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Childhood as a Social and Symbolic Space: Discourses on Children as Social Participants in Society

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In memory of Sharon

Preface

My work on this thesis, which was made possible through funding from the Norwegian Research Council, started with my involvement in the national project entitled Try Yourself, which was initiated by the Arts Council Norway.[1] The Norwegian Centre for Child Research was given the responsibility of both leading and evaluating the project. Through being in charge of this work, I acquired a variety of rich and stimulating experiences during the three-year project period, which have constituted both a basis and a great source of inspiration for this PhD.

First and foremost, I would like to thank the children involved for their exciting narratives of their experiences as participants in the project. During stimulating dialogues with them, I received rich empirical material for analysis and further reflection. The huge variety of different projects initiated by children also provided a stimulating basis for research. The local project leaders of Try Yourself deserve many thanks for their cooperation during the three-year period. Special thanks go to Annichen Hauan, a consultant in the Arts Council Norway at that time. Her huge enthusiasm, energy and knowledge were of great importance in our close cooperation in conducting a wide variety of different Try Yourself activities.

The Norwegian Centre for Child Research and its former director, Per Egil Mjaavatn, offered an inspiring environment for interdisciplinary child

[1] The official name has recently been changed from the former name of the Norwegian Council for Cultural Affairs

research from 1989 to 1997. I offer my thanks to him and all my former colleagues, who contributed to a very stimulating and creative research atmosphere. I owe special thanks to Professor Per Olav Tiller and Professor Marianne Gullestad for supervision and support in my training as a child researcher; they always contributed to creative dialogues on research perspectives relating to children, childhood and culture.

My thesis is dedicated to the memory of Sharon Stephens. As a colleague and close friend working at the Norwegian Centre from 1991 to 1996 she acted as a midwife for the project idea that resulted in this thesis. During the period in which the initial research idea was developed into an application submitted to the Norwegian Research Council, her encouraging support and supervision were invaluable. Due to her far too early death, I had to work on the thesis without the benefit of her supervision. However, her research and her voice have followed me, right up until the last word was written, as a tremendous source of inspiration.

Many people have contributed, inspired and supported me during the process of producing this thesis. Warm thanks are due to present colleagues at the Norwegian Centre for Child Research for their comments, support and encouragement. I also owe thanks to Associate Professor Astrid Grude Eikseth for stimulating discussions. Professor Jens Qvortrup, Director of the Norwegian Centre from 1997 to 2002, is owed particular thanks for stimulating comments, great support and close cooperation. My warmest thanks go to Dr Vebjørg Tingstad, for her encouragement, comments and valuable support. I would like to express my warmest gratitude to my two supervisors: Associate Professor Hansjorg Hohr, Department of Education, NTNU; and Associate Professor Karen Fog Olwig, Institute of Anthropol-

ogy, University of Copenhagen. Both of them have been very supportive and stimulating throughout my research, always responding quickly with valuable comments. I would also like to thank Robert Parkin, University of Oxford, for excellent help with language correction, and Anne Slupphaug for technical support. Many thanks also to the Foundation for Danish-Norwegian cooperation – '*Fondet for dansk-norsk samarbeid*' – that funded a week's stay at the beautiful Schäffergården in Copenhagen and made close cooperation with Danish researchers possible.

Last but not least, I convey my warmest thanks to my family, Morten, Ingvild and Ane, for encouragement, stimulating discussions and all kinds of support. Particular thanks are due to Ingvild for extensive support in compiling the references, and to Kaja and Peder Elias, for continually demanding my involvement in their childhoods.

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Chapter 1
Children as social participants; an introduction

The theme of this thesis is discourses on children and social participation in Norway in the 1990s, constituting childhood as a social and symbolic space. The starting point for my analyses was an interest in the increasingly powerful discourses on children as participants in society that emerged in different child political contexts, as well as within childhood research, from the early 1990s. These discourses were (and still are) operative at different political levels, such as local, county and national levels, as well as in international society itself. Different actors produce the discourses, for example NGOs, national ministries, the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities, The National Youth Council, The Ombudsperson for Children and others. A variety of different participatory projects have been initiated, and the call for children's voices seems to have tremendous rhetorical power in many contexts.

In applied research from the early 1990s at the Norwegian Centre for Child Research, I have witnessed an increasing interest from different employers in topics and activities that are mainly referred to as 'children and participation'. Phrases such as 'children's rights to have a say in society', 'children as citizens', 'children's voices', 'the child perspective' were (and still are) frequently used. The rhetorical power of these phrases, the overwhelming impression of certain truths being taken for granted and the growing interest in this discourse struck my attention.

The aim of the thesis is to explore discourses on 'children as participants' by questioning and discussing constructions of children and childhood that seems to be taken for granted, and which in certain contexts seem to have attained a hegemonic position in recent years. One important task is to gain an insight into the existential conditions of these discourses, to contextualise them by exploring the social practices that are developed as part of these discourses. In this context, it is important to discuss how constructions of the child subject in discourses affect children, and how children handle and experience the new identities that are made available to them through the discourses.

The thesis is based on empirical data from several studies. The main source for the present investigation is a case study of a participatory project entitled 'Try Yourself'('Have a go'). The empirical material used in relation to this project consists of:

1. Different written texts produced as part of the project, such as its aims and statements as formulated by the initiators; application forms designed by the initiators and filled in by children; texts in newspapers, etc.
2. Interviews and dialogues with children who participated in this project.
3. Field notes from seminars and meetings throughout the project period.

In addition to the case study, texts and information taken from a survey concerning the dissemination and character of participatory projects are also used as an empirical source of investigation. Additional text material,

such as national white papers and Government Declarations to Parliament relating to children and child policy, help complete the analyses. One of my articles is based on analyses of texts related to a Danish project: Children as fellow citizens.

The study aims to generate knowledge about discourses on children and participation by uniting analyses from different viewpoints: the 'policy level', here represented by the construction of the national project Try Yourself and written texts from policy makers on national, county and local levels on the one hand, and on the other hand; from the perspectives of children, participating in Try Yourself. Both these viewpoints give insight into discourses on children as social participants 'in action' – with other words: the politics of these discourses.

Approaching a research agenda: Childhood and children as social participants in society

Children are social participants in societies and cultural life in many respects. They are workers, soldiers and consumers, and they reproduce and produce culture in everyday lives on a par with adults. They are co-constructors of their childhoods and active agents in establishing relationships with adults as well as with other children. They are caring subjects and embodied beings who contribute emotionally to their own and others' quality of life. Life itself presupposes participation. Studies of infants show that children have an innate ability actively to influence communication with people in their surroundings (Threvarthen 1973, Bråten 1998). However, the shape and expression that the participation should be given, as well as the areas in which children are granted the opportunity to participate, are deeply embedded in cultural notions of generational relations and

what it means to be a child. More than that, their participation is part of social practices and ways of life, producing and reproducing cultural norms and values. The recognition of children as active participants varies across cultures. Children's social participation in society is thereby closely intertwined with social constructions of childhood. Childhood has also been described as a permanent structural element of a society, different from the individual child who loses child status (Qvortrup 1993), and as a particular life phase, understood in relation to other different life phases (Närvänen and Näsman 2004). Children are by birth attached to childhood as a particular *social and symbolic space* that is socially and culturally constructed. As such, they are not only subjects, but also objects encountering descriptions and prescriptions of what it means to be a child at a particular place and at a particular time (Cook 2002). The space of childhood is constructed by different discourses, not exclusively related to children and childhood, but closely intertwined with other discursive fields in society. The symbolic 'character' of childhood therefore derives not only from symbolic values connected to notions of children and childhood, but also from other discourses influencing the space of childhood with particular cultural values and meaning. However, as Daniel Cook argues: 'To render childhood symbolic, to situate it discursively in the field of signs, is not to negate the 'real' biographical children we all know and love (and hate), but to affirm them as thoroughly social configurations' (Cook 2002,4).

It has been argued that the concept of childhood is changing, even disappearing, in late modern societies in many parts of the world, due to profound economic and political transformations. Boundaries between children and adults have been described as becoming blurred. In the introduc-

tion to the book *Children and the Politics of Culture*, Sharon Stephens asks the following fundamental questions:

> How do new forms of international and local politics affect children? And how do children themselves experience, understand, and perhaps resist and reshape the complex, frequently contradictory cultural politics that inform their lives? (Stephens 1995, 3).

She suggests that, in the contemporary politics of culture, children have been placed in a central position, both as symbolic figures and as objects of contested forms of socialization. By calling for more research to be done on conceptualizing the role of the child in modernity, she argues that 'We are now witnessing a profound restructuring of the child within the context of a movement from state to global capitalism, modernity to postmodernity' (Stephens 1995, 19). In recent years, we have witnessed an increasing emphasis on 'children as participants' in societies, including an emphasis on children as political activists in different parts of the world. Their political participation and citizenship rights have been addressed in new ways. The construction of children as participants in contemporary societies highlights the need to explore critically the changing discourses and the way they affect children's lives.

In order to situating myself as a researcher, I shall briefly describe experiences that have been of importance for my studies.

Step I. Approaching 'children as participants' in the 1970s

In the early 1970s, just after finishing high school, I started my career as a pre-school teacher. An entry requirement for education courses at the University College at that time was that applicants must have worked for a year in a day-care centre under the supervision of a trained pre-school teacher.

My encounter with the ideology and social practices developed by pre-school teachers, as well as by children, within this institutional context represents experiences which have influenced my identity as a researcher within the field of children and childhood. During the 1970s and 1980s, I worked first as a trainee and later as a lecturer in the field of early childhood education and care. The every-day life of day-care centres caring for children aged between one and seven gave me a variety of rich experiences with children as social participants in an institutional setting with a particular ideology and way of thinking. I present two short memories serving to illustrate how children were constructed as social participants.

Assembly 1. Children as 'beings'

I was going to be in charge of my first assembly – *samlingsstund* – with the entire group of eighteen children aged between five and seven. Assemblies have ritual aspects: the children gather in a circle around the preschool teacher, we sing a song of welcome, we have roll calls and briefly reflect on that particular day and time of year. There follows a conversation about a theme – preferably related to the obligatory story of the day – a picture book or a fairy tale. I remember I had carefully planned everything in detail; the songs, the conversation and the picture book created a framework that I was rather pleased with around my chosen theme: professions, or 'what would you like to be when you grow up?'

I can still picture Marit, the pre-school teacher, guiding me afterwards: supporting and caring, just like any skilful preschool teacher is expected to be, she pointed out positive sides by my performance, the children's interest and participation, the emotional climate I had created around the dia-

logue, and so on. However, I realised that I had made one fundamental mistake, even though she tried to spell it out gently: my choice of theme.

Children do not BECOME, they ARE. The focus should not be on their future roles as adults. Childhood has an intrinsic value here and now, and the dialogue should focus on children's reflections, thoughts and everyday experiences. My choice of theme fell outside the framework of what was regarded as appropriate preschool pedagogics, corresponding to the prevailing constructions of children and childhood and the practising 'politics of culture' in this day-care centre.

Assembly 2. Ronny and Karen as social participants

The second story I have chosen happened about two years later. Part of my education was for me to train for two months a year in a day-care centre. This story is also about an assembly, this day being in the lead of the assistant Tone. A group of eighteen active children aged between three and five are sitting on the floor. The theme for today's assembly is 'from grain to bread'. Golden grain is collected from the fields and two stones for grinding are ready for use. A bag of flour is on the table, and afterwards everyone will make their very own bread. The children are eagerly watching Tone, who is an excellent storyteller with the ability to create the right atmosphere. Everyone except for Ronny. He is a restless little fellow aged four, who cannot concentrate either on the harvested grain or on the dialogue about the process of going from grain to bread. He twists and turns and tries to get the other children's attention by making faces. After a while, he starts crawling around. Eventually, the preschool teacher, Karen, intervenes. She doesn't say 'no'. She doesn't scold. Smiling, she takes Ronny's hand, and walking softly out of the room, whispers into his ear: 'I

think you and I need to go for a run.' Ronny was 'seen' by Karen, who took care of his needs without him expressing them verbally.

The image of a panting, sweating four-year-old, rather on the plump side with red cheeks, running back and forth along the long corridor, with an equally sweating, red-cheeked Karen, some fifty years his senior and also on the plump side, is still vivid. Ronny was glowing with happiness, and after a while he sunk down relaxed on Karen's lap and listened to the fairy tale about 'The little red hen' during the rest of the assembly.

These two stories provide brief glimpses of how children were constructed as social participants in day-care centres. Children were first and foremost recognised as 'beings', not 'becomings'. They were seen as creative and communicative human beings from the very beginning of life, with the right to be respected and heard. Their creative abilities and their cognitive skills were appreciated. Children's possibilities to 'free play' and to choose their own activity in a stimulating environment were emphasised. The constructions of children as participants were connected to a developmental paradigm, represented in early childhood education by theories developed by Jean Piaget and Erik H. Erikson. The construction of children as participants within this paradigm was related to an important focus on how to create a rich and dynamic environment for children as participants. Architectural style, furniture, the range of toys and educational materials, the emotional quality of the relationships between adults and children, the organisation of time and the structure of the day, different ways of organising groups of children, and more were problematised and discussed. The discourse was characterised by terms such as caring relations, the significance of safety, needs, development, free play, the intrinsic value of childhood,

self-esteem, creativity, 'appropriate toys' and the structuring of days, and adults' responsibility for giving children positive knowledge and experiences and a happy childhood. The use of terms like 'situation' and the Norwegian term – *stund* – (hour/while/moment) such as 'eating situation', 'cloakroom situation', 'resting hour'- *hvilestund*- -'chamber-pot hour' - *pottestund,* represent a transformation of daily activities to pedagogical events, but it also reflects a wish to create a supportive and stimulating environment. Terms such as 'participation rights' and 'the competent child' were absent from the discourse, indicating an implicit understanding of protection from adults as a requirement for children's participation. Historically, the bearers and grounders of the discourse were women, strong and fiery souls motivated by particular visionary notions of children and childhood, of taking children seriously and giving them a happy childhood. This was at a time when small chairs and toilets for children were a natural part of the day-care centre's furniture. It was equally natural that the adults in the institution should work on the children's terms, by, for instance, sitting on small chairs.

Step II. Approaching 'children as participants' in the 1990s

Situated within these discourses, I started as a researcher at the Norwegian Centre for Child Research in 1989. Once again, I encountered fiery souls with visions about children. I was assigned the task of project leader of Try Yourself, a national project over three years developed by the Norwegian Council for Cultural Affairs (now the Arts Council of Norway). A major part of the research activity at the Norwegian Centre for Child Research at that time was related to applied research, funded by employers connected with Norwegian child policies, such as various ministries, the Norwegian Council for Cultural Affairs, county authorities, etc. At the same time, I

was asked to assess the project. My handling of these two roles will be discussed further in Chapter 3. Try Yourself is analysed as a case study and constitutes the main empirical part of my thesis. The project is described in more detail in the articles and in Chapter 3, on methodology. Through my work as the project leader and person responsible for assessing the project, I had access to several different forums where researchers, project-leaders and actors in the child-political arena gathered because of their great interest in children and participation. Involvement, initiatives in abundance, faith and visions characterised central actors in the discursive field. These meetings were inspiring and provided an insight into 'the inside of the discourse', as well as representing a type of fieldwork within my own culture. I shall briefly present a few experiences and thoughts about the discourse as it was introduced to me at the beginning of the 1990s.

This discourse placed children aged between seven and fourteen as participants in their local communities. The focus in the discourse was primarily on the child subject as such and collective groups of children, not on the environment or the context of participation. Though characterised by some obvious similarities with children as social participants in day-care centres in the 1970s, the contrasts between the constructions of children as social participants in the two different settings were at first striking to me. I shall not anticipate the analysis here, but merely point out for the moment that my experience with children as participants in day-care centres – *barnehager* – represents a *type of practical, pedagogical* view on the analysis of the discourse about children as participants in the Try Yourself project. I would like to stress that this is naturally not the only view.

Step III. Researching 'children as participants': Research questions

As a starting point for my research interest and analyses, the following overall research questions were formulated:

1. How can we understand the increasing popularity of contemporary discourses on children and participation in Norway? In other words, what are the conditions for existence and for the increasing powerfulness of these discourses?
2. How are children and childhood constructed in these discourses? What does it mean to be a child participant in society, or a citizen?
3. How do discourses on children as social participants in society, - operating at international, national and local political levels, affect children? And how do children experience, understand and 'react' to the new discourses offered to them?

The context for investigation of these broad questions is related to the empirical studies.

Outline of the thesis: a short presentation of five articles

A collection of five articles represents the main content of this thesis. Each article represents an exploration and problematising of the discourse from a specific point of view. In addition, four different chapters will complement the analyses and discussions in the articles. The thesis consists of nine chapters. In **Chapter 1,** the theme of the thesis and a short sketch of the background, aims and perspectives of the study are outlined. In order to situate myself as a researcher in this field, I have included a short presentation of my own experiences with children as social participants. This chapter also contains a presentation of the five articles.

Chapter 2 describes the theoretical perspectives used in my analyses and discussion, while **Chapter 3** deals with methodological approaches. The analyses and discussions are theoretically anchored in the so-called 'new social studies of childhood', which emphasise the socially constructed nature of children and childhood. I also draw on analytical perspectives connected to discourse theory. Since the concept of discourse represents both a theoretical perspective and a methodological tool for investigation, the two being closely intertwined, it will be discussed in both chapters. The theoretical and methodological approaches are both discussed in the different articles. However, taking into consideration the limited length of an article, it has not been possible to provide a fuller elaboration of these perspectives. I have therefore chosen to complement the articles with two separate chapters elaborating on and discussing the theoretical and methodological questions related to my study. Though aimed at avoiding repetition, it has been impossible for me to refrain entirely from all overlap between the theoretical and methodological perspectives presented in the articles and in Chapters 2 and 3 respectively.

After the presentation of theoretical and methodological perspectives, the five articles are presented, organized as five different chapters. Approaches to the problems, perspectives and the empirical material on which each article is based can be seen as one of the surfaces of a prism shedding its own light on and providing a certain view of the discourse. The five articles are thus meant to provide an insight into the discourse from different points of view. However, a prism has more than five surfaces, which is why this thesis does not aim to provide a complete analysis of the discursive field of 'children as social participants'. An important aim has been to shed light on the complexities of a field that is often described as simple and unambigu-

ous. At the same time, I have also emphasised the totality of the combined articles and their connection as regards their content. This was obtained by basing each article on the findings and discussions of the previous one, so that they may be read as one coherent story. A degree of overlap between the different articles was therefore unavoidable.

Chapter 4 presents the first article of my collection of articles, entitled: '**The participating child': A vital pillar of this century?** published in the Nordic journal *Nordisk pedagogikk* in 2001, vol. 21, no. 2.

The article presents a short introduction to discourses on children and participation related to educational contexts like primary schools, as well as to the field of child policy in Norway. Discourse-theoretical approaches and the concept of the narrative are presented as a framework for the analyses. The two main research questions that are discussed in the article can be formulated as follows: What are the conditions for the increasing popularity of discourses on children and participation in our times? How were children and childhood constructed in discourses on 'children and participation' in the 1990s? The project Try Yourself is presented and analysed as a case study representing a particular public narrative on children. The article also focuses on the relationships between the different utterances that enter circulation. The terms 'child' and 'participation' seem to operate as 'nodal points' in the discourse, floating signifiers that different discourses attempt to cover with meaning (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985).

Based on the public narrative of childhood related to the Try Yourself project, one provocative question is formulated and reflected upon: Does the

construction of 'the participating child' represent a vital pillar of society in the 21st century?

In **Chapter 5,** the second article, entitled **'Small is powerful: Discourses on children and participation in Norway',** is presented. It was published in the international journal *Childhood* in 2002, vol. 9, no. 1.

Article 2 continues to discuss the construction of children and childhood presented in Article 1. The aim of this article is to contribute to a discussion of how discourses on 'children and participation' are related to other discourses than children's rights in the discursive field. The results of an empirical survey sent to all Norwegian municipalities are presented and discussed. The survey aimed at gaining an insight into the dissemination of the discourse, as well as into the aims of the participatory projects that were initiated. The starting point for this article was an interest in the further investigation of the relationships between the two nodal points identified in the discourse – the terms 'child' and 'participation', presented in Article 1. The focus in this article is therefore inter-discursive relations (see Foucault 1991, Chapter 2). In trying to gain an insight into the conditions of the increasing popularity of contemporary discourses on children and participation, I look at relationships between this discourse and discourses on Norway as a democratic nation and sustainable local communities in a historical perspective.

Chapter 6 presents Article 3, entitled: **'Imagined communities': the local community as a place for 'children's culture' and social participation in Norway,** published in 2003 in *Children's places: Cross cultural per-*

spectives, edited by Karen Fog Olwig and Eva Gulløv, London and New York: Routledge.

In Article 3, the inter-discursive relations between discourses on children and participation on the one hand and sustainable local communities on the other, discussed in article 2, are explored further from another angle. Children's perspectives as participants in the project Try Yourself are an important focus of these analyses. This article relates to the research question of how children are affected by the discourses, and how they experience and handle the new positions and identities that are made available to them in the particular discourses. It also sheds light on how, as participants in Try Yourself, children contributed to revitalizing the national identity of Norway as a democratic nation consisting of sustainable democratic local communities. The Try Yourself project can be seen as an attempt to realize communities of egalitarian relations associated with local communities as well as with 'children's culture'.

Article 4 is presented in **Chapter 7** and is entitled **'Creating a place to belong': Girls' and boys' hutbuilding as a site for understanding discourses on childhood and generational relations in a Norwegian community.** It was published in 2003 in the international journal *Children's Geographies,* vol. 1, no. 2.

