlemail.com

Supervisor contact details:
Ali Shaw
EYTS Programme Coordinator
Ali.Shaw@uwe.ac.uk

I agree to participate in this study.

Name: ……..

Signature …….

Signed Ethics form