The starting point for Article 4 is a further investigation of constructions of children as participants in local communities related to the particular construction of 'children's culture' embedded in the project Try Yourself. Building huts is seen as a traditional and particularly valued activity within 'children's own culture'. This activity therefore attracted my interest for

further exploration, both of children's experiences, as well as of the conceptualization of 'children's culture'. Building huts can be seen as children's constructions of special places during childhood. Often these places are seen as secret places, reflecting a separate 'children's culture' developed within a particular microcosm. I argue that the social practices developed among girls and boys are complexly related to local cultural practices and the construction of gendered generational relationships in the community. As in Article 3, the main empirical material in which the analyses are anchored is narrative interviews with children. This article also represents a contribution to discussions of how children are affected by the particular conceptualization of children as belonging to a separated age-related 'children's culture'.

Chapter 8 contains Article 5, entitled **The competent child and the right 'to be oneself': reflections on children as fellow citizens in day-care centres**.

A version of this article will be published in 2005 in: Clark, A, Kjørholt, A.T. and Moss, P (eds), *Beyond Listening - Children`s perspectives on early childhood services*. University of Bristol: The Policy Press.

The aim of Article 5 is to discuss constructions of children represented in two texts from a Danish project entitled Children as Fellow Citizens. One important question here is related to what it means to be a citizen in a day-care centre. What kinds of social practice are constructed in order to realize toddlers as citizens? The constructions of children as citizens in the texts represent a certain position in the discursive field, connoted by particular ideological values that are not openly reflected upon. The particular construction of the child subject in the texts is discussed in relations to Charles

Taylor's philosophical theories on individualisation and self-determination in modern societies, and Foucauldian perspectives on governmentality (Taylor 1978, 1985, 1991, Foucault 1991).

The reasons for choosing empirical data from a Danish context are many. One was to demonstrate a certain 'circulation of utterances' in particular constructions of children in discourses on children as participants in Denmark and Norway. The Try Yourself project resulted from a close contact between the Norwegian Council for Cultural Affairs and the Ministry of Culture in Denmark, which developed a Danish Try Yourself project before Norway. Though addressed to children of different ages and contexts, there are also many similarities between the particular construction of the child subject as seen in the Danish project Children as Fellow Citizens and the Norwegian project Try Yourself.

Chapter 9 is entitled **Children as social participants and childhood as a social and symbolic space: concluding discussions.** This chapter contains a summary and concluding discussion of my studies of discourses on children as social participants in society. Main perspectives and issues in the thesis will be further elaborated and discussed. I argue that, in complex ways, different discourses constitute *childhood as a social and symbolic space* for children as participants, in that they make available certain social practices and subject positions for participation while eliminating others.
The different titles of my five articles illustrate in different ways how childhood is constructed as a *symbolic space*. However, as I will demonstrate, children themselves are also significant participants in the construction of this social and symbolic space. Social constructions of children as autonomous, competent subjects in contemporary discourses on children

and participation are a central theme in some of my articles. This chapter presents an elaboration of theoretical discussions of constructions of the subject that are discussed especially in Article 5, but are also touched upon in Articles 1 and 4. As part of the conclusion to this chapter, I try to challenge these constructions and clarify my own position.

Chapter 2
Theoretical perspectives

The theoretical perspectives that have influenced my position as a researcher, informing both my research questions and the concepts and approaches used in the analyses, are anchored in the so-called 'new social studies of childhood'. This research field, also called the 'new sociology of childhood', has been developed by an interdisciplinary group of international researchers, particularly during the last ten to fifteen years (Jenks 1982, 1996, James and Prout 1997, James, Jenks and Prout 1998, Alanen 1992, 2000a, 2000b, 2001, Qvortrup 1994, 1995, Corsaro 1997). Sociologists and anthropologists have been the main actors in developing the field, though researchers from disciplines such as psychology, pedagogy, geography, history and philosophy have also been involved. Though quite new, and with no clear or definite boundaries, the approaches and perspectives developed within this interdisciplinary field represent a significant 'tradition' in international research on children and childhood. These approaches are being seen as increasingly dominant within the social sciences (Lavalette and Cunningham 2002). Though this tradition does not represent a single coherent theoretical and/or methodological approach, I shall outline some main features characterising the new social studies of childhood, representing, I would say, a new scientific research paradigm. I shall also point to emergent theoretical discussions in recent years and outline some inherent tensions and potential future directions in the development of interdisciplinary childhood research. My main focus will be on theoretical perspectives and discussions related to the socially constructed nature of

childhood, as well as on the construction of children as social participants and actors. These perspectives are of particular relevance for my study, and they are also critical in positioning the new social studies of childhood on the international research agenda. A further discussion and elaboration of theoretical perspectives connected to the construction of children as subjects will be presented in Chapter 4.

My research project is also influenced by theories connected to discourse analytical perspectives developed within a post-structuralist framework. After a short presentation of central theoretical perspectives in childhood research, I shall therefore continue with a discussion of the concept of discourse, which has inspired me and influenced my approaches to the study of children as social participants both theoretically and methodologically. The concept of discourse has been increasingly used in recent years by researchers emphasizing the socially constructed nature of childhood. However, this concept is not always defined or elaborated. I shall therefore also draw on theoretical perspectives taken from other fields than childhood research, such as discourse theory.

Childhood as socially and historically constructed

A key perspective in the new social studies of childhood, namely that childhood is a social phenomenon, can be traced back to Aries' thesis that contemporary notions of modern childhood are a relatively new phenomenon. Childhood was 'discovered' in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a result of particular social changes, such as the growth of the bourgeoisie in Europe (Aries 1962). Although some points in his thesis have been criticized, a fundamental claim in childhood research is that childhood is socially constructed and rooted in particular social, historical and cultural

contexts. A social constructionist approach does not deny the existence of a reality, as is sometimes alleged. Rather, it claims that reality is accessible through concepts and understandings that are socially and culturally constructed. One implication of this view is that the concept of childhood is neither biologically determined, nor constant. As James, Jenks, and Prout argue: 'Thus, as a social status, childhood has to be recognized and understood through routine and emergent collective perceptions that are grounded in changing politics, philosophy, economics, social policy or whatever'(James, Jenks and Prout 1998, 196).

Nonetheless, there are still different approaches to the study of childhood as a social phenomenon, ranging from macro structural approaches to radical social constructionism. In their book *Theorizing Childhood,* James, Jenks and Prout identify four dominant discourses within the interdisciplinary field of childhood researchers, in an attempt to stimulate future theoretical discussions of this field. These dominant discourses are 'the socially constructed child', 'the social structural child', 'the minority group child' and 'the tribal child' (ibid.). In my view, *Theorising Childhood* represents an exciting and inspiring contribution to theorizing and reflections of analytical approaches to the study of childhood. Having said this, I shall also add that, like all models, they represent prototypes which might prove to have inconsistencies as well as weaknesses. After discussing the four discourses in the book, I shall point to some aspects that seem to me somewhat ambiguous and incoherent. Before discussing the discourse of 'the socially constructed child', which is closest to my own position, I shall give a brief presentation of the three other discourses presented in the book.

Researchers associated with the discourse of 'the social structural child' see children as a structural category and childhood itself as a permanent form that never disappears in the structure of any society. Childhood is interrelated with other structural forms in society, such as social classes and age groups, an interrelationship that changes according to the social system and social formation (Qvortrup 1994). This conceptualisation of the child is universal and global in character rather than local (James, Jenks and Prout 1998). There are clear parallels between this understanding of the child and a social class perspective emphasising socioeconomic factors and children's possibilities for exercising power and control (James, Jenks and Prout 1998).

'The minority group child' is described as being 'an embodiment of the empirical and politicized version of the social structural child' (ibid., 210). Children are first and foremost presented as rights-claimers, with the same rights as the adults in their society. Their rights to citizenship are emphasised in particular. Children are seen as structurally differentiated within societies, a group who to various degrees have their rights fulfilled in different societies, often on the basis of paternalistic ideologies. The child in this discourse is also a global, universal child belonging to an exploited minority group in a discriminating society, and therefore on a par with other minority groups, such as ethnic minorities. The authors argue that '"The minority group child" approach is universalistic, differentiated and global, and fails to find liberation through the historical processes. Children are seen as conscious and active beings with a consciousness awaiting mobilization' (ibid., 212). I shall discuss the discourse of 'the minority child' more thoroughly in relation to the emphasis on 'children as citizens' later in this chapter.

The child in the discourse of 'the socially constructed child' is not an essential, universal child with a fixed place in the social structure. The idea that childhood is socially constructed implies an emphasis on the diversity and particularities of childhoods, given that they are constituted and practiced in different social and cultural settings. In order to obtain knowledge and understanding of the everyday lives of children, according to this discourse, it is important to contextualise the analyses, returning to the phenomenon under investigation in order to obtain an insight into how it is constituted and established in various ways in everyday life.

Social constructionists reject any kind of fixed and essential reality or truth. Realities are multiple, as are childhoods, and an important task for research is to reveal the 'taken for granted-ness' of a particular childhood and truth constructed in a particular context at a particular point in history. Social constructionism is committed to radical relativism, which, according to James, Jenks and Prout, is not a critical characteristic. They argue: 'Rather this relativism is a considered analytical device to enhance the particular and partial, or perspectival, nature of an understanding of childhood, a refinement of the phenomenological strategy of "bracketing"' (ibid., 212). Relativism also makes deconstruction and revelation of the 'naturalness' of a phenomenon possible, providing reasons for why a particular social construction of a child is dominant at a particular time. The authors further claim as another implication of this relativism the impossibility of making universal statements of value of any kind.

The fourth discourse is 'the tribal child'. This is described as a politicized version of 'the social constructed child', one emphasizing and recognizing children's competence and agency as being part of their *difference* from

adults, as well as their having their own autonomous communities and childhoods that they themselves have constructed. They assert that this understanding of children 'sets out from a commitment to childhood's social worlds as real places and provinces of meaning in their own right, not as fantasies, games, poor imitations or inadequate precursors of the adult state of being' (ibid., 28). In this discourse, children's social worlds are often seen as autonomous and, although not totally unaffected by adults, 'artfully insulated from the worlds of adults' (ibid., 29). Researchers within this discourse often use ethnographic methods in order to study children's social worlds in their own rights. Playgrounds, day-care centres and places where groups of children are together are often the preferred places for investigation.

Theorizing childhood: a model with ambiguities and paradoxes?

When presented as a kind of prototype model, the four discourses illuminate in an interesting way the different and dominant theoretical perspectives related to research on children and childhood. As with any model, they are prototypes, theories that researchers often use in an eclectic way by combining elements from different discourses. One example of this is Leena Alanen, who situates herself within the discourse on 'the socially constructed child'. She asserts that it is important to differentiate between the following:

1. Childhood as referring to a concrete, undifferentiated social phenomenon – such as the childhood of an individual child or the childhoods of a group of children – and
2. Childhood (in the singular) as a theoretical concept referring to a specific socially constructed generational condition'. (Alanen 2000, 15).

Arguing that childhood has not yet been recognised clearly enough as a generational phenomenon, she suggests that:

> "Generationing" refers to the processes through which some individuals become (are constructed as) "children" whereas others become (are constructed as) "adults" having consequences for the activities and identities of inhabitants of each category as well as for their interrelationships (ibid., 14).

In order to reveal the 'naturalness' and underline the socially constructed nature of contemporary childhood, an important task for research is to deconstruct the cultural ideas embedded in the particular construction of childhood that is often taken for granted. Alanen argues: 'To investigate the childhood(s) of today is to "deconstruct" the cultural ideas, images, models and practices through which children and childhood are presently "known" and acted upon' (ibid., 13). Though situating herself in the discourse of 'the socially constructed child', Alanen can also be located within the discourse of 'the minority group child'. She asks, 'Is there a children's standpoint to adopt for sociology?' (as there is a feminist standpoint) (ibid., 106). Her answer is as follows: 'When children are seen to form a social category of their own, the idea of a distinct children's perspective also becomes interesting in its own right' (ibid., 107). She is arguing for 'an account of society *from the point where children stand* – that is from a children's standpoint' (ibid., 108).

However, the fact that different researchers can be placed in more than one of the four discourses at the same time does not represent a problem as such. More challenging for the presented model, in my view, is the fact that there might be some paradoxes embedded in the model. One of these is connected with the discourse of 'the tribal child' being presented as a form of 'the socially constructed child'. In my view, the 'the tribal child' is a

normative discourse grounded in particular normative and western-oriented values associated with romantic and idyllic notions of harmonious children and autonomous communities of children. Such a normative model is hard to reconcile with the social constructionist perspective. To me this is a very clear example of a particular social construction of children and childhood, rooted in a particular time in western societies, and also to some extent in a particular social class. Olwig and Gulløv suggest that the description of children and adult as separate that is so often found in the research literature, is not a universal characteristic but one anchored in western studies and notions of childhood (Olwig and Gulløv 2003). They argue: 'Children are not necessarily marked as a distinct group defined in contrast to adults, and we therefore need to examine closely the nature of relationships between people of varying ages in different cultural settings' (2003, 13).

Research-based knowledge on the discourse of 'the tribal child' might suffer from being self-fulfilling in its character, in that it takes a certain normative construction of children and childhood as a premise for the analyses. In my view, such a starting point is incompatible with obtaining a deeper insight and understanding of the cultural context in which the particular childhood is constructed and the reasons for such constructions being made. This argument is central to my analyses, being elaborated and discussed further in all my articles.

I also have some difficulties in grasping the logic of seeing the discourse of 'the socially constructed child' as being on a par with the three other discourses. From my perspective, having positioned myself within the discourse of 'the socially constructed child', I argue that at least two of the other discourses, 'the minority group child' and 'the tribal child', are also

socially constructed. As I elaborate in my articles, both these constructions of children are embedded in discourses on children and participation, and rely on particular normative values of what it means to be a child and what it means to participate. Notions of children that are close to the discourse of 'the tribal child' and construct children as different contribute, I argue, to placing children in an age-related social order, as separated instead of integrated into an intergenerational social structure and a broader cultural context.

As part of my concluding reflections on the model presented by James, Jenks and Prout, I shall also remind the reader of the argument of the most radical social constructionists, that every reality is socially constructed, including 'the social structural child'. Based on this argument, then, from a position located within the discourse of the socially constructed child, the three other models cannot logically be seen as equal to it in the model, but as subordinated. It might be argued that a social constructionist perspective in 'its nature' is ontologically and epistemologically incompatible with other discourses in the model the authors present.

Children as citizens: a research perspective and political claim

A cornerstone of the research paradigm connected to interdisciplinary childhood research is the recognition of children as competent subjects and social actors with rights in society. Discourses that construct children as competent social actors with rights to participate in society and have a say in matters that affect their lives have been flourishing during the last fifteen to twenty years among childhood researchers, NGOs and actors within the field of international and national child policy (Kjørholt 2001, McKechnie 2002, Halldén 2003). As illustrated in Article 1, this emphasis on the com-

petent child, their rights to participation and influence in society, as well as their rights to be taken seriously as participants and subjects in research, is connected with the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (Kjørholt 2001). But there has been an increasing emphasis on a child perspective in research as well as in policy. Concepts such as the child perspective, or children's perspectives, and children's voices are increasingly being used in many different contexts. The concept of a 'child perspective' is used in a variety of different ways, whether as an ideological concept with great rhetorical power or as a methodological concept in research (Halldén 2003). It has been argued that the discourse of 'the socially constructed child', emphasising 'children's childhoods', and the need to listen to children's voices has lead to the privileging of qualitative methodological approaches, centring children as informants and subjects, a privileged position being criticized for being particularistic and for ignoring the importance of social and economic structures (Lavalette and Cunningham 2002). While I do not agree with these authors' criticisms of the increasing emphasis on qualitative research as such, one of my main arguments in this thesis is that the increasing emphasis on, and rhetorical power of, 'children's voices' in research, as well as in society in recent years, must be critically examined. As part of a research paradigm, the claim for 'children's voices' is problematic theoretically as well as methodologically and needs to be addressed further and clarified. This position, so central both in child political contexts and in research, is elaborated and discussed from different angles in all my articles (Articles 1 and 5 in particular) and is also a matter for theoretical discussion in Chapter 9.

However, the claim for a 'child perspective' in research, as well as within society, has also been approached from a structural position. Jens Qvortrup

asserts that children are in a marginal position in both society and research, such as welfare research and policies. Placed within the discourse of 'the social structural child', a child perspective is thus related to analyses of children's position within a social structure. A child perspective has also been related to the absence of children as a social unit in social statistics, as well as the exclusion of a child perspective in dominant theoretical perspectives, as in welfare research (Qvortrup 1994).

The concept of childhoods, in the plural, used within a social constructionist approach, underlines the particularity and variety of *different* childhoods. The concept of 'children's childhoods' emphasises that children themselves are important actors in meaning making and the constructions of their everyday lives (Mayall 1994). Children are co-constructors of their own childhoods as well as of society (Qvortrup 1993). Studies of children within peer-cultural contexts such as day-care centres underline the importance of studying children from their perspectives by using ethnographic approaches and focusing on children's agency (Åm 1989, James 1993, Christensen 1999, Gulløv 1998, Corsaro 2003, and Strandell 1994; Nilsen 2000a, 2000b). Agency has been interpreted as collective action practised within in a peer-cultural context (Corsaro 1992), and it has also been argued that social practices among children often are constructed as part of resistance to adult control (Nilsen 2000a).

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC): an international discourse

The UNCRC is used as a tool for policymakers, and the concept of the child perspective serves to unite them (Lindgren and Halldén 2001, Kjørholt 2001). Based on the rhetorical power of the concept of the child

perspective, Halldén argues for the need to clarify and define the concept, a claim I fully support (Halldén 2003).

As I show in Articles 1 and 2, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is a powerful and widespread discourse on children and childhood today within the fields of both childhood research and policy. The Convention asserts that all children are independent individuals holding many of the same rights as adults, in addition to a number of special rights linked to their status as children. Participation is one of the three P's upon which the Convention is based, the other two being provision and protection (Cantwell 1993). In order to supplement the brief presentation of discussions related to participation rights and citizenship in Articles 1 and 2, I shall go further here into some of the central issues raised in discussions of these topics in the international research literature.

The UN Convention has been described as revolutionary when compared to earlier declarations on children's rights that did not recognise the child's autonomy and the importance of children's views (Verhellen 1997, Freeman 1992). On the other hand, it has been argued that the rights to participation in the UN Convention are also limited, since they deny children political rights, such as the right to vote, and thus refuse to recognise them as full citizens (Sgritta 1993, Opdahl 1998, Freeman 1992). Nevertheless the emphasis on participation rights in the Convention has been used by researchers, as well as by child rights advocates and politicians, as a frame of reference and a tool for treating children as fellow citizens or co-citizens (de Winter 1997).

In France, municipal councils for children and young people had already been established by the early 1970s (Riepl and Wintersberger 1999). In Norway, the number of youth councils has increased during the last few years. Today nearly three out of four municipalities in Norway have established youth councils for children aged thirteen to eighteen (Lidén 2003). Others have warned that participatory projects for children and young people might turn into 'prestige projects' serving as an alibi for certain political decisions, rather than realising children's interests (Hart 1992; Riepl and Wintersberger 1999). However, I argue that notions of participation and 'interests' still need further clarification. Conclusions from two research projects in Norway based on interviews focusing on children's perspectives as participants support this view. In an evaluation of the implementation of a project entitled The Meeting Place, the researchers found a difference between adults' and children's experiences concerning the notion of participation. Whereas adults characterised the process as child-centred, because in their view children were main leaders, the children themselves viewed the process as exclusively adult-directed (Sletterød and Gustavsen 1995). Another research report, conducted by an anthropologist, pointed out that many children in projects aimed at realising children's rights of participation felt that they were merely symbolic participants with no real influence (Haugen 1995). These experiences are in line with international research on children as social participants, which have drawn attention to the fact that there are different degrees of participation, an idea illustrated using the metaphor of a 'ladder of participation' (Hart 1992). This underscores the fact that children are often used as symbolic participants rather than empowered actors enacting real influence (Hart 1992). The symbolic importance of children as participants is increasing in modern societies, and I argue that their symbolic value has been underesti-

mated. The title of Article 1, 'The participating child': A vital pillar in this century?' points to discussions of this topic. In Article 3, children's symbolic value as participants is connected to constructions of egalitarian local communities.

Much literature on children's participatory rights is characterised by universalising and normative assumptions (Alderson 1999, Hart 1997, Langsted 1992, Poulsgaard 1993, Verhellen 1993, Flekkøy 1993, Franklin 1994, Pavlovic 1994, Van Gils 1994) about the self-evident value of children's participation, rather than providing a critical scrutiny of political discourses of implementation of particular projects, or focusing on the actual experiences of child participants in these projects. International comparative studies of the topic are rare (Horelli 1998), and a consensus on common terminology and theory at the international level is badly lacking (Riepl and Wintersberger 1999). These studies urge further empirical investigation of how participation rights and participatory projects affect children's lives, and how universal rights are implemented in different social and cultural contexts. There are further calls for research to develop theoretical and conceptual clarification of citizenship and participation rights.

Recent comparative case-studies dealing with children's participation in neighbourhood improvements view children's involvement in making child-friendly environments from their own perspectives, as a means of giving children a more central place in society, and of breaking the mechanism of marginalisation that characterises their position today (Horelli 1998). In a replication of a former UNESCO study, 'Growing up in Cities', conducted in 1970s, Louise Chawla focuses on how community develop-

ment processes in eight different countries may encourage children and young people to invest energy and creativity in shaping their environments. She also points out that the marginalisation of children, which can be seen world-wide, often results in denying children rights to participate in urban planning and democratic processes (Chawla 2002). The study is conducted by an interdisciplinary team of child-environment experts. Children's and young people's perspectives on both their urban environment and their roles as participants in planning processes are investigated using different methodological perspectives (Chawla 2002). In other participatory projects too, there is a striking focus on methodology. To obtain an insight into children's perspectives, using different kinds of methods – for instance, drawings, photos and models – is seen as important (Horelli 1998). In a discussion of literature on children's participation in environmental planning and neighbourhood improvement, Horelli concludes that: 'Children's participation urges one to redefine what agency means' (1998, 237). She also argues for more studies of children's agency and participation in the creation of child-friendly environments.

Participation rights are seen as a fundamental part of citizenship (Hart 1992). In traditional citizenship theories, children are not citizens in the formal political sense of the term. However, a focus has been developed on the citizenship of children and young people in the social and legal sense in recent years (de Winter 1997). Giving children citizenship rights raises fundamental questions connected to notions of citizenship, childhood, and social and democratic participation. What does it mean to be a citizen? What is social and democratic participation? And what does it mean to be a child? These questions are only discussed clearly and addressed by the great majority of researchers and child rights advocates to a minor degree,

using the concepts of rights to participation or citizenship, and working in favour of giving children rights as citizens. Discussion of these topics so far has mainly been conducted within the field of philosophy and law. This thesis aims to offer reflections on the questions raised above by locating participation within particular empirical contexts, as well as by reflecting on the concepts theoretically.

During the last twenty years, there has been a lot of discussion concerning notions of citizenship in general. Feminists have been arguing for the need to re-conceptualise traditional notions of citizenship in order to develop women-friendly citizenship, and to reconstruct traditional borders between public and private as two distinct and dichotomous spheres (Voet 1998).

Children are to a great extent excluded from these discussions. Giving children rights as citizens challenges traditional theories of citizenship, which are based on liberal notions of democratic participation and the ideal of the rational autonomous individual. According to traditional liberal theories of citizenship (Marshall 1964), children are excluded from citizenship because they do not have political rights, such as the right to vote. What they do have are certain civic and social rights. But the increasing highlighting of children as subjects with rights of participation in society illustrates that social rights of citizenship are gradually receiving greater emphasis. In the theoretical discussions of children as subjects presented in Chapter 9, I partially relate these considerations to feminist perspectives on citizenship. However, I would like to stress that my discussion does not intend to present a theoretical reconstruction of citizenship for children.

Criticisms of children's social participation in a variety of different contexts in society warn against the danger of placing a heavy burden on children's shoulders by giving them too much responsibility and exposing them to a lack of care and protection (Nijnatten 1993, referred in de Winter 1997). Adults have the overall responsibility for creating environments to ensure children of a high quality of life and of presenting contexts for children's participation (Mollenhauer 1986, referred in de Winter 1997). Others have emphasised children's rights to be children (Veerman 1992). The argument of children's rights to be children often accentuates the *difference* of the child subject as compared with adults. And the different child subject means first and foremost a subject with rights and possibilities to play. It has been argued that citizenship is a tool with which to integrate children into the social structure of society, strengthen their influence and agency in society, and educate them as future adult citizens (de Winter 1997).

The term 'participation' in international discourses on citizenship and participation has been given different meanings, as for instance referring to the 'fundamental right of citizenship', 'the process of sharing decisions which affect one's life and the life of the community in which one lives' (Hart 1992).

The rights in the UN Convention are formulated as individual, formal and universal moral rights. This implies that the fulfilment of the rights is subject to interpretation and assessment made by the culture the children belong to. The rights in the Convention are anchored in the recognition of children as individuals and competent social subjects. This implies a process of individualisation of children in the way that they are increasingly removed from being defined within the framework of the family and are

instead connected to the state by being treated as individuals in their own right (Näsman 1994, Mortier 2002). The principle of 'the best interests of the child', made as a kind of 'overarching framework', is not a neutral idea, but a standard with different meanings across cultures, one which may also differ within a certain cultural context due to class, ethnicity, gender and so on. Philip Alston points out that, whereas a child's individuality and autonomy will be valued as being in line with the principle of the 'best interests of the child' in modern western societies, this may contradict traditions and values in other societies in the world that see the child's interests in terms of what is best for the family as a whole and any larger group of relatives (Alston 1994). The lack of specific standards connected to the principle of the 'best interests of the child' makes it possible to use this principle to legitimize a practice in one culture that in another would been seen as hurting children (Alston 1994).

As well as the principle of 'the best interests of the child', I claim that the concept of participation is also dependent on cultural interpretation and assumptions. There are no specific standards connected to the implementation of participation rights, a point which my empirical studies clearly illustrate. Due to the universal character and hegemonic position of the discourses on children's rights in the UN Convention, however, this fact is seldom openly discussed.

Children as competent autonomous actors, or as vulnerable and independent?

As I demonstrate in Article 1, discourses on children as citizens are closely related to the conceptualisation of 'the competent child' (Kjørholt 2001, Mortier 2002), which is often presented as a paradigm shift, replacing earlier conceptualisations of children as vulnerable, dependant and in need of care. The new social study of childhood has positioned itself as a new paradigm partly by criticizing what are called pre-sociological perspectives on children and childhood. These discourses have been criticized for constructing the child within a developmental paradigm, as a vulnerable and dependent being that is first and foremost in need of care. These discourses, mainly involving actors from psychology, pedagogy and health science, have been characterized as constructing the child as a 'human becoming', an incomplete human being compared to an adult and/or mature person. The 'new' childhood researchers have replaced this construction with the child as a 'being', a competent social actor on a par with adults (Qvortrup 1994). The concept of a 'being' instead of a 'becoming' has often been referred to by researchers within the fields of child and childhood research.

As I demonstrate in Article 1, this dichotomous construction also essentialises children, thus replacing one concept of the child with another that is defined, by contrast, in terms of the same characteristics that these child researchers criticize developmental psychologists for using. The new social studies of childhood have been criticized for oversimplifying the variety of different perspectives that embrace children as subjects within the discipline of psychology (Hobbs 2002), a criticism I mainly support. However, I also fully confirm the criticism addressed towards the developmental paradigm for being adulto-centric in its character. Martin Woodhead criticizes

developmental psychology for producing notions of the universal, global child without taking variations and cultural contexts into account (Woodhead 1999). However, he also points to a very important argument, which I fully support:

> Displacing an image of the needy child with an image of the competent child must not result in the neglect of differences between younger and older human beings. We must not throw out the baby with the developmental bath water. The difference is that a children's rights paradigm alters the status of children as social actors. Respect for their competence as rights bearing citizens does not diminish adult responsibilities. It places new responsibilities on the adult community to structure children's environment, guide their behaviour and enable their social participation in ways consistent with their understanding, interests and ways of communicating, especially in the issues that most directly affect their lives. (Woodhead 2000, 124)

Social constructionism and relativism

The authors of *Theorizing childhood* have been criticized for adopting a postmodern position and hanging on to cultural relativism (Lavalette and Cunningham 2002). The claim that there are a number of different discourses implies, according to Lavalette and Cunningham, a cultural relativistic standpoint:

> The denial of any underlying reality, of any total structure of exploitation and oppression, necessarily prevents the consistent postmodernist from seeing one view of the world as any better than any other. They are simply different, equally valid 'discourses'. (Lavalette and Cunningham 2002, 26)

They continue their critique by concluding that James, Jenks and Prout have not taken account of the fact that childhood is constructed within concrete contexts and structural relations which are located within particular historical processes. They argue that the thesis of 'childhood as a social phenomenon being constantly constructed and reconstructed' does not refer to the broader socio-economic context, and the socially constructed child also tends to be local and extremely particularistic (Lavalette and Cunning-

ham 2002). They are also critical of what they regard as a further implication of a social constructionist approach, namely that children are to be studied in their own context without reference to any universal set of standards or values.

As I see it, the discourse of 'the socially constructed child' *does* take context into consideration. It is, as James, Jenks and Prout also argue, contextual and local in character. The question is; what does context mean? To Lavalette and Cunningham this seems a very 'narrow' concept, one restricted to local settings, implying ethnographic studies that are micro-oriented in character, and excluding analyses of the broader socio-economic context, which obviously influences this 'narrow' and particular context. While I am fully aware of the fact that many such studies are conducted within a social constructionist paradigm, I do not agree that the paradigm as such rejects broader analyses. Quite the contrary, in my view a social constructed approach opens up a possibility for the inclusion of discourses related to the broader cultural and socio-economic context, as well as for analyses of the interrelationships between local cultural contexts and the wider society, including the 'underlying' historical conditions that gave rise to the particularities of different contexts.

Discourses work on different levels, from the local to the global, and they are closely intertwined in dynamic ways. I shall come back to these issues when discussing the concept of discourse later in this chapter.

Another central question connected to the critique of radical relativism that I have referred to can be formulated as follows: What does radical relativism mean? Does such a standpoint include a denial of all forms of ethical

and moral judgments and considerations about values and norms, good and bad, in a certain context? Are any forms of social construction of childhood equally good and valid? Can any forms of educational practice be equally preferable, any kinds of social practice in everyday life be accepted as solid and valuable? Among the large numbers of social constructionists, there will of course be different answers to these huge questions. The so-called 'weak' and 'strong' poststructuralists will certainly give different answers to these basic questions. My view is closer to a 'weak' (or very weak) position here. To me, questions and evaluations related to ethical standards and moral judgements are not only necessary, but also extremely important. To me as a researcher, the discourse of 'the socially constructed child' is stimulating and inspiring because it also opens up a field for reflections on values and ethical issues by revealing the taken-for-granted-ness of a particular concept of children and childhood, thus making visible the connection between different interests and different constructions. In the anthology *Social Constructionism, Discourse and Realism*, one of the authors claims: 'To me, one of the clearest things to emerge from the discussion of the other contributions to this book is that they agree on the importance of values, and upon the necessity of making moral and political choices' (Burr 1998, 22).

In discussing quality in day-care centres from a position within the discourse of 'the social constructed child', Peter Moss and Pat Petrie argue:

> Critical thinking enables us to speak of questions of possibilities rather than givens and necessities. It shows us there are choices to be made between possibilities, that the usual way of proceeding is not self-evident, that there is no one "best practice" or "standard quality" to be found (2002, 11).

The authors argue that these issues are related to choices relying on more fundamental questions, such as: 'What is a good childhood, what do we want for our children, what is the place for children in society?' (ibid.). In other words, a focus on how childhood is socially constructed by different discourses at a certain time in history and in a particular context may reveal how this particular construction is connected to particular values of what it means to be a child, and to specific cultural notions of a 'good childhood'. It may also expose specific positions and interests that are connected to the particular constructions of childhood involved, as for instance special economic or political interests. I fully support Moss and Petrie's argument, who further claim that the answers to the questions addressed above 'require choices to be made that are ethical and political in nature, and a recognition and acceptance of the responsibility that goes with making such choices' (ibid.).

This view illustrates how children's lived childhoods in a particular context are interrelated in dynamic ways to the constructions of children and childhood in the broader cultural context, and the need to make choices related to ethical and moral standards and norms. However, I would like to add, questions related to the implications of radical relativism connected to the discourse of the social constructed child must be more openly discussed and elaborated. One particular focus of Article 4 is on children's childhoods and the relationships between their social practices with friends and the gender-specific norms and values in the broader cultural context. Article 5 discusses how the construction of children as fellow citizens in a day-care centre is associated with particular ethical values and norms. Childhood is then constituted as a particular social and symbolic space. In the article these values are explicitly and critically examined in relation to

theoretical perspectives on new forms of governmentality (Foucault 1991), and individualization and self-determination (Taylor 1985, 1991). The concluding discussion presented in Chapter 9 is also aiming at a further clarification of my normative position.

Moss and Petrie refer to the work of Foucault in their analyses and discussions of quality. I shall now continue clarifying my theoretical approach to this study of children as social participants in society by outlining the concept of discourse, which has been an inspiring source for my own approach to this study. However, the concept of discourse also forms part of a methodological approach, and its different aspects can hardly be discussed separately as belonging to either theory or methodology. I shall therefore also deal with questions related to theoretical perspectives in the discussions of the concept of discourse in the following chapter, on methodology (Chapter 3).

Childhood as a social and symbolic space for participation

The concept of discourse has been used increasingly in recent years in connection with analyses in the social and human sciences. Discourses have been defined as linguistic and communicative practices that reflect particular notions of social phenomenon such as children and childhood at a particular time and in a particular place (Potter and Wetherell 1998, Mills 1997). However, discourses cannot be understood as representations of social phenomenon alone: from a poststructuralist point of view, they also constitute and produce the phenomenon that is being spoken about. This implies that the concept of discourse does not refer to text in a limited way. According to Foucault, the concept of discourse not only embraces texts produced in action or interaction, but also covers an aggregate of social

practices. Discourses also have material manifestations. Discourse, then, refers to dynamic processes that abolish the dualistic nature of the construction of structure and agency as opposite and separate entities, thus merging the two concepts together (Foucault 1972, Foucault 1999, Mills 1997). From a discourse-theoretical perspective, discourses are constituted by the production of certain relations between knowledge, truth and power at a certain time in history. With respect to children and childhood, this means a focus on how certain truths and knowledge about what it means to be a child are produced, and how these constructions are made possible by particular institutionalised power relations. Discourses are produced at different levels of society by a variety of agencies manifested in different material contexts. The concept of politics underlines the dynamic character of discourses, pointing to the *operating* of discourses – or discourses in action. The concept 'politics of childhood' refers to the variety of discourses that are produced and at a particular time and affect constructions of children and childhood in a cultural context, constituting a space for children's subjectivities, meaning making and social practices. The aims as well as the outcomes of this 'politics of childhood' are conscious and unconscious. Chris Jenks argues:

> The status of childhood has its boundaries maintained through the crystallization of conventions and discourses into lasting institutional forms like families, nurseries, schools and clinics, all agencies specifically designed and established to process the child as a uniform entity' (Jenks 1996, 5–6).

The tradition of discourse analyses based on Foucault, called discourse theory, is characterised by a lack of any one precise definition and a variety of meanings of the term. Due to this lack of a definite meaning, Foucault's work and his discourse-theoretical approach also creates certain flexibility for researchers who are trying to conceptualise and analyse social phenom-

ena and changing societies (Mills 1997). One important question is how particular discourses in a society can be identified. Sara Mills argues that

> A discursive structure can be detected because of the systematicity of the ideas, opinions, concepts, ways of thinking and behaving which are formed within a particular context, and because of the effects of those ways of thinking and behaving (Mills 1997, 17).

According to Foucault, discourses are characterized by 'relations of dependencies' in different ways. He points to three such dependencies:

> (a) *intradiscursive* dependencies (between the objects, operations and concepts of a single formation);
>
> (b) *interdiscursive* dependencies (between different discursive formations)
>
> (c) *extradiscursive dependencies* (between discursive transformations and transformations outside of discourse, such as for instance a wide range of economic, political and social changes)' (Foucault 1991, 58).

My research questions and approaches to analyses of discourses on children as participants are to a certain degree related to what Foucault describes as intra- and interdiscursive dependencies. My focus on intradiscursive relations is mainly concentrated on identifying the domain of the discourse, that is, the ways in which children, childhood and participation are spoken about and thus constituted, related terms and utterances in the discourse, and the circulation of those utterances. Article 2 also touches on extradiscursive relations to a certain degree by focusing on notions of democracy in the Norwegian political context. Foucault has formulated the following questions that are of importance for my discussion: 'What is it

possible to speak of? Which utterances are put into circulation, and among what groups?' (Foucault 1991,59–60).

Foucault also points to the significance of ritual recitation, pedagogy and publicity in making certain utterances and constructions in the discourse visible and powerful. This focus is included in my analyses in Article 2, demonstrating how certain utterances are destined to 'enter into human memory' in a national child forum having a ritual character. I also argue how, through the circulation of particular utterances in the national and local media, the Try Yourself project made certain constructions of children and childhood visible. From another angle, in Article 3, I also invoke points made by Foucault in discussing children's contributions to discourses on localities and childhood as strong 'imagined communities'. In Articles 2 and 3, I discuss interdiscursive relationships between discourses on 'children and participation' and discourses on Norway as a democratic nation, as connected to terms of sustainable local communities.

Foucault underlines the importance of relating the discourse: 'not to a thought, mind or subject, but to the practical field in which it is deployed' (Foucault 1991, 61). An important focus in my study is the social practices that are developed as part of the discourses on children as participants, and discussions of how these practices affect constructions of children as subjects and possible ways of acting, meaning-making and social practices.

As I have argued earlier in this chapter, the rights to participation listed in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child seem to have had an enormous effect in ways of thinking as well as of behaviour and policies in

many countries world wide, opening for certain social and political practices and actions connected to the construction of children as citizens.

Contemporary notions of what it means to be a child have been seen as being in a state of crisis due to globalisation processes that affect children's lives. Notions of what it means to be a child are certainly affected by globalisation processes too. As Sharon Stephens argues:

> A historical perspective on 'the world's children' suggests complex globalisations of once localized Western constructions of childhood. Current crisis – in notions of childhood, the experiences of children, and the sociology of childhood – are related to profound changes in a now globalised modernity in which 'the child' was previously located. (Stephens 1995, 8)

Social phenomena like children and childhood are never constructed by one discourse, but by a variety of often conflicting discourses and social practices at the same time (Mills 1997). It has been argued that the concept of discourse may be a useful tool for cultural analyses and production of knowledge about ideology and cultural processes, where the concept of discourse replaces that of the hermeneutic text, as well as the problematic concept of culture (Urban and Sherzer 1988, Kaarhus 1992). The Norwegian anthropologist Randi Kaarhus expresses it as follows: 'Discourses may probably be used to connect symbol- and text-analytical approaches to social interaction that in turn can be connected to economic and political processes' (Kaarhus 1992, 114).

According to the anthropologists Shore and Wright, who use the concept of discourse to analyse the field of policy, discourses are defined as: 'configurations of ideas which provide the threads from which ideologies are woven (Shore and Wright 1997, 18). Discourse can be used to shed light on how a certain text is culturally constructed in a particular time in history –

aimed at serving certain interests – representing a specific 'regime of truth' that is often taken for granted (Foucault 1972, Kaarhus 1992). Shore and Wright focus on the links between policy, subjectivity and governance. They argue that

> Policies are inherently and unequivocally *anthropological* phenomena. They can be read by anthropologists in a number of ways: as cultural texts, as classificatory devices with various meanings, as narratives that serve to justify or condemn the present, or as rhetorical devices and discursive formations that function to empower some people and silence others' (Shore and Wright 1997, 7).

Policies contain implicit ideas and models of (good) childhood, as well as of the society concerned. Childhood and children's everyday lives are constituted through a set of discursive practices, containing narrative structures. These discourses are historically constructed and change and develop into new forms in dynamic ways by being connected to new interdiscursive contexts. According to Foucault, continuity is not the main characteristic of history. Rather, discontinuing processes and ruptures are the moving forces of the development of new relationships between power, knowledge and 'regimes of truth' in different fields.

The elimination of the dualistic nature of structure and agency inherent in a discourse-theoretical perspective also implies a different approach to the 'participating subject'. The notion of a pre-given autonomous subject is destabilised by poststructuralists, who claim that subjectivity is produced in and by discourses (Davies 1989, Søndergaard 1999). Children are placed in a variety of different discourses at a particular time in a society. These discourses constitute a space with specific available positions opening up certain ways of behaving and meaning-making while excluding others (Søndergaard 1999, Davies 1989). In other words, children are constructed as participating subjects by and within discourses. This perspective repre-

sents a break with a focus on the individual subject as such, and opens up other fundamental questions that need to be addressed. Dorte Søndergaard asks the following question: 'How are the autonomous identities of the western world spoken into existence and practised?' She suggests that:

> The subject is positioned within particular contexts and discourses. By taking up discursive practices as their own, individuals are appropriated and, through the same process, become active subjects; they 'speak' and act the conditions of their subjection into existence. In becoming active subjects, they can thus re-affirm the already constituted conditions, and they can also act against these conditions, break with them, contradict them and amplify them (Søndergaard 1999, 6-7)

Discourse theory thus implies moving the analytical focus from an abstract, essentialised notion of the autonomous child subject to *childhood as a social space* for certain subjectivities, meaning-making and social practices. This space can also be described as a *cultural* and *political space*, representing and producing particular 'regimes of truths', attached with cultural values and specific power relations. Children are themselves contributing in significant ways to reproducing, creating and even changing those spaces for participation. These issues are investigated further in Articles 3 and 4.

Spaces for children as participants contain ideas and models of childhood that are often conceptualised in *narrative structures*, thus constituting particular cultural narratives of childhood. I will argue that these narratives also reflect childhood as an important *symbolic* space, making the symbolic 'nature' of childhood more visible. Children are situated in such narratives of childhood, and they construct their own identities in narrative structures by drawing on different narratives on childhood. My study is based on a narrative approach, which is integrated into all my articles, and further described in Article 5. However, in order to clarify how I use the concept of

narrative, this will be elaborated in Chapter 3 as part of my discussion of methodological perspectives.

Chapter 3
Methodological approaches

> Human science meaning can only be communicated textually – by way of organized narrative or prose. And that is why the human science researcher is engaged in the reflective activity of textual labour. To do human science research is to be involved in the crafting of a text (van Manen 1998, 78).

While my thesis reports on research by presenting analyses of discourses on children and participation, it also represents a specific positioning within these same discourses, and as such is a contribution to their development. Inspired by a narrative approach in authoring the articles, my aim in each is to tell a particular story. The intention is also for the articles taken together to represent a coherent story of the construction of children as participants in a particular cultural context.

As the above quotation from van Manen emphasizes, my research project involves the crafting of a text. The crafting of a text, or rather of texts, is conducted at different levels and at different stages of the research process. Reflexivity is an important part of this activity. This chapter accordingly aims to illuminate my reflections on methodological approaches and the investigative steps involved in this study. For van Manen, the concept of methodology refers to 'the philosophic framework, the fundamental assumptions and characteristics of a human science perspective. […] methodology is the theory behind the method, including the study of what method one should follow and why. […] Methodology means the logos (study) of the method (way)' (van Manen 1998, 27-8).

The social constructionist perspective and discourse theory presented in Chapter 2 is therefore closely intertwined with the methodological considerations presented in this chapter. I shall continue by elaborating more concretely on perspectives, choices and procedures related to the empirical study and the different steps in investigation, interpretation and textual crafting. To describe these different steps in the research process means clarifying the 'way' or method, as well as the procedures, for investigation and interpretation. My study is anchored in different kinds of empirical data, generated through a combination of different methods. These will be discussed following a presentation of methodological approaches that have informed my analyses of the different empirical texts. However, although anchored in the same basic methodological assumptions, there are also differences that will be elaborated in the way my interpretation of different data draws on the methodology connected with discourse theory.

A narrative and discursive approach

During the last twenty years, there has been an increasing emphasis on researching life experiences and social life as narratives (Bruner 1987, Taylor 1989, Gudmundsdottir 1996, van Manen 1998). Poststructuralists define narrative and narrativity as concepts through which we understand and make sense of the social world (Somers 1994, Søndergaard 1999). In my analyses, I shall use Margaret Somers' concepts of narrative. These are referred to briefly in my articles, but in order to make the conceptual framework for my analyses more visible, I shall supplement the presentation in my articles by elaborating more on the methodological approach in this chapter. Somers has developed a conceptual framework that approaches collective as well as individual narratives from different angles. She argues

that social identities, including one's identity as a researcher, are constituted by '[…] being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives rarely of our own making' (Somers 1994, 606). The understanding of narrative as an ontological condition of social life is connected with what Somers defines as available social, public or cultural narratives. Grasping experiences in narrative structures means placing events in a historical and relational context. She states that: 'Narratives are constellations of relationships (connected parts) embedded in time and space, constituted by causal emplotment. […] Narrativity turns events into episodes (Somers 1994, 616). Somers' concept of 'public narrative' refers to the cultural contexts from which ontological narratives are constructed. She explains the concept by invoking the philosopher Charles Taylor: 'The intersubjective webs of relationality sustain and transform narratives over time. Charles Taylor calls these "webs of interlocutions", others call them "tradition", I call them public narrative' (Somers 1994, 618).

This analytical perspective and the different concepts of narrative open possibilities for the analysis of how individual experiences and social constructions of identities are connected to a cultural context. The concept of a public narrative or cultural narrative refers to types of 'collective narratives' in this context, understood as socially and historically constructed. The cultural particularity of childhood can then be understood as stories or narratives that place children in specific positions in a discursive structure.

Though Somers mainly uses the concept of 'public narrative', she also sometimes uses the concepts 'cultural' and 'social' for such narratives. In my articles, I have followed her by using the concept of public narrative, which is defined further in Articles 1 and 5. However, I will add here that

the term ‘public’, which often refers to dualistic notions of private and public as two opposite spheres with clear boundaries, is complicated and has been contested in recent years. I therefore emphasise that the concept of ‘cultural narrative’ to me seems more reasonable, since it stresses the culturally constructed ‘nature’ of such narratives. The term ‘culture’ refers to the dimension of meaning in social life (Gullestad 1989, 1992, 1996). However, the construction of ontological identity on an individual level always has a cultural dimension. To find perfect labels that clearly define narratives on the different levels is therefore not an easy task. An important difference between the two concepts is the dissimilar levels they refer to. The term ‘public narrative’ then refers to constructions of narratives in a socially, politically and culturally contextual framework, that is, to institutional networks that are greater than the level of the single individual.

I have found the concepts of a public or cultural narrative, as well as the ontological narrative, a great source of inspiration in the analysis and interpretation of the case study, Try Yourself, since they open up possibilities to interpret political texts and social practices as particular narratives of children and childhood. This approach also provided room for creativity in the process of interpretation and construction of a research text that makes certain cultural constructions of children and childhood more visible. However, like all concepts they also mean influencing the analysis in certain ways, generating knowledge from a particular discursive position.

Another of Somers’ concepts, conceptual narrativity, refers to the concepts and explanations that social researchers use in their work. An important conceptual challenge for social researchers using a narrative approach is to: ‘develop a social analytical vocabulary that can accommodate the conten-

tion that social life, social organizations, social action, and social identities are narratively, that is temporally and relationally, constructed through both ontological and public narratives' (Somers 1994, 620). I suggest that this quotation clearly positions Somers as a researcher who emphasises the significance of narratives in understanding society and cultural life and constructions of identities on the level of the individual, as well as the dynamic interrelationships between the different narrative levels.

In addition to the narrative approach developed by Somers, concepts and perspectives relating to social constructionism and discourse theory, elaborated in Chapter 2, inform my construction of this research text. In the examination of children's experiences as participants in Try Yourself, I am also, to a certain degree, making use of a phenomenological hermeneutical methodology (van Manen 1998). This will be explained further in the descriptions of the analysis and interpretation of the interviews.

Different narratives can be seen as being constructed within a space of 'discursive practices'. Referring to Foucault, Iver Neumann states that we are referring to 'discursive practices' whenever we speak of 'those interpretations of conduct that produce and affirm actions and their concomitant subjects and objects that are institutionalized because the interpretation is often repeated and accepted' (Neumann 2001, 38). The narrative on childhood that I present in Article 1, based on the interpretation of texts and social practices associated with Try Yourself, is part of the discursive field of children and participation. As will be demonstrated in this article and in Article 2, certain terms seem to produce and affirm particular actions that are institutionalised because they are repeated and accepted.

As I shall argue in particular in Article 3, children also actively contribute to repeating and renewing discourses, not only in the field of childhood, but also in discourses on local communities, democracy and national identity.

An important question is how analysis drawing on a discursive approach is conducted, and using which methods. My methodological approach is close to Neumann's overall stance to this question, underlining that a pluralistic approach to the selection of methods, including the use of the concept of discourse itself, is important (Neumann 2001, 21). When I started this research project, I had already conducted the major empirical part of the study, as presented in an evaluation report (Kjørholt 1993). The empirical material from Try Yourself, 'gathered' as part of an evaluation of the project, represented a variety of different material that could be analysed as texts constructed within a particular discursive context. The social practices that were developed and carried out during the three-year project are also analysed as texts. As will be described further later in this chapter, my analysis is therefore anchored in divergent empirical texts and in the use of different methods. As already noted in Chapter 2, Shore and Wright see discourse as a tool for cultural analysis. My methodological approach to this study can therefore also be seen as a sort of cultural analysis. The analytical approach to the variety of different texts that are the focus of investigation can to some extent be described as being close to an ethnographic approach.

In line with this, my role in the Try Yourself project can be described as doing a kind of fieldwork in 'my own culture', being both an 'insider' and an active participant in the discursive field, and at the same time a researcher and an 'outsider' aiming to analyse the field from a distant posi-

tion, thus unpacking the naturalness of particular constructions of children, participation and childhood. Before discussing my position in Try Yourself in more detail, I shall present the research design, including the different empirical methods I am using.

Developing a research design: investigative steps, methods and procedures

The study in this thesis is based on a combination of different empirical methods relating to different projects:

- A case study: Try Yourself
- A survey of children and participation
- Texts from a Danish project: Children as Fellow Citizens
- A short field study of a national children's forum

The case study represents the main empirical study for investigation. The material used included written texts of various kinds, such as formulations of the aims and organisation of the national project,[1] my own field notes during the three-year project period, a huge number of texts about Try Yourself published in national and local newspapers, children's texts on application forms and qualitative interviews, conducted as part of the evaluation with 60 children aged 7-15 who participated in the project. Out of these, I selected a minor sample of interviews (ten) to subject to a more in-depth analysis and interpretation.

The varieties of written texts and the social practices related to the Try Yourself project were interpreted as a public narrative on children, partici-

[1] I was asked to take charge of the project about half a year after it was initiated. Different texts were written by the initiators and/or the former leader of the project.

pation and childhood. The further analysis and interpretation of interviews with children were conducted after I had constructed a public, cultural narrative, which I called *'Children as an endangered people'* in order to use the public narrative as a conceptual tool in the interpretation of children's communicated experiences.

The collection, analysis and interpretation of the data followed a particular time sequence, a course of action characterised by certain phases. In order to make visible the processes of data collection, analysis and interpretation, I shall present the work as different stages or steps in the process of investigating the discursive field of children and participation:

Step 1: Conducting and evaluating the case study Try Yourself (conducted before my PhD study started)
Step 2: Conducting a quantitative analysis of a survey in order to acquire a broader view of participatory practices and discourses on children and participation in all the Norwegian municipalities.
Step 3: Analysis and interpretation of political texts and practices in the Try Yourself project, and the construction of a public narrative.
Step 4: A qualitative analysis and interpretation of the answers to the open-ended questions in the survey, and of additional written text material received from the respondents to the survey.
Step 5: Analysis and interpretation of qualitative interviews with children.
Step 6: Additional two days fieldwork; a national children's forum.
Step 7: Analysis of written texts from the Danish project, Children as Fellow Citizens.

Delimiting the discourse represents the first methodological step in any discourse analysis (Neumann 2001). I stress that I do not intend to present a complete Foucauldian discourse analysis of the whole discursive field of children and their participation as such. Such an analysis would, for instance, require more systematic identification and definition of the borders of the discourse, as well as an investigation of the archives and the battles within the social space that is connected to different representations of children and participation. However, as I elaborated in Chapter 2, the concept of discourse has inspired my approach, theoretically as well as methodologically, in studying constructions of childhood and children as participants in a particular cultural context. The empirical studies I have conducted represent one way of contextualising and delimiting the discursive field of children and participation and of making it suitable for analysis. According to Neumann (2001), the actors' own notions and thoughts about the discourse and its context must be taken into consideration in delimiting the discourse. This view has been integrated into the construction of the survey by focusing on the respondents' representations of children and participation, as well as their notions of participatory projects.

A second step in the analysis of these discourses is to identify the representations of children and their participation in the discourse. Is the field characterised by one dominant representation, or do different representations exist and compete within it? Which terms are used in defining and presenting undisputable webs of meaning?

In the analysis, it is important to identify the media by which the discourse is spread, the social spaces in which the discourse is produced and communicated, and the target persons who are being addressed in the discourse.

The different empirical studies represent a way of following the discourse in different social contexts, where utterances and practices regarding children and participation are a central focus. Particular utterances and constructions of children as participants in their local communities, as well as in formal institutional settings like day-care centres, are produced and circulated in different contexts related to child policy at both the local and national levels, and in Norway as well as in Denmark. The following question (based on Neumann 2001) is of relevance for my analysis: How is the social energy that is necessary to construct dominant representations of children and their participation in the discourse mobilised and maintained?

Laclau and Mouffe emphasise the importance of looking at the nodal points in the discourse. Nodal points are significant terms, floating signifiers loaded with a particular meaning that structure the discourse (Laclau and Mouffe, quoted in Torfing 1999). Referring to Laclau and Mouffe, Neumann argues that if the discourse is characterised by its subordination to a particular nodal point, then it is being fixed as hegemonic (Neumann 2001, 65).

A case study: Try Yourself

The participatory project entitled Try Yourself represents the main empirical focus of investigation in this thesis. The aim and organisation of Try Yourself are described in the articles. However, in order to clarify further the context of the study, additional information about the project and its organisation will be included in this chapter.

The project was one of many cultural projects directed towards children and youth that were initiated by the Norwegian Council for Cultural Affairs

during the 1990s. A sum of 1.5 million NOK (aprox. 200 000 Euro) was allocated to the project over a three-year period. Eleven different municipalities in Norway were chosen to take part in the project. Later a similar project was initiated by the County Governor – *Fylkesmannen* - in Troms in four different Samii[2] districts in the northern part of Norway. Despite being limited to a period of three years, the overall aim of the project was to introduce permanent local funding directed towards children. As in many other national projects, principles associated with social democratic traditions in Norway, emphasising decentralisation and equal opportunities for different local communities and districts in the country, were basic criteria in selecting participating municipalities. This principle was related to all the projects initiated by the Council for Cultural Affairs within a certain period. Most of the participating municipalities in Try Yourself happened to be located in rural districts and thus consisted of small local communities. By being invited to take part in the national project, the municipality received state funding, but the costs of the local administration of the project had to be covered by the municipality. The latter were also responsible for selecting someone to be in charge of the administration of the project locally and to conduct the duties expected within the project as part of their ordinary work. The local administrators of Try Yourself held different posts, mostly in the local cultural administration or as teachers, although one local community chose the local fireman to run the project.

Down the years, there has been close cooperation and contact between the Norwegian Council for Cultural Affairs and similar national agencies in other Nordic countries. Try Yourself was certainly inspired of a Danish Try Yourself project that had earlier been initiated by the Ministry for Culture

[2] An indigenous people living scattered in the Nordkalotten area.

in Denmark. During the project period, the initiator arranged several nationwide seminars with participants from Norway and Denmark (national and local project leaders, people connected to the project in the national cultural councils) focusing on the topic of 'children and participation' in general, and experiences with the Try Yourself projects in Norway and Denmark in particular. During the three-year project period, I was also invited to Finland to give a lecture about experiences with Try Yourself to a seminar of people working with cultural activities for children and young people in Finnish counties and municipalities.

Though similar in many respects, there were also certain differences in the organisation and aims of the Try Yourself projects in the two countries. An evaluation of the project was conducted in Norway but not in Denmark. In Norway responsibility for running the project nationally was delegated to the Norwegian Centre for Child Research. Working with applied research, I was asked to be in the charge of the project nationally as well as being responsible for evaluating the project.

Being in charge of the development of the national project – and researching it

Neumann argues that, in order to conduct a high-quality discourse analysis, the researcher must have general knowledge of the discursive field that is the focus for the study (Neumann 2001). He further states that one implication of a discourse analytical approach is that the researcher cannot analyse the field without being a part of it. As part of the introduction to Chapter 1, I gave a short presentation of my entry into the discursive field of children as participants in the early 1970s and continued by gathering knowledge of the discourses from new positions in the early 1990s.

However, the particular mixture of two different identities and tasks calls for considerations and reflections relating to different issues. A variety of relevant questions can be formulated:

- What ethical dilemmas and challenges are related to the combination of these two identities?
- How did I handle the different discursive positions I was placed in? How did I construct and combine the two different identities?
- What are the reasons – and interests – involved in delegating these two different tasks, which are asserted to have dissimilar identities, to a single research institution? In other words, what are the possible discursive effects of combining these two identities?

As I see it, in principle the combination of these two positions and tasks are, and indeed should be, irreconcilable. This particular position recalls a well-known Norwegian saying 'about allowing a goat to look after the corn'.

Occupying the two different positions of project leader and researcher was certainly not without its problems. This particular situation also represented the starting phase of my career as a researcher, so I had no earlier research experiences to draw on. However, my former positions as a preschool teacher and a lecturer at a university college educating preschool teachers gave me valuable experience of the discursive field. The particular character of the Try Yourself project made it easer to handle the different statuses than would have been the case in another project. As the name of the project indicates, the children were expected to 'try themselves' without the intervention of adults. This 'philosophy' also represented an integral part of the organisation of the project, thus giving great autonomy to the local pro-

ject leaders, who were to be responsible for information about the project, helping the children fill out the application forms if necessary, being in charge of the money granted to the municipality, funding the different groups of children, and reporting on the variety of children's activities that were initiated on the standardised evaluation forms. In addition, they were obliged to take part in seminars together with the other local Try Yourself leaders.

Since the project had been set up before I joined it, I did not take any part in deciding its character, aims, organisation or standardised information and evaluation forms. My tasks as a national project leader were to arrange annual seminars, inform newspapers etc, about the project when they contacted me, and be responsible for contacts with local project leaders, including giving advice if asked. Since the idea and practice of the project had been clearly elaborated before I started, this part of my work as the overall project leader did not present me with any severe ethical dilemmas, and the expectation that I should be loyal to the idea of the project was relatively easy to adapt to. However, in order to make this role compatible with the role of a researcher evaluating the project, I actively chose to 'tone down' my role as project leader. This implied emphasising the administrative aspects of the role, rather than being an enthusiastic actor aiming to generate the most 'positive results' possible in the project, and then contributing to reproducing the dominant representations of children and childhood in the discourse. My role as a researcher in charge of the evaluation required me to establish a certain distance from the discourse that I was going to be critically examining. The combination of the different roles demanded continually reflexivity, according to how the two positions were to be handled in different situations.

An important question can be formulated as follows: How did my management of the discursive position of national project leader affect the discursive practices that were developed? One may argue that if I had taken a more active role as a project leader, including marketing the project with greater intensity and enthusiasm, I might have managed to contribute more actively in reaching the aim of establishing a permanent fund earmarked for children's cultural activities in all Norwegian municipalities. A planned strategy on this would, however, be very difficult to reconcile with my position as a researcher. I have also asked myself if I should have tried to contribute to destabilise the discourse during the project period by opening the discursive field with reference to alternative constructions of children as participants. I have no simple answers to these huge and challenging questions. My position as a project leader demanded a certain loyalty to the idea and practice that the project was supposed to develop. Although knowledge of and insight into the discourse was developed to a certain degree through the evaluation of the project, this occurred first and foremost by studying for the present PhD. Any other construction or way of managing the two discursive positions would definitely not have been possible without the knowledge that was generated through this study. And, I suggest, it would still have been challenging, though not at all desirable.

However, regardless of how I handled these two positions, from a discursive point of view their particular combination, in asserting the role of project leader to a national child research centre, contributed to making the particular constructions of children as participants legitimate and more powerful.

It is also important to underline that my particular position in the discursive field gave me valuable knowledge about the discourses and social practices that were developed. By being placed in a position as a national project leader, I gained 'embodied experiences' of the politics of the discourse. These experiences represented a unique basis for a critical analysis of the discursive field.

A brief presentation of the design and results of the evaluation

The design of the evaluation of the project was based on a combination of different methods, qualitative as well as quantitative[3]. In line with its ideological notions of children, the Norwegian Council for Cultural Affairs asked for an evaluation of the project that included the children's own perspectives as participants. Qualitative interviews with a sample of the children who had taken part in Try Yourself were therefore an important part of the research design. In addition, every child who participated in the project also had to give information on a standardised form about the extent of his or her participation in organised leisure-time activities. This form represented a tool in acquiring statistical information of children's backgrounds according to this variable. The content of the form mirrored an important aim of Try Yourself, namely to include children who did not take part in organised activities, the so called 'unorganised children and young people', as an important target group. This emphasis was related to discourses expressing concern about particular children and young people dropping out of organised activities such as sport and music, which were seen as being connected with social class. A similar concern about 'associationless' children are also seen in Denmark, illustrated for example by an 'open gym'

[3] This design was developed by the former project leader in cooperation with the Norwegian Council for Cultural Affairs.

project, aimed at promoting social integration in local communities through sport (Anderson 2003). Qualitative interviews with all the eleven local leaders in the project were conducted in order to obtain knowledge about their experiences and views of the project. In addition, the local project leaders were responsible for administering standardised evaluation material consisting of two different forms that had to be filled out on every children's project that had been given funding. One of these was a simple one-page application form asking children to give a short description of the activity they wanted to carry out. The other consisted of standardised questions on the 'results' and experiences of each project from the local project leader's point of view.

In short, the evaluation report on Try Yourself aimed to describe and analyse the aims and practices that were developed during the project period as experienced by the different actors. I shall continue by referring briefly to the report, which constituted an empirical frame of reference for the development of my further empirical analyses.

During the three-year project period, Try Yourself received a great deal of attention. Nearly 1700 children aged 6-15 years participated in the project by applying for support for a whole range of activities. The construction of children as competent creative subjects in the project was demonstrated by the huge variety of different creative initiatives they came up with. Children applied for support in relation to dance, theatre, photographic exhibitions, looking after cats, building huts, running cafes, selling eggs, and so on. However, the local project leaders also played an important role in the project, in relation to both it marketing and the extent and kind of support that children obtained. Some of the differences between municipalities in

the number of applications received from children and children's experiences of the project itself are related to variations in how different project leaders carried out the project locally. These differences were related to the amount and intensity with which the project was advertised, degrees and forms of contact with children who participated in the project, and discrepancies according to the systematic use of the standardised evaluation material.

Extending and delimiting the discursive field: additional texts

In addition to the case study, I wanted to explore the discourse on children and participation from other viewpoints. In order to obtain an insight into the extent of the discourse and the circulation of particular utterances and practices, I drew up a questionnaire which was sent to all Norwegian municipalities. The reason for targeting these respondents were experiences I had acquired through the Try Yourself project that the municipalities were important target groups for the circulation of the discourse, as seen from the perspectives of state political authorities. The questionnaire is described in more detail in Article 2.

The percentage of responses to the survey – more than 90 – was in itself an illustration of respondents' eagerness to report on the participatory projects going on in their municipalities. This impression of the discourses of children and participation as being both powerful and extended was strengthened by the fact that I also received several telephone calls from respondents excusing themselves for not as yet having started any participatory projects, but assuring me that they soon would do so.

During the three-year project period of Try Yourself, I actively took part in seminars and cooperative networking with people who were engaged in participatory projects as part of discourses on children as participants in Denmark. As already noted, Try Yourself was inspired by a similar Danish project. Two popular short texts from a Danish project entitled Children as Fellow Citizens stimulated my interest in conducting further investigation. Article 5 presents an analysis of these texts, which represent a particular position in the discursive field of children as social participants in formal institutional settings.

These two empirical studies represent both an extension and a delimiting of the discourses on children as social participants that are the focus of my analysis. In addition to this empirical material, texts from white papers and Government declarations to the Parliament will be included, but these are not objects for complete analyses. I also include experiences from my participation in a huge national children's forum – *barnehøring* – related to Norway's report to the UN concerning its fulfilment of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1998. The aim of this forum was to listen to children's voices and opinions about rights in their everyday lives. In local processes in their municipalities, a selection of 60 children aged 7-14 were invited to meet all Norwegian ministers to let their voices being heard. I participated in the two-days meeting in Oslo, where children met together and prepared their speeches in small groups led by an adult, as well in the national forum where the children met the ministers.

Researching children's lived experiences and voices: methodological reflections

The interviews with the children aimed to obtain knowledge about how discourses on children and participation, like those framed within the Try Yourself project, affect children. The main focus is thus on children's perspectives and experiences as participants in Try Yourself. However, taking into account the growing concern and interest during the last fifteen years on terms such as 'children's voices', 'children's perspectives', 'children's standpoint', 'children's childhoods' and the like – which are often used vaguely as slogans, as discussed in Chapter 2 – the methodological approach to research with children needs to be clarified and discussed further.

As a starting point, I would claim that my methodological approach is anchored ontologically in perspectives conceptualising childhood *in the plural*. Even in one and the same cultural context there are different childhoods, based on gender, age, ethnic and social groups etc. From a post-structuralist point of view, a child, like an adult, also constructs various identities in everyday life that are related to different social practices and discourses. As elaborated in Articles 3 and 4, and discussed theoretically in Chapter 9, children actively construct their own identities by working on the discourses in which they are situated.

Using a narrative and discursive perspective means approaching children's communicated experiences during interviews as texts constructed in narrative structures. Gunilla Halldén asserts that, since children's expressions and perspectives always mirror particular discourses, the possible positions in which to be children in a particular context are made visible (Halldén 2003). Reflecting on the concept of the 'child's perspective', she argues:

What we can get through an analysis of children's stories are children's perspectives on their positions. The meaning of children's perspectives is then that which the researcher can read from children's texts. It is important […] to emphasise that the term 'children's perspectives' has been filtered through the subject of the researcher. (Halldén 2003, 21, translated from Swedish to English by ATK).

I fully agree with Halldén's analytical standpoint, and she argues further that a discursive analysis revealing how children's voices form part of a discursive context makes it possible to discuss children's place in society, as well as what experiences they derive from this place (Halldén 2003). I would add to this the consideration that a child's utterances as communicated, for instance, in a particular social science interview seldom constitute a 'pure' mirror of a specific discourse in the way that these utterances represent a reproduction of the cultural context alone. Children are placed in many, often competing discourses on children and childhood, and they actively engage in meaning-making processes and constructions of identities by drawing on different discourses in creative ways.

However, the importance of investigating children's perspectives as utterances being produced in a particular social and cultural context that 'frames' these utterances in particular ways must not be underestimated. An important question is which context will inform the analysis and interpretation of children's perspectives. In Article 4 I argue that intergenerational relations and local cultural practices are important contexts for children's experiences and for their social practices with one another, as well as for their experiences as participants in Try Yourself. Children's communicated experiences in the interviews represent a point of view concerning

knowledge of the cultural context as constituted in the interplay of different discourses.

Approaching children's experiences and perspectives through interviews with a discursive perspective also requires that we reflect on the relationship between language and lived experience. One fundamental question is whether it is possible to obtain insights into children's experiences and perspectives through spoken language without undertaking an ethnographic study and thus analysing social practices through participant observation as well? Participant observation obviously provides room for insights into the complexities of children's experiences in everyday lives, as well as for what Clifford Geertz calls 'thick descriptions' of social and cultural life (Geertz 1953). My view on this basic question is influenced by van Manen and more generally, hermeneutic and phenomenological perspectives. A hermeneutic phenomenology is both descriptive, in that it tries to grasp things as they appear, and interpretive, because uninterpreted phenomena do not exist (van Manen 1998). Based on the assumption that meaning is multi-dimensional and multi-layered, van Manen argues: Language is a cognitive apparatus. […] What we try to do in phenomenological research is to evoke understandings through language that in a curious way seem to be non-cognitive (van Manen 1998, xviii).

It may thus seem paradoxical to choose the interview as a method for investigating children's experiences and perspectives. One pragmatic reason for this choice is that it would have been impossible to conduct an ethnographic investigation as an exercise in evaluation within the framework of Try Yourself because it would have been too time-consuming and expensive. Under the circumstances, therefore, qualitative interviews with chil-

dren were a reasonable way of determining children's experiences of the project. Van Manen's reflections underline the need to be aware the limitations of language, at the same time as this is the main medium that the researcher has to trust in order to generate knowledge of social life. By asking how we capture our experiences in language, and what the relationship is between language and experience, he argues:

> Experience is always more immediate, more enigmatic, more complex, more ambiguous than any description can do justice to. The human science researcher is a scholar-author who must be able to maintain an almost unreasonable faith in the power of language to make intelligible and understandable what always seem to lie beyond language (van Manen 1998, xviii).

This quotation illustrates some of the tremendous challenges that the researcher is faced with in the processes of analysis and interpretation, as well as in relation to the different aspects of the process of social interaction that is the research interview. One fundamental question here relates to how children are conceptualised in research. My position on this question will be clarified further in the next section of this chapter.

Children as participants in research

An evaluation of a participatory project like Try Yourself highlights the importance of reflexivity in relation to contemporary methodological discussions on doing research with children. Traditional concepts and ways of approaching research have been contested over the past two decades, and new methodological approaches recognising children as competent informants or co-researchers concerning their everyday lives have been carried out (Tiller 1989, 1991, Solberg 1991, Mayall 1994, Alderson 1999, 2000, Christensen and James 2000, Woodhead and Faulkner 2000, Eide and Winger 2003). The psychologist Per Olav Tiller was a forerunner in this

field in Norway in the 1980s, since he criticised using adults as informants regarding children's lives and insisted that the dominant concept of children as objects in social research be replaced by the idea of children as competent subjects who must be taken more seriously as informants in research as well as in society (Tiller 1989, 91). He argues that when children are used as informants in social and cultural research, it is important to stress that they are the experts, the ones with stories to tell (Tiller 1989).

A variety of new and creative research techniques in doing research with children have been developed, especially during the past decade, using a variety of methodological approaches, including such media as graphs, maps, written stories, drawings, photographs etc., in order to obtain an insight into children's perspectives and everyday lives (Alderson 2000, Halldén 2000, Christensen and James 2000, Nilsen and Rogers 2004). Researchers also approach children's social practices and perspectives by entering into new arenas for participation in modern societies, such as children's chat room on the Internet (Tingstad 2003).

Different methodological positions have been relating to research on children, which avoid the image of children as mere objects. Alderson argues that children's rights to participation, as stated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, demand a new approach that regards children as competent researchers on a par with adults (Alderson 1999, 2000). She refers to many projects that have used participatory methodologies in conducting research in schools and local communities, arguing that children are fully competent as child researchers (Alderson 2000). It is widely recognised that children are the primary source of knowledge about their own everyday lives. However, asserting that children have participatory rights regard-

ing the publication of their own research is more controversial. As Alderson argues: 'The novelty and immediacy of children's research reports can attract greater publicity and interest in using the findings than much adult research does' (Alderson 2000, 253).

This construction of children as child researchers is, in my view, problematic, since it touches on questions of what it means to be a researcher and what social science is. Like adults, children are not researchers in respect of being human beings, in spite of their inhabiting human qualities such as curiosity and the ability to explore the environment and to be communicative, creative and reflective. In order to do qualified research, one need to have been educated as a researcher; including knowledge about theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches and philosophical traditions in the social and human sciences. It is important to be aware of any new essentialist construction of children that places them in the position of competent researchers by virtue of their being children.

Rather than regard children as researchers, a less radical view would use alternative terms like co- researcher, informant, subject or participant, which, despite their diversity, all suggest that children are co-constructers or participants in the different stages of the research process, seen as a common meaning-making process. My own view is that, while children are co-constructers of knowledge during the research process – to which they can contribute in valuable ways in different stages of any research that is aimed at achieving an insight into their experiences and perspectives on different topics and phenomena, as well as their everyday lives as practised in different private and public places – they are not *responsible* contributors in the way that the researcher is. Overall responsibility for the research de-

sign, the production of meaning and knowledge during the different stages of the research process, and actually publishing the research is in the hands of the researcher. These different positions imply an asymmetric relationship between the researcher and the child, which places the researcher in a position of power and control that is different from that which concerns the child.

However, this does not mean that children should not be seen as equal and competent participants during some stages of the research process, as for instance during the interaction process of an interview or in other forms of research practices. Approaching children's experienced lives in research therefore means doing research *with*, not *on* children (Christensen and James 2000).

An important question is whether doing interviews with children demands different approaches compared to doing interviews with adults. Anne Solberg argues that in principle there is no difference, and that age should be ignored (Solberg 1991, 1996). She states: 'It should be open to empirical investigators to explore the significance of age and status within different contexts and situations, to explore "doing" rather than "being"' (Solberg 1996, 64).

Doing interviews with human beings, whether children or adults, demands social as well as cultural competence. As part of this, it has been argued that the researcher needs knowledge of the particular cultures of communication that characterize the group (s)he is going to interview (Christensen and James 2000). This will be discussed and elaborated further in relation

to the description of the research interviews that were conducted with children as part of the Try Yourself project.

Doing interviews with children: interaction, analysis and interpretation

The interview situation in social science research can be described as a meaning-making process, a social interaction between two or more participants inhabiting different positions in the interaction. The participants are positioned within different discursive contexts which are not necessarily open to the consciousness of either the researcher or the child participant. However, it is of great importance for the researcher to reflect on her/his position, included the conceptual narrative (s)he is inscribed in, and to make visible the different positions to the person (s)he is doing research with. Important questions relate to how the different positions affect the common construction of knowledge during the interview situation and the social context that is being constructed. It has been argued that the intergenerational relationships between children and adults, which are characterised by asymmetry and an unequal distribution of power, must be recognised in order to understand how it influences children and adults, as well as the social interaction process during the interview (Mayall 1994, Jenks 2000, Eide and Winger 2003).

Step 1: Preparing and designing the interview

In any kind of social research, knowing what questions to ask and the ways in which it is best to ask them, as well as knowing which questions *not* to ask and how *not* to ask them, is recognised as one of the keys to a successful research outcome (Christensen and James 2000, 1).

The formulation of research questions and focus of the interview represented the initial phase of the planning process of the empirical research with children, followed by the development of the design of the interview. In evaluating Try Yourself, the central research questions and aims were related to obtaining insights into children's experiences of the project. The research interview therefore had a narrative character, the aim of which was to design the interview and ask questions in a way that invited the children to describe particular activities and social processes openly and freely as they experienced them during the project. I decided to draw up an interview guide, with questions and focuses that might be included in children's stories. The interview then had a semi-structured character, constructing the researcher as a participant in the dialogue, but still with a main focus on children's constructions of their stories. However, it is important to stress that the interview guide was used in a flexible way, being individually adapted and never used in the same with any two children. Indeed, for me it became a tool to stimulate children further to talk about their experiences as freely as possible, within certain frameworks. The introductory questions therefore started with the words 'Tell me about…'. The questions in the interview guide were structured by a time sequence, focusing on how the project was initiated, children's reasons for being attracted to the project in the first place and applying for funding, which kinds of activity they wanted funding etc. Then followed a sequence focusing on how their activities were carried out, including positive highlights as well as any negative or frustrating experiences. Social processes among those children who belonged to the group that applied for funding, as well as intergenerational relationships, were also core issues. The final sequence of the dialogue focused on the end of their funded project, why it ended and how, and on their general reflections of being participants in the project.

An integral aspect of the dialogue was to stimulate reflections by children on their communicated experiences. The particular constructions of children and intergenerational relationships and the value of 'children's own culture' embedded in the Try Yourself project constituted an important conceptual framework for the interviews.

In order to contextualise the analysis of children's experiences as participants in Try Yourself, I attempted to acquire an insight into children's everyday lives. I therefore decided to divide the interview into two sections. The first section was focussing on children's narratives of their experiences in Try Yourself. The second part was inspired of the so-called 'life-form interview' which asked children to describe and tell about their activities and the events in their everyday lives, from the moment they got up in the morning until going to bed in the evening. This form of interview has been conducted with children as young as four years old in their own homes, and was then followed by their being asked to show and 'do' what they do during the day (Andenæs 1991). Guided interviews have also been conducted in children's homes and outdoor surroundings (Nilsen 2000b, Nilsen and Rogers 2004).

In this second section of the interview, I asked children to tell about their lives on the previous day, from early morning to the moment they went to bed. The interview guide was narrative-oriented and semi-structured, with time being the structuring element. The main focus was on activities and events, as well as on relationships with adults and other children, the aim being to obtain detailed stories from children about social practices and relationships with other people in their everyday lives. During the dialogue, I asked whether the events and activities described were done regularly, or

whether they represented an aspect of particular experiences of the previous day. This section of the interview represented a cultural context for my analysis and interpretation of the children's experiences as participants in Try Yourself.

Each interview was planned to last for about an hour, though of course this was not fixed, but adapted to the particular communication that took place with each child, as well as the child's expressions and interest in continuing the dialogue.

Sampling procedures

A sample of sixty out of the nearly 1700 children who participated in Try Yourself was selected for interview as part of the project evaluation. This selection can be described as a stratified, random sample. The criteria for stratification were gender (approximately fifty percent boys and fifty percent girls), locality and age. The sample represented variation according to age as well as geographic locality, ranging from eight to fifteen years of age, and geographically dispersed among seven different local communities. A further principle for selection was to include more than one child from each group that had applied for public funding. After following these stratification criteria, a random sample was selected.

In my PhD, I selected ten of these interviews for further analysis and interpretation. The number of interviews was limited because I wanted to combine analysis of children's experiences and perspectives with analysis of public, cultural texts. The selection of these interviews was based on my research interest. Building huts, which was seen as a particularly valuable aspect of 'children's own culture', was a popular activity within the Try

Yourself project. Fifteen percent of all participants in Try Yourself applied for funding to build a hut, an activity that proved extremely attractive in one of the participating municipalities. Hut-building practices, which mostly attracted boys, and cultural notions of a (good) childhood that seemed to be related to these hut-building practices, struck me as being of particular interest for further investigation. Seven children aged between ten and fifteen, five boys and two girls, all living in the same local community and applying for funding to construct thee different huts, were selected for further analysis and interpretation. An interview with a grandfather of one of the boys, who was supporting his grandsons in this activity, was also included in the analysis. In addition I selected two interviews with girls living in another local community, who belonged to a group applying for funding to start a music band. These girls were selected in order to explore and describe how children positioned themselves in the local community within the new discursive space that the Try Yourself project had made available for them. In selecting this sample, I was aware that the children involved in building huts in the same local community represented a particular case study, selected because of this *particularity*. The selection of the two girls interested in playing music, on the other hand, was based on a feeling of some sort of *'generality'*, meaning that their stories could be used to illustrate and explore further experiences and practices that were common to many other participants within Try Yourself. A major principle in selecting samples was to choose interviews that represented rich empirical material on children's communicated experiences, and that were useful in illuminating important aspects of the complexities of discourses on children as participants in society.

Place

For practical reasons, it was decided to conduct the interviews at the local primary school. This decision was taken in cooperation with the local project leaders, who were responsible for the practical arrangements, including the time schedule. Place as an important aspect of the meaning-making process of an interview, has been emphasised by a number of researchers in recent years (Mayall 2000, Nilsen and Rogers 2004, Eide and Winger 2003). It has been argued that conducting interviews in the school context suffers from the danger of reproducing the traditional relationship of authority between the teacher and the pupil in the relationship between the researcher and the child (Mayall 1994, 2000). It is important to add here that, in many of the small local communities that took part in Try Yourself, the primary school building is also used as *grendehus*, that is, a meeting place for social gatherings and activities of different kinds for people living in the local community. The school building is therefore not necessarily associated with teacher–pupil relationships alone.

It is important to reflect on the meaning of place in the production of knowledge during a social-science interview. However, I argue that place, like the social relationships associated with a particular place, is not fixed or embedded in a static cultural meaning but socially constructed by those particpating in a particular social interaction. Conceptualising children as competent participants in the research interview therefore also means recognising their flexibility and skills in understanding and adapting to the complexities of a particular social situation. This may imply taking an active part in redefining a social situation like a research interview as *different* from ordinary school activities and the teacher–pupil relationship, even when it takes place in the school context. As I shall describe further in the

next section of the methodological chapter, the social situation during a research interview can be seen as constituted by two or more participants as a dynamic and discursive context characterised by complexities of meaning. The meaning of place, such as a school, in the construction of intergenerational relationships, knowledge and meaning during the interview process therefore must be investigated empirically.

However, I must stress here that several decisions related to the research design, such as the choice of a place to interview children, was made within, and restricted by, the framework of the evaluation of a national project. Being reflexive in a retro-perspective, an exiting place to conduct interviews with children could have been where the activity had mainly been carried out. In the case of those children who were applying for funding to construct huts, the interview could have been conducted in the hut. However, choosing the hut as a site for the interview could have distracted the children in particular ways, also influencing the narrative in certain ways. The sixty children chosen for interview were interviewed in different places, such as their own homes, a *grendehus* or the school. My main experiences with the interviews were that the definition of the social situation and the mutual interaction that was established was of great significance for the construction of rich narratives.

It is also important to add that methodological discussions of the significance of place in carrying out research have been developed in particular during recent years, following my evaluation of Try Yourself in the early 1990s. The site for conducting the interviews was therefore not a particular focus for extensive reflections.

Using tape recorders

I decided to use a tape recorder during the interview in order to contextualise and make possible a systematic analysis and interpretation of children's communicated experiences, as close to their spoken words as possible. As part of the introduction to the interview, children were asked if they agreed to a tape recorder being used. As part of this process of eliciting their agreement, we listened to a few sentences first. They all agreed without any further questions or comments, and none of them seemed to have been affected or distracted by the tape recorder during the interview.

Ethical considerations

The ethical principles of *anonymity* and *confidentiality* were stressed in communicating with children, both in the invitation letter that they received before the interview, and as part of the introduction to the dialogue. I emphasised that I would be using other names when presenting their views in the research report, and that no one, not their parents nor their teachers nor other children, would informed about what they had told me during the interview. Paradoxically the principle of anonymity seemed to be disappointing to some of the children, who remarked that they would like to have their names included in the report, thus making their views known in a public space. In fact none of the children actively expressed any degree of satisfaction regarding the practice of anonymity that was followed during the research.

In order to demonstrate that children were being taken seriously as subjects in the research, the invitation letter asking their consent to participating in the interview was addressed directly to them. On the envelope the child's name was put first, then the phrase 'with parents' was added, to inform the

latter. Only three out of sixty children who were asked refused to take part in the interview.

In order to make the context for the interview clear to the children, I introduced myself and gave a short presentation of child research in general, as well as the aims, research questions and perspectives of the Try Yourself evaluation in particular. Then I continued by clarifying my expectations of the interview, emphasising that it was their experiences and reflections that were of particular interest to me, that, in line with Tiller's suggestion (1989), referred to earlier, they were the 'experts', and that I wanted to learn from them. As part of the introduction to the interview, I also stressed that they were free to refuse to speak about anything they did not want to, and that I wanted them act freely in directing the dialogue and bringing up any issues or reflections they considered relevant.

Step 2: The interview as a process of social interaction

A qualitative social-science interview can be described as a process of social interaction. Of greatest importance for the knowledge that is constructed during the interview is the contact and communication between the researcher and the interviewee. If the contact is of high quality, the interview can be described as a joint meaning-making process (Gudmundsdottir 1995).

From the very beginning of each interview, I aimed to establish close contact with the child. Although the child and I represented two quite different participants in this meaning-making process, and were placed in different discursive positions in the situation, I aimed to create a social situation

characterised by equality, mutual respect, confidence and curious engagement.

In my view, this does not imply either trying to adopt the 'least-adult' role (Thorne 1993), or avoidance of any kind of pedagogic attitude. Quite the contrary, I actively drew on my experiences as a preschool teacher in communicating with the children. It is important to emphasise that the concept of a teacher covers many different conceptualisations of children, learning and knowledge, as well as different cultures of communication. A core issue was to develop a caring and appreciative relationship with the child in the communication, as is further elaborated in Article 4.

An important part of this process is to be sensitive to the uniqueness of the person in the particular situation (van Manen 1998), acknowledging not only the spoken word, but also trying to grasp emotional feelings and nuances and being aware of what is left unspoken and is silenced. This implies resort to intuition in deciding when and how you are going to ask for further reflections, when it is appropriate to listen and be silent for a while, giving the child space for further reflections to be elaborated, and when you should keep up the momentum, trying to inspire the child by switching to another theme.

When I started to work on the selected interviews for purposes of further analysis and interpretation as part of my PhD, I also listened to the interviews on the tape-recorder many times in order to obtain insights into the quality of my communication with the children. An important aim was to reveal the different ways in which I, as a researcher, influenced the children's communicated experiences during the interview, and to be reflexive

in relation to this process. I shall now briefly present some of my reflections concerning the dialogues I held with these children.

One striking characteristic of my communication 'style' with the children was that I often repeated some of children's expressions during the conversation. These replications seemed to function as an appreciation of the children's own reflections, contributing to further development of the topic being discussed. The importance of recognising relationships for the development and elaboration of children's expressions, as well as their emotional well-being and self-identity, has been emphasised in studies of social practices and relationships between adults and children in day-care centres (Bae 1996).

Below I present excerpts from two different transcribed interviews with two boys who participated in constructing a hut, illustrating how I repeated some of the boys' statements, and how this repetition seems to contribute to recognition and elaboration of the theme:

Example A

AT: Now, I'm very eager to hear about your experiences in Try Yourself. Can you tell me about your hut-building project?

Ola: Yeah…we have constructed a hut. We are five boys who have constructed a hut which my grandpa helped us with…to construct, then…

AT: Yeah, your grandpa helped with the construction, yeah?

Ola: Yes, then he has told how to construct and stuff like that…. So, things have gone pretty well. We have not completely finished yet...we have a bit of painting and stuff left. And some planks that

we are going to put on. But that's something we are going to do afterwards…

Example B

AT: I'm curious to know how other children respond to your hut. Are some of them jealous because you got money from Try Yourself?

Hans: Yeah. And somebody doesn't like it that grandpa helped and stuff like that.

AT: Just like that...? So they don't like it? What exactly are they saying?

Hans: 'You should have managed yourself, without help. It wasn't necessary'. It's foul play in a way …not funny for us of course..

Such replications, also called 'mirroring' – *speiling* – were not part of any planned strategy of communication, but something that happened spontaneously as part of my response to children's expressions (Andenæs 1991).

Neil Nodding's concept of 'interpersonal reasoning', which is related to an ethics of care, seems to me to be of relevance in developing an awareness of important aspects of the communication process in research interviews and dialogues with children (as well with adults). According to Noddings (1990), interpersonal reasoning is characterised by a caring relationship, attention, flexibility, attempts to cultivate the relationship, and lastly a search for a proper response.

Despite the last point – the search for a proper response – these concepts represent tools with which I reflect on the process of social interaction that

constituted the interviews I conducted in Try Yourself. In the narrative-oriented dialogue I adopted, children's reflections and stories were the main focus. My role as a co-constructer of meaning during the interaction process was to facilitate, inspire and support children in elaborating their stories. I therefore suggest replacing Nodding's last recommendation with the suggestion that one is a gatekeeper for the elaboration of reflexivity, narrativity and the construction of meaning. Bae's criterion of the necessity of recognising relationships also represents inspiring approaches that provide insight into the importance of listening, understanding and recognising children's expressions during the social interaction (Bae 1996).

When listening to the interviews subsequently, I recognised sequences in the dialogue in which my attention and sensitivity had not been sufficiently elaborated, resulting in a lack of inspiring questions that might have contributed to the children providing more detailed narratives. At other times, I switched to another topic too quickly, without being sufficiently sensitive and flexible in following up possible leads in the child's statements. The example below illustrates this:

> AT: Tell me why you wanted to participate in the Try Yourself project.
> Hans: Well, I like carpenting…my father is a carpenter.
> AT: He is a carpenter, yeah?
> Hans: So I enjoy carpentry very much…
> AT: Yes. And when you wanted to take part in the project, who told you about Try Yourself?

By asking the last question, I forestall any further elaboration of the boy's dialogue about carpentry. The boy's utterances represent a seed that could have been developed further into interesting reflections on intergenerational relationships, masculine identities, and joint activities and interests between Hans and his father. This would have required more flexibility on my part, leaving aside discussion of the boy's experiences of Try Yourself for a while, and concentrating on developing the input that Hans had presented in the conversation by supporting the 'teller' in constructing and developing meaning during the interview.

Step 3: Analysis: from tape to transcripts

In line with Steinar Kvale (1997), I treat utterances in interviews not as gathered data but as a common construction by the researcher and the person being interviewed. A main principle in the transcriptions of the interviews has been to write down a text that is as close as possible to the oral dialogue. Bodily movements form an important part of the conversation. If the interview person hesitated and was uncertain of what to say, I used: ……in the transcribed texts. The transcription aims to represent the children's words as close as possible to his or her actual dialect. As Kvale points out, transcription can itself have a narrative form. By using a narrative approach during the transcription process, the researcher can focus on reconstructing the story told to her by the informant into the story that she wants to present (Kvale 1997). However, this form of transcription has not been followed in this study because I wanted to analyse texts that in an unrevised form was as close as possible to children's utterances as expressed during the interview situation. An experienced assistant transcribed the interviews from the tapes, ending up with written texts. During analysis and interpretation I mainly used the transcribed texts, but I also listened to the

dialogue on the tape recorder in order to grasp nuances in the voices and obtain a better insight of how the different utterances were expressed. The tape recorder also provided an opportunity to 'listen to silence', to be aware of and look for possible 'unspoken sequences' in the dialogue.

Step 4: Interpretative analysis: from transcripts to identifying themes

The social interaction of the dialogue with the children and the transcription of the tape-recorded interviews both represent stages in the research process involving analysis and interpretation. Early in my analysis of the transcribed texts, I read through the different texts looking for themes in children's constructions of meaning. Embedded in my research design and research questions, certain themes could be discerned, but the transcribed text also clearly included themes developed by the children themselves during the interviews. Themes approached in an interview may reveal experiences that are of significant value for the 'teller'. As Van Manen argues, 'Themes are like stars that make up the universes of meaning we live through. By the light of these themes we can navigate and explore such universes' (1998, 90).

Children's experiences with other children in an age-related social order, as well as their relationships with other generational groups in their cultural context, were a particular research focus in my analysis of themes. I wanted to explore how children constructed their social practices with other children within the discursive context of Try Yourself. The particular constructions of children as participants in this context represented a sort of 'mirror' or 'framework' for investigating children's communicated experiences. Power and control in intergenerational relationships constituted one of the core issues in my analysis and interpretation of the themes in the tran-

scribed texts. The analysis of the meaning of power and control in intergenerational relationships also involved looking for themes where other dimensions of constructions of intergenerational relationships revealed different themes than just power and control.

The following two excerpts of transcribed texts provide an illustration of how intergenerational relationships are connected with other themes than power and control:

Example A

AT: When you return from school at about twelve o'clock, do you prefer to be at home alone, perhaps playing with friends, without adults, or do you prefer mom or dad or somebody else to be at home?
Gunnar: It's best when mom is there…I don't like to be on my own, alone in the house.
AT: So you prefer mom to be there. Why do you think you prefer that?
Gunnar: It's just boring when she's not there….

Example B

AT: Some children prefer to do things alone or together with other children, and some like to do things together with adults. What do you like?
Lars: I'd rather do things with grown-ups.
AT: You prefer to do things together with adults.
Lars: I don't know what to do on my own.

In these examples, it is I, the researcher, who explicitly introduces the theme, namely relationships with adults. However, the children's own expressions demonstrate how the theme of intergenerational relationships is connected to themes like 'being together', 'doing together', and feelings of inter-generational community. Nonetheless, when identifying themes, it is important to be aware of the complexities of meaning. In the same text, Lars seems to want to fish alone, without being together with adults.

> AT: When you are out fishing on the lake, are you usually alone?
> Lars: No, I'm not allowed to go alone: it's dangerous.
> AT: So you are together with adults, then?
> Lars: Yes, they are a bit afraid of me falling into the water and stuff. I'm not allowed to go on my own. I have asked several times, but…

Analysing and interpreting texts by looking for themes also means looking for paradoxes, complexities and variations in a single interview. Having explored themes related to my research questions, such as how inter-generational relationships are constructed, I looked for themes that the children had brought up themselves without me introducing them. The excerpt from the interview with Hans illustrates how he directly relates his interest in applying for funding in Try Yourself to an inter-generational relationship of closeness and similar interests. His statement that 'I like carpentry because my father is a carpenter' places me on a path that I want to investigate further in the analysis of the narrative.

Step 5: Interpreting children's constructed narratives

For me, a narrative approach towards interview research includes focusing on narrative forms during the interview, throughout their analyses and in-

terpretation, and in constructing the research text (Kvale 1997). I have chosen to interpret the transcribed texts by looking at how meaning and themes are constructed through narratives structures. This means focusing on how the text is authored in sequences aimed at telling stories with a particular structuring of events (Kvale 1997, Søndergaard 1999, Gudmundsdottir 1995, Somers 1994). In both steps 4 and 5 of the interpretation process, to a certain degree I also made use of a hermeneutic, phenomenological approach. This implied that when I had identified interesting themes in one interview, this opened up ways for a new interpretation of other texts that I had read before, in other words, an interpretation characterised by the principle of the hermeneutic circle.

The amount and length of narrative sequences in the interviews varied. Often I had to put together different narrative sequences in order to make coherent stories. It is important to stress that there are no transparent walls between the children's narratives and my own. Children's narrative sequences are constructed as part of a dialogue with me as a researcher.

Step 6: From children's narratives to the researcher's

It has been argued that even if the 'teller' does not present the utterances in the form of visible narrative structures in the interview process, the researcher can still use a narrative approach in analysing the utterances by trying to construct a coherent story out of the different utterances in the interview (Kvale 1997). This implies occupying different positions during the process of interpretation. In the final stage of the interpretation, my aim was to create coherent narratives out of identified narrative sequences in children's narratives and the different events that the children described in their dialogues with me (Kvale 1997).

Interpretation has been described as art, and thus as involving creativity and intuition. Following systematic analysis of the themes and narrative sequences that the children had expressed, I tried to construct different narratives that reflected their communicated experiences by putting together different pieces as a coherent whole, like constructing a particular picture out of different pieces of a puzzle.

In my construction of the different narratives based on children's experiences, I used theoretical perspectives and the constructed public narrative of childhood that was related to Try Yourself. I decided to construct one narrative based on an interpretation of two (three) transcribed interview texts of children who had participated in the same group. Originally the sampling procedure of selecting more than one participant from each 'child-funded project' was focused on the differences and variations in children's experiences, in order to present different narratives. The initial steps of my analysis and interpretation were aimed at identifying different themes and narrative sequences. However, the similarities between the main themes and the narratives in the communicated experiences of different participants belonging to one group were striking. During the interpretation process of the different hut-building projects, this solution seemed to me to open up creative ways of looking at the differences between the three such projects. The transcribed interviews with the two girls who applied for funding for a music band also produced similar major similarities in their stories of their experiences of Try Yourself.

According to Kvale (1997), the process of interpreting the text using a narrative approach may involve structuring the text by either reducing it and/or extending it (Kvale 1997). To a certain degree both of these procedures

have been used in conducting my interpretation, though I also emphasise that, in my presentation of the different narratives, the quoted texts from children have been neither extended nor reduced.

Presentation of the articles

Chapter 4
Article 1: 'The participating child'. A vital pillar in this century?

Published in the Nordic journal *Nordisk pedagogikk*, 2001, vol. 21, no. 2.

Article 1 is not included due to copyright.

Chapter 5
Article 2: Small is powerful: Discourses on 'children and participation' in Norway

Published in *Childhood,* A global journal of child research*,* 2002, vol. 9, no. 1.

Paper II is not included due to copyright.

Chapter 6
Article 3: 'Imagined communities': The local community as a place for 'children's culture' and social participation in Norway

Published in Olwig, K. Fog and Gulløv, E. (2003) *Children's places: Cross cultural perspectives*, London and New York: Routledge.

Paper III is not included due to copyright.

Chapter 7
Article 4: 'Creating a place to belong': Girls' and boys' hutbuilding as a site for understanding discourses on childhood and generational relations in a Norwegian community'

Published in *Children's Geographies,* 2003, vol. 1, no. 2.

Paper IV is not included due to copyright.

Chapter 8
Article 5: The competent child and the right 'to be oneself': Reflections on children as fellow citizens in a day-care centre

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The competent child and the right 'to be one-self': Reflections on children as fellow citizens in a day-care centre

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Introduction

'Children have to be children on their own terms, based on their own interests, and they must be protected against "adult control"' (Government Declaration to the Norwegian Parliament - *Stortingsmelding,* 27/2000, 73).

The Government Declaration is entitled 'Day-care institutions in the best interests of children and parents', describing the political aims of day-care centres, and is produced by the Ministry for Children and Family Affairs in 2000. The document is one of many political texts stating that children have a right to increased influence in their everyday lives. In Norway, as well as in other countries in Europe and the developing world, discourses constructing children as social participants in society have flourished during the past fifteen years in both child policy and child research (Kjørholt 2001). The increasing amount of different participatory projects in this period should be viewed in the context of international discourses on children as social actors with certain rights to participation on the basis of their human rights, as manifested in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Discourses on children as citizens are closely related to the concept of 'the competent child' (Kjørholt 2001, Mortier 2002), which is often presented as a paradigm shift, replacing earlier concepts of children as vulnerable, dependant and in need of care.

These new discourses, along with the variety of participatory projects, obviously represent new opportunities for children and young people to influence decision-making processes in different contexts and to be participants in social, political and cultural life in new ways. On the other hand, discourses constructing children as subjects with rights to participation in so-

ciety are not unproblematic, but suffer from lack of conceptual clarity and ambiguity related to ideas of both participation and the child subject. An important issue is the kinds of social practices that are implemented in day-care centres as part of the new discourses, and their consequences for children's everyday lives and agency in public institutions.

In this article I shall present two particular texts that stem from publications produced by a Danish project entitled Children as Fellow Citizens, initiated in the 1990s by the Danish Ministry for Culture. The aim is to discuss the particular notion of toddlers and children below school age as 'fellow citizens' in day-care centres[1] represented in the texts, with a focus on how discourses on children and participation are connoted with specific ideological and moral values. I argue that the construction of the child subject in these texts is related on the one hand to processes of individualisation[2] and the construction of the autonomous, self-determining subject in late modern societies in the Western world in general, and on the other hand to particular cultural notions of 'the free child' that were current in Denmark and Norway during the 1990s. I stress that my intention here is to discuss a *particular position* existing in the discursive field and represented by the two

[1] In both Denmark and Norway, most children aged 1-6 are placed in institutional care such as day-care centres (Norway: *Barnehage* 1-6-year-olds: 66% (SSB 2002), Denmark: *Børnehaver*: 90%, *vuggestue*, 1-6year-olds: 60%) The children spend approximately six to nine hours a day in the institution. In both Denmark and Norway, the curriculum in day-care institutions emphasises 'free play' to a large extent, underlining the fact that the pedagogy is more child-centred than in primary schools.

[2] The concept is often used in different ways without further clarification. Elisabeth Näsman, referring to Turner 1986, distinguishes between three forms of individualism: first a political doctrine of individual rights; secondly an expression of individual autonomy; and thirdly the process of individuation, which points to integrative processes connecting the individual to social forms (Näsman 1994). It is the first two forms that are of particular relevance for my discussion here.

texts, not to present a complete analysis of discourses and ongoing practices in Nordic day-care institutions as such.

Theoretically I shall relate the discussion to Charles Taylor's theories of individualism and self-realisation in modern societies (Taylor 1978, 1991, 1999). However, my approach to these texts will also be related to the concepts of discourse and governmentality (Foucault 1991, Rose 1996, Neumann 2000, Hultqvist 2001). The rest of the article is structured as follows. After a section on methodology, I briefly introduce the two texts. The analysis of the texts starts with a presentation of a narrative I call '*The right to be oneself',* followed by a section discussing the texts' position in the discursive field. After this, I shall continue with a discussion of the texts relating to Charles Taylor's theoretical perspectives on negative liberty, individualisation and self-realisation, as well as perspectives on self-determination as new forms of governmentality, thus questioning the autonomous subject (Foucault 1991, Rose 1996, Hultqvist 2001). Finally I conclude with a critical discussion of both the emerging practices in day-care centres and the extreme individualism that the practices described seem to reflect.

Methodological approaches

In my analysis of these texts, I am drawing on the concepts of *discourse* and *narrative*. The term 'discourse' is used here as an analytical tool to explore how children are constituted as subjects through certain ways of speaking in the texts. According to Foucault, the concept of discourse refers to: 'the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements' (Foucault 1972, 80). This definition

embraces text in a broad sense, in principle covering materiality and social practices as well. Discourse can be used to shed light on how a certain text is culturally constructed in a particular time in history, with the aim of serving certain interests, and how it represents a specific 'regime of truth' that is often taken for granted (Foucault 1972, Kaarhus 1992). The concept of discourse, used as an analytical tool, opens the possibility to explore critically political discourses that subjects are placed in and thus to present ideological criticism. According to the anthropologists Crispin Shore and Susan Wright, who use the concept of discourse to analyse the field of policy, discourses are: 'configurations of ideas which provide the threads from which ideologies are woven' (Shore and Wright 1997, 18). Inspired by this thinking, I focus on identifying characteristics of the construction of children and toddlers as fellow citizens in the texts, together with related ideas and 'regimes of truth' that seem to be taken for granted.

The texts will also be read as narratives. The concept of narrative taken from literary criticism is also adopted within the human and social sciences to understand how human life and experience are organised in narrative structures and constituted as narratives. The title of an article on narrative research, 'The teller, the tale and the one being told', illustrates the social constructionist nature of narrative research and points to the dynamic relationship between the text (the tale), the author of the text (the teller) and the subject constructed by the text (the one being told) (Gudmundsdottir 1996). The 'teller' of a certain narrative is not only an individual subject: 'society' can also speak through written or spoken texts, presenting a social phenomenon (for instance, children as fellow citizens) in a narrative form. In that sense, policies can be read as narratives that serve to justify or condemn the present or legitimise new political visions and practices. Marga-

reth Somers uses the concept of political or public narratives, which are 'those narratives attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual, to intersubjective networks or institutions, however local or grand, micro or macro stories' (Somers 1994, 619).

Children's everyday lives are constituted through a variety of different narratives on childhood that exist in a particular society at a certain time. The term 'storyline' is fairly close to Somer's concept of public narrative, being:

> a course of events, a sequence of actions that, just as with categories, creates identities through inclusive and exclusive discursive movements. A storyline is a condensed version of a naturalised and conventional cultural narrative, one that is often used as the explanatory framework of one's own and others' practices and sequences of action (Søndergaard 1999, 13).

As this quotation stresses, cultural narratives or storylines are important because they are used as frames of reference, often taken for granted, for social practices, for instance, in day-care centres. Both children and adults are positioned within cultural narratives, which open the way for certain forms of action and meaning making while prohibiting others (Davies 1993). Storylines are collective, but they are changed through the different ways in which individuals interpret them and develop their own narratives (Søndergaard 1999). In other words, available storylines represent constraints and possibilities for how subjects narrate themselves and 'do' different positions (Søndergaard 1999). By reading a certain political or cultural text as a narrative, dominant representations and lines of development in the text often stand out as more evident and visible.

Narrative analyses have been characterised as being almost intuitive and loosely formulated, with no clear prescriptions for the collection, interpretation or analysis of data (Riessman 1993, Lieblich et al. 1998). My presentation of these two written texts will proceed through the following steps:

1) Describing the texts, partly drawing on procedures that have been termed 'holistic content analyses' (Lieblich et al. 1998). This procedure includes identifying core themes by trying to read the texts as a coherent story with the intention of grasping the teller's perspective.
2) Presenting a cultural narrative on children as fellow citizens. This narrative is told from a researcher's perspective, being the result of a dialogue between myself as a researcher and the texts. In the interpretation of the texts, my own position as a reader is influenced by theoretical and methodological understandings anchored in childhood as a social construction, cultural analytical approaches that take discourse theory as a starting point, and philosophical theory on individualisation and self-determination (Lee 1998, Foucault 1972, Mills 1999, Neumann 2000, Taylor 1999). I am also influenced by my position as a practitioner, in that I draw on my own earlier experiences as a preschool teacher in day-care centres in Norway.
3) Discussing the position of the texts in the discursive field by relating them to other texts debating day-care pedagogy and children as social participants in formal institutional contexts in Denmark and Norway.

'Listening to children': a presentation of two selected texts

The written texts that I have chosen come from a publication produced by the Ministry of Culture in connection with the project Children as Fellow Citizens. One of these is a report on this project, entitled *Listening to Chil-*

dren: A Book about Children as Fellow Citizens, which includes several short articles (Ried Larsen and Larsen 1992). The two texts are entitled 'Toddlers have rights too', and 'The play is more intensive'. The book from which the texts are taken can be described as popular in form and aimed at convincing and persuading readers of the value of giving children rights to participate in decision-making in day-care centres.[3] The texts are of particular interest because of their rhetorical form, which highlights certain representations of children, freedom and self-realisation in discourses on children's participation. Also evident are the relationships between constructions of children as active social participants in these texts and similar constructions in discourses on children and participation in Norway in 1990s (see Kjørholt 2001).

The project Children as Fellow Citizens was initiated and supported financially by the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Culture in Denmark. It is one of many participatory projects for children and young people that have been initiated by public authorities in the Nordic countries, as well as in many other European countries and the developing world, since the early 1990s. The aim of the Danish project was to empower children as citizens and increase their ability to influence their daily lives. As part of the project, various activities aimed at promoting children as social participants in different contexts were implemented in five local communities in Denmark. One of these activities dealt with children's rights to be active participants in day-care institutions. The two chosen

[3] The authors are journalists by profession. Between six and eight thousand copies of the report have been sold by the Danish Ministry of Culture to different readers, for instance staff in day-care centres, municipality administrations, bureaucrats etc. Requests for the report peaked during the 1990s, but it has also been in demand during the last few years (Information from the Danish Ministry of Culture).

texts describe one of the local projects that were initiated within the overall project, Children as Fellow Citizens, and deal with children's ability to make decisions for themselves in an institutional context such as a day-care institution. Two day-care institutions in a local community have formed part of this local project, *Vuggestuen Myretuen* for toddlers, and *Børnehaven Grantoften* for children from two six years old.

Text 1: 'Toddlers in day care have rights too'.

> In the 'Anthill' day-care institution, no adults pick the toddlers up and carry them, screaming and wriggling, to the bathroom to put on a new nappy. Here the toddlers have the right to continue their play, until they themselves decide to have a new nappy. (Ried Larsen and Larsen 1992, 31, translated by ATK)

These two sentences introduce the article 'Toddlers in day care have rights, too' – *Vuggestuebørn har også ret* – in the book *Listening to Children: A Book about Children as Fellow Citizens*. The authors of the texts, Hanne Ried Larsen and Maria Larsen, describe everyday life in the day-care centre and the new practices that the staff is implementing as part of the project Children as Fellow Citizens. The texts are written with the voice of the staff. The ongoing theme in the text is how toddlers are being empowered and emancipated from adult control by the new practices that are being implemented.

The quotation above illustrates how toddlers are constructed as autonomous subjects with the right to make their own decisions in everyday life within the institutional context. The rhetorical style of the text, which is aimed at convincing the reader of the value of the new practices, is also mirrored in the thematic approaches. One of the themes discussed is parental attitudes towards the changes in the institution. Some parents are presented as being

negative and sceptical regarding these changes, asking the staff whether the children are going to decide everything by themselves. As part of the argument of the superiority of these new practices that, the staff in *Vuggestuen Myretuen* are described as being successful in changing the attitudes of the parents at special meetings with them. The negative attitudes of parents are explained as resulting from a lack of knowledge and information. Referring to the staff's viewpoint, the authors argue that, when parents are informed and become used to the changes, their negative attitudes disappear.

After the introduction, the authors continue by describing what the professional caretakers do if the toddlers refuse to change their nappy even after being asked ten times: 'In order to avoid them [the toddlers] going too far, we make an agreement with them. When they have finished playing, their nappies will be changed' (ibid.).

In the text from *Vuggestuen Myretuen*, we see the toddlers, who are described as formerly having been treated with force by the adult caretakers, are being constructed as rights claimers. The former practice of putting on a new nappy without consulting the toddler is described as a form of coercion exercised by adults over the toddlers. The new discourse constructing the toddlers as subjects with rights of participation allows no room for this kind of practice on the part of the adults, which, within a discourse of care and child development would be defined as an inevitable act of care, a duty associated with professional care-work in day-care institutions. 'The children's rights to have 'pooh' in their nappy is only one of the rights the children have obtained after the staff started to reflect critically on their rules and listen more to the children' (ibid.). In this text, the children in the insti-

tution are constructed as belonging to a 'child community' of equals, where power relationships between children seem to be absent. This point is evident in another theme that is discussed in the text, dealing with the toddlers' rights to solve their own conflicts. Conflicts between adults and children are seen to be a result of adult control, which represents a threat to the children's possibilities for self-realisation within the institution. Conversely, conflicts *between children* do not seem to be an impediment to the individual child's right to self-determination. The quotation below underscores this point:

> The adults' respect for children saying 'no' results in fewer conflicts between children and adults. They do not scream when they are going to get a new nappy. They do not scream when they are going to have their rainwear put on. […] But there are more conflicts among the children themselves, a right they have also obtained. Earlier, the adults intervened more. Now the children are allowed to find solutions by themselves (ibid.).

The fact that the new cultural practices in the day-care institution result in more conflicts among the children themselves is therefore accepted, since they open up new possibilities for the children to practise another aspect of the right to influence their daily lives –the right to solve their own conflicts without adult intervention. However, the text is completely silent about how different children manage to solve these conflicts.

The authors of the text 'Toddlers have rights too' also raise the following question: Are there any limits to the children's rights to decide for themselves in the daily life of *Vuggestuen Myretuen*? The answer, from the staff's points of view, is formulated as follows: 'There has to be a certain framework, otherwise the toddlers will feel insecure. But many rules seem to exist for the sake of the rules themselves. All rules have to be discussed'

(ibid.). Two of these rules concern the meals and the sleeping routines in the day-care centre. The toddlers are not allowed to decide *if* and *when* they eat their meals and sleep during the day.

Text 2: 'The play is more intensive'

The right of children to decide when to eat their meals, however, is a central theme in text 2, which describes the new practices and daily life in the day-care institution of *Grantoften*. The subtitle of this text indicates the main theme of this short article: *No fixed time for meals and no forced activities*. As in the previous text, 'Toddlers have rights too', the main theme is a description of the improved quality of life for children after the changes in the practices within the institution. As part of the introduction, the author refers to the staff, saying: 'Two schoolchildren attended the day-care centre [for two days], and then we started to discuss our daily routines and practices. The children made observations, and they inspired us to break with many of our habits' (Ried Larsen and Larsen 1991, 27). The schoolchildren from the local primary school were given the task of expressing their views about the ability of the smaller children to decide for themselves. Based on the pupils' advice and their own reflections, the staff changed their practices in certain ways to endorse children as fellow citizens. Earlier daily routines, for instance, a fixed meal for everybody at a particular time, is one practice that is seen as being forced on children by adults and it has therefore been abolished. The overall argument is that the abolition of rules and the practice of adults deciding time and activities structures, means a better life for children.

The ability of children to decide when to eat seems to be an important part of the right to self-determination according to the ideas in the project Children as Fellow Citizens. I quote from the text:

> Now the children can eat their lunch when they are hungry. […] The fruit meal at two o'clock is also eliminated. It was not the children who needed to stop playing and sit together, eating fruit and listening to fairy tales. The fruit is ready at two o'clock, but the children decide by themselves when they want to eat it. Now the staff only arranges meetings with the whole group (*'samlingsstunder'*) when it is somebody's birthday, or a group of children have prepared a hot meal for everyone. In other words, when there is a reason for the whole group to be together (ibid., 29).

This text illustrates how different arrangements, such as common meals for everybody (prepared by adults) and fairy tales with the whole group, have been eliminated in order to promote children's rights to make their own decisions. As the last sentence indicates, these activities are not seen as a good enough reason for the collective group of children to be together. However, a child's birthday or a hot meal prepared for everybody by a group of *children* is seen as a reason to be together as a collective group. The paradox that these reasons also seem to be a result of adult opinions and evaluations is left silent in the text.

As in the text 'Toddlers have rights too', reactions from parents are also a theme in this text. The authors report the staff referring to rumours saying that children are allowed to do whatever they want, for instance bring snakes to the day-care centre from their homes. A paragraph in the text adds the following argument to this, under the sub-title: '*The world is not created free*'. One of the staff members says: 'We have not made the whole world free. The children are not allowed to shout or to run up and down the

corridors or create a disturbance. It is our responsibility to teach the children ordinary manners' (ibid., 28). And she continues:

> Excursions, rhythm and music practice and common meals once a week are among the few obligatory activities in *Grantoften.* It is not up to children to decide whether they want to participate in these activities. The adults see it as their responsibility to give children experiences outside the institution. (ibid.).

The rhetorical form of the text provides no room for discussion or critical argument. Critical voices opposed to the new practices are explained as being caused by a lack of information. The quotation above also underlines certain ambiguities and paradoxes embedded in the text. On the one hand, adult control and decision-making on behalf of the children is presented as an evil that has to be abolished. On the other hand, the staff members have in fact made many decisions about structure, rules and the organisation of time and space within these institutions. Another paradox concerns an additional theme presented in the text, namely the adult need to have a certain structure: 'When old habits are broken, one has to have something to stick to' (ibid.).

In the beginning, the staff drew up a form that organised the adults' activities according to time, space and responsibilities with regard to the new situations. It is remarkable that, whereas a certain structure of time and space during the day is presented as a threat to children's rights to participation, this is presented as a *need* of the adults working in the day-care centre.

A public narrative about children: 'The right to be oneself'

I read the two texts from Children as Fellow Citizens as a public narrative about children that I have entitled *'The right to be oneself'*. As already

noted in the methodological section, public narratives are 'attached to cultural or institutional formations larger than the single individual' (Somers 1994, 619). This public narrative is first and foremost a story about children's right to decide for themselves and to realise themselves in 'free activities' with other children. In the texts, the fellow citizenship of children is constructed as the individual's right to be free and make her or his own decisions. Freedom for the individual child is connected with notions of 'free choice', a core issue in the new practices that the staff is implementing. Children are presented as a weak group in contrast to the adults, who are in a position of power. Intervention from the group in power, the adults, represents an obstacle to the children's ability to be free and to decide for themselves.

The particular way in which children are constituted as rights claimers from an early age in the two texts is, to me, an illustration of how universalising discourses on children's rights in this context are connected to particular moral values that are hidden in the discourse. These overall values seem to take the form of the ability of children to make their own individual choices. In this particular narrative, time is a structuring element dividing the story of childhood into two phases: 'the past', characterised by a patriarchy controlling children's well-being in a negative way; and the present, which also points towards future visions of equality for all, including children. The new practices that are being implemented are seen as an inevitable step in progress towards democracy for all human beings. The authors take the view that the practices of the past must be left behind because they are oppressive to children and deny them their rights. As such, the narrative is also about the development of egalitarian democratic societies, since it sees development as a kind of neutral and encouraging 'force' that is

treated as politically and ideologically neutral, something to which one has to adapt.

In the texts, the toddlers and other children are placed within discourses on children who belong to a collective group of peers within an age-related social order. This collective group is described as having a right to play without being interrupted by adults. Toddlers and preschool children are first and foremost constructed as 'playing subjects'. Citizenship is then related to individual choice and rights to play. Children are then asserted to be autonomous and recognised as *equal* to adults in certain respect on the basis of being *different.* Discourses that construct toddlers as vulnerable and in need of the care and protection of adults are rejected. The texts also illuminate the tension between and dualistic nature of two opposing discourses on children as subjects in day-care centres. The narrative evokes prevailing discourses in Danish day-care institutions, which situate adults as authoritarian subjects who force toddlers to perform certain practices without respecting the toddlers' own desires and will. In discourses on children as fellow citizens the daily practice of preschool teachers in providing toddlers with a new nappy is given a meaning that differs from the same practice constructed in discourses on professional care and children's needs. The toddlers and children in the narrative '*The right to be oneself*' are constructed as autonomous, competent, rational subjects from an early age, exhibiting the competence not only to make their own decisions, but also to express these decisions verbally.

Common meals: a threat to children's self-realisation

The public narrative is a story about the relationships between citizenship and individual freedom. In my view, the narrative illustrates how this par-

ticular position in the discursive field of children's rights to participation means excluding certain kinds of meaning-making and cultural practices while promoting others. Whereas a weekly excursion for everybody outside the institution is highly valued and is seen as obligatory for all children, common meals for everybody, which are organised at a certain time every day, is seen as obstructing the exercise of children's rights. This challenges prevailing discourses on traditional day-care pedagogy – *barnehagepedagogikk*- and professional care both in Denmark and Norway, which values collective meals for everybody. Such collective meals can be characterised as a time-structuring, ritual activity, affirming a particular cultural fellowship and making visible each and everybody's belonging to a specific community of children - *barnefellesskap.* These traditional discourses emphasise a homelike, cosy atmosphere in the construction of the meal as a cultural practice (Korsvold 1998). Flowers and candles create an aesthetic framework around a community of children in which cultural values are both reproduced and created. Common meals can be characterised as both a central site for social interaction, friendship, care and humour, and an affirmation of belonging to this community of children. Participation in common meals has significant symbolic value as an assertion of belonging to a particular culture (Douglas 2002). The meal is seen as a highly structured and ritualised action, and it obviously also represents discipline and socialisation into certain norms and values in the surrounding culture.

It is interesting to note that the changes in cultural practices that are being implemented by the staff within the institution are mainly spoken into existence within the discourse of children's universal rights in general, and their rights to participate in particular. In the public narrative '*The right to*

be oneself,' common meals are constructed merely as a way of exercising adult power and controlling the children. Other aspects of a common meal, such as those I have described above, are totally absent in the narrative. A collective meal decided by adults is seen as being inconsistent with children's right to choose for themselves. This particular construction of the child subject in the narrative – the child as an individual human being with the right to decide for him/herself –leaves room for certain types of behaviour and freedom, while closing the door on other possible forms of meaning-making and social practices within the institution, like a common meal. The new practices that are being implemented can be interpreted as being part of individualisation processes, in that they eliminate certain forms of collective practices when the whole group are participating together in the same activities. But the public narrative conveys other possible subject positions for the 'child' and other forms of promoting 'participation rights'. In the text from the Danish project Children as Fellow Citizens, the 'competent child with the right to decide for him/herself' is spoken into existence as if there were only *one* way of acting for the staff in order to fulfil children's rights. In the chosen texts, the particular construction of 'the competent autonomous child' is in a position of hegemony, which effectively excludes alternative subject positions.

The narrative is also a story about the dualistic nature of children and adults as belonging to two different and opposite groups. Relationships between adults and children are constructed only in terms of perspectives of power, which itself seems to be understood as an individual property possessed and exercised above all by adults, while being absent as a force among children.

The position of the texts in the discursive field of children as social participants in institutional care in Denmark and Norway

As described in the introduction, I shall now place the two texts from the publication *Listening to Children: A Book about Children as Fellow Citizens* in the discursive field. A central question is whether the particular construction of children and toddlers as fellow citizens in the two texts represents dominant and hegemonic positions in the discursive field, or reflects a marginal position. In order to answer this, I shall refer to recent discussions in professional and research literature on children as social participants within the field of early childhood education and care. There is a huge amount of literature in this field, and my intention is not to present a complete review of it all. However, I have selected some texts that I find to be of particular interest for my discussion.

In a book published by the Danish National Institute for Educational Research in 1998, the authors discuss pedagogical theory and practice in day-care centres in Denmark. In an article entitled 'Participation or reactive pedagogy,' Pernille Hviid characterises ongoing practices in Danish day-care institutions as a 'what do you want pedagogy', emphasising children's freedom of choice and 'free play' in everyday life in the institutions. This pedagogy takes as its starting point the individual child's perspective and refers to particular notions of 'freedom', 'desire', 'self-determination', 'diversity' and 'free choice' (Hviid 1998). Self-determination, Hviid argues, is mainly understood as the individual's ability to 'decide for her/himself', and to have as many possibilities for individual choice as possible. This understanding prevails in different institutions for children, from toddlers up to schoolchildren. Hviid is critical of this practice for a variety of reasons. One of her arguments is that this kind of pedagogical practice places

the children overwhelmingly in a position where they must take responsibility for their own lives and development. The implication of this, she argues, is that the right to make a choice of one's own includes being responsible for this choice (ibid., 213). She points out that this particular practice of encouraging individualism was introduced in the 1990s, representing a change from pedagogical practices during the 1970s and 1980s. Writing at the end of the 1990s, she argues that, 'the Danish day-care institution probably stands at the threshold of another kind of pedagogy, which places more emphasis on the social and learning aspects' (ibid., 208). In the discursive field, Hviid's voice confirms the pervasiveness of representations of self-determination and freedom in Danish institutions for children in the cultural texts that I have discussed. However, her voice is also a critical voice in the discursive field, since it reveals the emergence of a different construction of the child subject and individualism at the dawn of the 21st century. The hegemonic position of the particular child subject in the two texts I have discussed is thus challenged.

I have also identified similar notions of self-determination and free choice operating in the discursive field in Norway. In many day-care institutions and *skolefritidsordninger* (after-school supervision of children), the practice of eating a meal together has been eliminated since the end of the 1990s as part of the intention of giving children more time for 'free play' and to decide when (and even if, in some institutions) they want to eat their lunch. The head of the state network for after-school institutions or *skolefritidsordninger* in Norway reports as follows:

> I travel all over the country and hold courses where one of the issues I address is the meal. When, talking into the microphone, I speak warmly of free eating in tall trees with one's mates, I get icy looks from wise women in their prime in the audience. (*SFO-Nytt* 1999, 4)

The construction of children as social participants in different institutions in Norway is emphasised in different ways, but there has been no state-initiated project on children as fellow citizens in day-care centres, as there has been in Denmark. However, in some parts of the country some public authorities have recently initiated more systematic approaches to implementing practices connected to 'children's participation rights' in day-care institutions.

The child's right to choose activities, and the children with whom she/he wants to play, is stressed in both day-care and after-school institutions in both Norway and Denmark. Contemporary discussions concerning day-care institutions in Denmark are characterised by 'moral assumptions and evaluations on individual autonomy, social coherence and perceptions of the welfare society and citizenship' (Gulløv 2001, 2). Research in Danish *skolefritidsordninger* shows that the staff strongly emphasise children's abilities to decide and manage themselves. Susanne Højlund relates a story concerning one of the staff members in one institution in Denmark where she was doing fieldwork. While closing the door to a particular room where children were playing together without adult intervention, she enthusiastically stated: 'in that room the children can be themselves completely and utterly' (Højlund 2000, 7). This quotation illustrates how notions of freedom and self-realisation within institutional contexts are associated with the absence of adult control and intervention. These particular cultural notions of 'being oneself' also correspond to the anthropologist Marianne Gullestad's analyses of changes in relationships between the generations in Norway during the last five to six decades. Whereas children in the 1950s were brought up to be useful, children in contemporary Norway are

brought up to 'be themselves' (Gullestad 1997). There is, however, a certain tension between the emphasis on self-realisation and the control of children's everyday lives (Prout 2000). The ambiguities between contemporary discourses of children as autonomous social actors on the one hand, and discourses placing children as beings in need of more control in the 21st century on the other hand, illustrate a situation characterised by a new blurring of borders between adults and children.

The texts presented about children as fellow citizens in Danish day-care centres form part of contemporary discourses on children's rights and their place in society. Thoughts, reflections and ways of reasoning about children that are presented in the texts affect the social practices being developed within the institution, as well as how the generational order is constructed. Locating the child subject in discourses on children's rights in these two day-care institutions universalises a particular subject position for children, contributing to making a shift in discursive practices in day-care centres authoritative (Shore and Wright 1997).

Negative liberty, individualisation and self-realisation

From this background, I draw the conclusion that the two texts in the Danish report, 'Listen to Children', represent a position that is not on the periphery of the discursive field of children and participation. However, the degree of empirical extension of the practices described in the two selected texts in Danish and Norwegian day-care centres has not been documented by researchers. The texts document a certain position in the discursive field that it is important to make visible and discuss. One important question is how such public texts on children as fellow citizens can acquire validity by being produced in universal children's rights discourses? I shall approach

this question by referring to the philosopher Charles Taylor, for whom individualism is a major malaise of modernity. Taylor, like many other philosophers and social scientists in modern times stresses that individualism can take various forms and assume several facets that can be approached from different angles. In my discussion I shall tentatively look at particular forms of modern individualism as moral discourses on human life that characterise Western societies. Children and adults are both placed in particular discourses representing moral ideas and values that form the subject in such a way as to affect possible ways of acting and thinking. Particular storylines or narratives on individualism can be identified in these discourses. Taylor argues that, 'Modern freedom and autonomy centres us on ourselves, and the ideal of authenticity requires that we discover and articulate our own identity' (Taylor 1991, 81).

Taylor's theories on individualism in modern Western societies are useful in understanding powerful discourses and storylines that affect the construction of modern subjects – children as well as adults. In an earlier social order, individual life was to a large degree determined by 'fate' and by inhabiting particular positions serving the interests of a community grounded in the order of things or the will of God. Today, new moral positions hold that everyone has the right to have their own values and to develop their own ways of life grounded in individual choices about what is important. Taylor claims further that:

> This individualism involves a centring on the self and a concomitant shutting out, or even unawareness, of the greater issues or concerns that transcend the self, be they religious, political, historical. As a consequence, life is narrowed or flattened (ibid., 14).

This centring on individual self-fulfilment is connected with a moral idea of being 'true to oneself', which can be described as a culture of authenticity that points to a better or 'higher' mode of life. The higher mode of life is reached by subjects who are true to the 'inner voice' with which they are constituted. In order to act correctly, one has to listen to one's own nature and feelings 'deep inside'. Taylor is critical of the fact that the force of subjectivism and the contemporary culture of authenticity are not openly discussed as a moral ideal, but explained in terms of 'recent changes in the mode of production, or new patterns of youth consumption, or the security of affluence'(ibid., 21).

Closely related to the contemporary culture of authenticity are Rousseau's ideas about freedom. Taylor argues that freedom is often conceptualised as 'self-determining freedom', referring to the idea that individual freedom means individual independence from others, being free from external influences. This concept of freedom is connected with traditions of negative freedom. Whereas theories of negative freedom are connected with individual choice and notions of freedom as doing what one wants, positive freedom stresses the subject's actual ability to control and shape his/her own life (Taylor 1985).

Although children are not a specific focus of his theoretical approach, I find Taylor's perspectives to be of great relevance in discussing children as subjects in modern Western societies. He claims that the ideal of authenticity in Western culture in the last two centuries has 'identified one of the important potentialities in human life' (Taylor 1991, 74). However, he also argues that it is important to explore contemporary discourses critically in order to reveal negative forms of the ideal of authenticity that are con-

nected with notions of freedom as self-determining freedom. Taylor's standpoint is that practices linked with contemporary ideals of individual self-realisation and authenticity must be defined and discussed in relation to the moral ideas and ethics to which these practices subscribe (Taylor 1991). From this perspective, implementing children's rights to be active participants in day-care institutions entails continuous critical evaluation of the dynamic relationships between each child subject's expression, wishes and needs on the one hand, and the particular moral and cultural space in which these expressions are developed on the other. I agree with Taylor that we cannot reject the ideals of self-realisation and authenticity that are connected with the construction of human subjects in modern societies. The ability to be active participants by developing individuality and self-realisation within the day-care centre are, I suggest, of great importance. However, individual self-realisation and the right to be an active social participant in everyday life must be evaluated in accordance with the social practices that are constructed and the social and moral space within which these practices are constituted. Human relationships, intergenerational as well as age-related, are part of the social and moral space of these institutions.

Taylor claims that the subject – or the self – is developed within a moral space. From a discourse-theoretical point of view, one might argue that the powerful ideals of authenticity and particular forms of individualism in modern times produce subject positions that mirror the moral space within which children are placed. In the public texts I have presented, the moral space in which children are placed seems to be a space that constructs self-determination and negative freedom as overarching values. This is problematic for many reasons. Taylor argues that: 'the subject himself cannot

be the final authority on the question whether he is free; for he cannot be the final authority on the question whether his desires are authentic, whether they do or do not frustrate his purposes' (Taylor 1985, 216). According to Taylor, individual self-realisation is always closely connected with participation in and belonging to a human community. The subject's individual autonomy is closely intertwined to dependency by being constructed within a web of social relationships to others (Lee 1998). The values and moral standards in human communities constitute a basis for individual choice, values and preferences. Rather than a focus on individual choice to liberate children from external control – that is, adult power – the main focus should be discourses and social practices in the day-care centres. It is most important to explore critically what kind of choices each child has. These choices can be evaluated by being related to analysis of the complexities of the cultural context, constituting a social space for children as citizens. Social processes of inclusion and marginalisation during 'free play' are one important aspect of this space. Can each child choose to be included in different groups of child communities and to form close friendships? Is there a variety of different positions available related to play, or are some children constantly placed in marginal positions such as, for example, that of being a dog in a symbolic play about family life? Is individual self- realisation and autonomy related to caring relationships? What kind of subjectivities and social practices are available in the social space within which the child is placed?

Discourses on children as fellow citizens in day-care centre have to link children as individuals to a wider network of relationships, a network consisting of both children and adults. Within any one institution there is likely to be a fluid network of different and shifting relationships, characterised

by diversity according to ongoing social processes and social practices. These relationships may represent different communities – *fellesskap* – that expose children to certain moral and cultural values and standards. Degrees of inclusion, exclusion and belonging to such groups of friends – or communities – will be a core issue in relation to understanding children's expressions and choices. These are not 'free choices', but choices developed within the particular social and moral space to which each child relates.

Self-determination as new forms of governmentality: questioning the autonomous subject

The particular construction of children as fellow citizens in the day-care centres can also be examined from another angle. Foucault's concept of governmentality questions the notions of individual freedom and power as an individual possession as revealed in the public texts on citizenship in Danish day-care centres that have been analysed. Subjects are placed and constituted within discourses. The fact that discourses 'design' subjects in particular ways implies that individual autonomy and freedom are always related to a particular subject positions. Foucault asserts that discourses are: 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault 1972, 49). From a discourse-theoretical point of view, one might argue that these particular forms of individualism – which, according to Taylor, may legitimate 'the worst forms of subjectivism' – represent 'regimes of truth' to which subjects in modern Western societies are subjugated. Foucault asserts that: 'Never, I think in the history of human sciences – even in the old Chinese society – has there been such a tricky combination in the same political structures of individualisation techniques and of totalisation procedures' (Foucault 1982, 213). Without going further into this short text by Foucault, we can see that the quotation underlines the oppres-

sive power of contemporary discourses that place human beings in positions that promote new forms of subjectivity. Foucault regarded these practices of government in Western societies as troubling (cf. Gordon 1991). The concept of governmentality relates to truth regimes or power regimes that, in modern societies, design subjects – adults as well as children – in particular ways, as self-determining rational subjects. Foucault defined the concept of governmentality, referring to changing forms of governance through history, as: '"the conduct of conduct"; that is to say, a form of activity aiming to shape, guide or affect the conduct of some person or persons' (Gordon 1991, 2).

New forms of subjectivity relate to changes in economy and political life and the development of decentralised forms of governing. Liberal principles of governing emphasise the autonomous and self-regulated subject. However, in recent years the governing of the subject has become based on regulating the choices made by autonomous subjects, based not on their relation to society but on their pledge to families and communities (Rose 1996). Building on the theories of Foucault and Rose, Hultqvist's analysis of day-care institutions and primary schools in Sweden shows that, since the 1970s, there has been an increasing emphasis on the child as a responsible subject.

> [Children] have become a subject that is 'guaranteed' a certain freedom to act on their own, to be autonomous and self-reliant. This idea of freedom inscribed within the practices of childhood is the vantage point for the new decentralized rationales for governance. Freedom is the result as well as the prerequisite of such decentralised forms of governing. (Hultqvist 1997, 409)

In his analysis of the history of Swedish preschools (day-care centres), Hultqvist asserts that the particular construction of the child subject in con-

temporary preschool discourses can be traced back to a period of transition between 1920 and 1940. The child was seen as a renewer of society, as a hope for creating a better society in the future. In order to make a more humane society and re-create social life, the child had to realise his/her full potential. Hultqvist argues:

> Inherent in this vision is the liberal idea to set the child free. The child must be released from the restraints of the old order, i.e. from the traditions and conventions of the adult society, in order for the child to be able to realise their (and the person's) full potential. (ibid., 419)

The quotation also illustrates how contemporary notions of children and self-realisation in Nordic countries are related to the concept of negative freedom that I presented earlier. According to Hultqvist, freedom is a principle through which children are governed. On the basis of this, one may assume that contemporary discourses on children as fellow citizens linked to notions of freedom as negative freedom restrict children's possibilities to act and think, rather than broadening their horizons for a variety of possible actions, thoughts, expressions and emotional feelings of freedom and belonging. One might argue, and rightly so, that toddlers' and children's verbal expressions of their desires and choices in the two day-care institutions, *Myretuen* and *Grantoften*, mirror discourses on extremes forms of individualism in the institutional context. In other words, they choose and express wishes and desires from a limited repertoire of subject positions made available to them within particular discursive practices that are constructed by the adults in the institutions. Placing toddlers and young children in day-care institutions in a position to take their own decisions in this way can thus be interpreted as an example of new forms of governmentality in modern societies.

The day -care centre as a space for children as citizens

I have argued that it is important to realise that the space created for children to construct themselves as fellow citizens and competent individuals with the right 'to be themselves' in the texts in the Danish day-care institution is in fact an ideological and moral space suggesting particular notions of what it means to be a child. But this is not openly discussed in the texts. The fact that the space created for children's rights of participation is constructed by adults as a rather limited space for action and meaning-making is also hidden. The space for children is a place for individual choices within a group of children and is understood as belonging to an authentic child culture aimed at realising 'free play' among themselves. Placed within these discourses, children are not able to choose to participate in an intergenerational relationship and interact with age groups other than preschool children. They cannot participate in working activities, or decide to engage in activities together with their parents or older siblings. Nor can they choose to go outside the day-care institution. The space is designed in a particular architectural style, with particular toys and furniture representing values and norms concerning how to behave as a child in the institution. They are placed in this limited material space together with groups of other children of roughly their own age. Placing children in this age-related social order clearly imposes many restrictions on the choices that are available to them.

The two texts about children as citizens in day-care institutions can, I have argued, be read as a narrative of the construction of children as rational subjects realising ultimate moral values of self-determining freedom and individual choice. The new practices empowering children to decide for themselves, being freed from external (adult) control, are obviously con-

nected with notions of negative freedom. The representations of children and the new social practices that are described in the texts 'The play is more intensive: no fixed meals and enforcing activities' and 'Toddlers have rights too', certainly serve to substantiate Taylor's argument. Based on his theoretical perspectives, it will be important to view children's social participation in day-care institutions in the light of a broader cultural context – first and foremost, as he assumes, within the moral space of which individual choice and freedom form a part. This concerns both the individual level and the group level. For each individual, choices have different meanings and significance, some being of great importance while others count less according to the situation and the more overarching values to which the individual subscribes.

In the text 'The play is more intensive', conflicts between children were seen as promoting a new right: – the right to solve the conflicts by themselves. Whereas the staff in the institution aimed to avoid conflicts between adults and children, since they saw these as an expression of adult power and control, the new practices were seen as promoting this new right for children. This example clearly shows that the overriding moral value here is self-determination for the individual child. Conflict solutions among children are not related to forms of ethical standards of moral justice. Nor are ways of resolving conflicts evaluated and differentiated according to any form of ethical standard of good and bad. If two children are involved in a conflict between each other, and the children are forced to find their own solutions to this conflict, children (like adults) will obviously choose a variety of different ways to solve such conflicts. Some children may then be placed in positions as winners, whereas others become losers. Some children might suffer by being placed in a subordinate position as victims

of injustice, which are nonetheless legitimated by discourses on 'children's rights to solve conflicts on their own'. Such discourses also imply leaving the responsibility to children for their own social life among themselves, as well as for making moral decisions on their own. One may ask whether this practice represents adults' abdication from a caring relationship with children.

In my view, Taylor's critique of self-determination and 'free choice' as guiding moral values can be related to this example. Some ways of solving conflicts are better than others according to moral standards of justice. To avoid placing children in positions of perverted individualism, it is necessary to discriminate and reflect on different ways of solving conflicts in relation to moral values on justice, and to make such moral standards superior to the individual's free choice. When groups of children are together – as in a day-care centre – reflections and evaluations about whose interests count must be made repeatedly.

Seeing the particular form of individual freedom that is described in the texts as a way of governing children – and thus as being inherent in power, not its opposite – makes possible reflections on children's participation within institutional contexts other than the particular rights discourse represented in the analysed text. From a Foucauldian perspective, it can be argued that, by being placed in discourses constructing human beings as autonomous and self-determining subjects, children are being placed in positions that are oppressive in new ways. Subjects are constructed as having the intentions and the 'free will' to decide for themselves and create their own 'way of life'. The agency associated with this child subject is in cer-

tain contexts constructed with an almost absolute power to influence and change the circumstances of life.

This perspective also opens up the possibility of questioning the role of language and speech acts as constitutive of the subject as a social participant, as seen in the Danish texts about the day-care institutions, *Myretuen* and *Grantoften.* It has been argued that universalistic notions of the human being, like rights discourses, can be connected with particularistic notions of the human being that recognise individuals as rights claimers based exclusively on cognitive and linguistic competence (Vetlesen 1996). The notion of the human being as a sensitive and emotional subject is thus excluded and left behind (Vetlesen 1996). This argument is of particular relevance, I think, for discussions of children's and toddlers' rights to participation in formal institutions like a day- care centre.

Concluding remarks

The aim of this article has been to discuss and contextualise universal children's rights discourses and practices connected with children's rights to participation in Nordic countries in recent years. The narrative of children's rights to participation within Danish day-care institutions is a narrative of particular forms of individualism in a modern Western society that constructs certain ideas of individual autonomy and self-realisation as overarching moral values. Self-realisation is conceptualised as the individual's right to make her/his own choices and decisions. Children's self-realisation is first and foremost seen as an individual project that can be realised within an age-related social order. As such, the narrative I have entitled 'The right to be oneself' is also a public narrative that conceptualises an age-related social order as a moral ideal, constructed as a relationship be-

tween equal individual child subjects. Play is seen as a core activity of the subjects belonging to a 'community of children', reflecting particular cultural notions of what it means to be a child in the Danish context. This particular construction of children and childhood is in line with constructions of children as social participants and fellow citizens in Norway (Kjørholt 2001). The toddlers in the *Myretuen* were constructed as 'fellow citizens' by obtaining the new 'right' in their daily life in the institution, 'to have pooh in their nappy' (Ried Larsen and Larsen 1992, 31). This example clearly illustrates the need to challenge such positions within discourses on 'children and participation' in different ways, to destabilise it by making visible truths that are taken for granted, and to 'speak into existence' important issues and perspectives that until now have been excluded from the discourse.

I have also argued that there is a need to replace the notion of the autonomous subject with a relational perspective emphasising care and solidarity, based on the assumption that all subjects, whether adults or children, move between different and shifting positions of dependence and independence, competence and incompetence. The construction of children as social participants – or citizens – in day-care centres represents important challenges for policy and research, as well as for the field of early childhood education and care. The ability of children and toddlers to be active social participants influencing everyday life and realising themselves are the preferred goals. However, individual self-realisation and rights of participation must be critically explored in relation to the complexities of the moral and cultural space children inhabit. A core need is to obtain insights into children's own constructions of identities and communities in day-care centres, and to ex-

plore how they position themselves within contemporary discourses on individualisation and children as citizens.

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Chapter 9
Children as social participants and childhood as a social and symbolic space: concluding discussions

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to highlight the main points and arguments presented in the five articles in this thesis. The scope of my study is broad and complex, leaving behind, in each article, threads and new questions as potential focal points for further analysis and discussion. In this concluding chapter, I have chosen perspectives and issues that seem to be particularly important to highlight in order to generate new insights into discourses on children as participants in contemporary societies, constituting childhood as a social and symbolic space.

The increasing emphasis on children as social participants in society is a global phenomenon, reflecting blurring boundaries between children and adults and ambiguities of what it means to be a child. Due to globalisation processes these changing constructions are also affecting children in the third world, but this is still mostly an issue in late modern, industrial societies. The blurring of boundaries also reflects transformations concerning the social construction of the person in the western world (Gullestad 2003). One of the key issues in my study was to obtain an insight into the conditions of existence for the increasing power of discourses on children as participants in society in recent years. I have argued that the growing accent on children as social participants and citizens in Norway since the 1990s is connected to the dynamic interplay between international children's rights

discourses and particular cultural constructions of children and childhood (especially ideas of what constitutes a 'good' childhood) operating on the national as well as local levels in the Norwegian context. In order to develop further the understanding of how this inter-discursive relationship affects children, I would like to present additional theoretical reflections on the construction of the child subject as embedded in the international rights discourses discussed especially in Article 5. Individualisation connected to individual choice, self-determination and the search for authentic voices are, I have argued, core issues in the construction of the 'participating child' in contemporary societies. In being based on children's narratives, this theoretical discussion points to the importance of communities, belonging and intergenerational relations and represents a small step in a reconceptualisation of children as social participants – or citizens – in society.

The discursive construction of childhood and children highlight to a certain extent both *universality,* due to the connection with international rights discourses, and *particularity,* revealing specific cultural notions of children and childhood in the Nordic cultural context. However, the discursive field also exposes complexities and ambiguities related to current social constructions of children as participants in society. Children's experiences in Try Yourself demonstrate on the one hand how the project opens up new ways of participation in local communities, but on the other hand how the new positions made open to them by these discourses are restricted and connoted with particular cultural notions of what it means to be a child. Current constructions of children as social participants or citizens in contemporary societies reflect ambiguity related to the construction of children as either being *different* or *equal* to adult citizens, a construction that suggests a lack of clarity as well as paradoxes.

Another focal point taken up in my studies is the close interplay between discourses on children as citizens and discourses on nationality and democracy in Norway. This relationship highlights on the one hand the significance of children as central actors in these discourses, and on the other hand how social constructions of children and childhood are closely intertwined with economic, cultural and political transformations in society.

As part of my concluding chapter, I argue that, in complex ways, all these different discourses constitute a *social and symbolic space* for children as participants, in that they make available certain social practices and subject positions for participation while eliminating others. More than that, I will argue that the immense symbolic value related to constructions of children as social participants in society, also evokes childhood as an *ideological space.* However, it is important to underline how children themselves also are significant participants in the construction of this social and ideological space. Moreover, as I have shown, children are important actors in the renewal of Norway as a modern democracy. Their importance as vital actors contributing to constructing 'imagined communities' in global societies where traditional national and local identities and borders are blurred will be further highlighted. The construction of children as social participants in society then illuminates their great symbolic significance.

Children as social participants in society: hegemonic constructions and marginalised positions

My study reveals that discourses on children as social participants in Norwegian society can be characterised as being in a position of hegemony, in the sense that they reflect certain constructions of the child that are relatively unchallenged and seem to be taken for granted (see Neumann 2001).

One condition for the existence of this hegemonic position is the association with international rights discourses that have become hegemonic, connecting the construction of the child subject to value concepts such as rights, freedom, choice, independence and individuality (Gullestad 2003). These constructions of children as participants in society can be described as quite effective and almost impossible to resist in modern democratic societies, because the subject that is thereby produced is linked with value concepts such as liberty, human rights, respect for the human being, equality, democracy, development and progress. All these concepts represent core values anchored in long traditions in western liberal societies. The claim of universality makes human rights discourses extremely resistant towards alternative constructions of the human being.

Another condition for the existence of the hegemonic character of discourses on children as participants in the Norwegian context is the interdiscursive relationship between discourses on democracy and nationality on the one hand, and children and childhood on the other. As I presented in Article 1, the terms 'child' and 'participation' both represent nodal points in the discourse, floating signifiers which different discourses fight to cover with meaning (Lauclau and Mouffe 1985). This implies that both terms can be filled with a variety of different meanings, from other discourses occupying the field, and still function as if the signifiers (the term 'child' and the term 'participation') referred to one coherent explicit meaning. One important point is that this fact is often hidden in the discourse. The meaning of concepts such as children as 'active participants' and 'competent autonomous actors', which are used so frequently without further clarification or discussion, is, as I have demonstrated, often taken for granted. This taken-for-grantedness is further demonstrated by the overwhelming collec-

tive acceptance that these notions seem to attain in different contexts, as well as the striking lack of discussion concerning the use of these concepts.

As the result of the survey (Article 2) and the analysis of notions of children and childhood relating to Try Yourself (Article 1) demonstrate, the construction of children as participants reveals a complexity of different notions of children as participants operating in the discursive field. My studies demonstrate that the construction of children as competent autonomous actors – which is so often presented as a paradigm shift, replacing earlier notions of children as dependent, incapable and vulnerable – reveals different constructions at stake, referring to children as both becoming and being, independent and dependent. This complexity, however, is seldom visible at first hand or openly discussed in the discourse, clearly explaining the characteristics with nodal points described by Laclau and Mouffe, presented above.

As I have argued (Article 2), there also seem to be a high degree of correspondence between the construction of the citizen in Norwegian discourses on democracy and 'Norwegianness' as characterized by egalitarian individualism on the one hand (Eriksen 1993, Bergreen 1993, Gullestad 1997), and the child subject in international human rights discourses on the other. The emphases on equality for all and the individual's rights to participate in society in Norwegian democracy are in line with the main principles embedded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The UNCRC therefore seems to be functioning as a tool for the further development and strengthening of Norwegian democratic traditions (Kjørholt 2002). The flourishing interest in discourses on children as social participants and citizens, especially during the last ten to fifteen years, in Norwegian society

can largely be explained with reference to this inter-discursive relationship, contributing to making the discourse particularly powerful in producing truths that are taken for granted. According to Laclau and Mouffe, ideology plays a crucial role in the construction of hegemony (Torfing 1999, 113).

My argument is that ideology is playing a crucial role in current discourses on children as social participants in society. I shall present further reflections on this point later in this chapter.

Despite being placed in hegemonic discourses on children as social participants in society in recent years, children are, I suggest, still being placed in marginal positions in many ways. As I have already shown (Article 2), the great majority of the many participatory activities and projects initiated in Norwegian municipalities within a ten-year period were ad hoc and short term, and suffered from a lack of integration into permanent and legal structures. The fact that more than sixty percent of these participatory activities were addressed towards children aged fourteen or more reveals that age is still a category leading to one's exclusion from different kinds of participation in society and even to one's marginalisation.

In order for people/children to be recognised as citizens with the right to influence and affect decision-making processes in different areas, it is necessary to anchor these rights in permanent legal structures and changing practices. In Article 2, published in 2002, I argued that the lack of incorporation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into the Human Rights Act that was adopted in Norway in 1999 illustrated the ambiguity involved in the willingness to take children's rights to participation in society seriously. This lack of incorporation caused criticism, both from UN's Expert Committee on children's rights in their

Expert Committee on children's rights in their response to Norway's status report on activities connected to the implementation of the UNCRC in 2000, and from various political actors in Norway. As a result of this pressure, a working group consisting of representatives from different ministries was set up in order to discuss this issue further (see Article 2, footnote 1).

In September 2003, the UNCRC *was* in fact incorporated into the Human Rights Act by the Norwegian Parliament. This incorporation means that national laws affecting children must be reconstructed in order to conform with the framework and different articles of the UNCRC. The incorporation of the Convention into the Human Rights Act expresses a political will to take children's rights in general and their rights of participation in particular more seriously. However, the position of children as social participants in society still depends on the possible changing practices that will eventually emerge from this incorporation.

As I have already shown (Article 2), the survey also exposes other interests than children's rights to participation as being involved in discursive practices on children and participation. Important aims associated with the construction of children as competent participants in society were the creation of drug-free environments, the construction of sustainable local communities by preventing young people from moving and the protection of the environment. These results illustrate the arguments presented by Laclau and Mouffe (1985) that nodal points are 'floating signifiers' which other discourses fight to cover with meaning. This vulnerability of discourses on children as social participants in society easily places children in marginal positions.

The number of youth councils organised by municipalities to allow the voice of children below voting age to be heard has increased during the past few years (see chapter 2). Youth councils are being organized by local authorities to comply with the demand of rights to participation on the local level. Recent studies of youth councils confirm my study in some respects. One survey of local youth councils concluded that they are being set up not necessarily because of the UNCRC, but because of local authorities' need to consult young people as consumers of welfare goods (Skimmeli 2000). Furthermore, youth councils are also being as a tool to increase the interest of young people in local politics, as part of a long-term aim to halt the decline in voter turnout in local elections (Lidén og Ødegård 2002, Lidén 2003). The youth councils tend to construct young people as being *different* from adults, not being included in representative democracy since they lack the vote – unlike members of other councils in local participatory democracy – nor being allowed entry as legitimated political actors on to decision-making bodies (Kjørholt and Lidén 2004).

The right 'to have a voice to be heard' is linked with children's rights to be seen, to make claims, to be represented and included in society in different ways. Children as a group or a collectivity are excluded not only from representative democracy, but in a number of areas. One example of their marginality in society is their lack of visibility in public statistics. It has been argued that:

> The fact that children have largely been excluded from statistics thus indicates that they have not been needed to keep society running; […] they are not counted because they do not count. Instead, they have been represented by their parents, by families and other relevant units. […] Participation, in particular social participation, is more than simply being part of decision making bodies, it is

> perhaps much more a question of being acknowledged as a claims maker on available resources (Kjørholt and Qvortrup 2000, 5).

It can also be argued that the exclusion of children from some forms of participation in contemporary discourses on children as participants in society also contributes to placing them in a position of marginality. Children are important participants in daily activities, such as in school, as consumers, as participants in different kinds of paid work, in working within the family and household – all examples of forms of participation that are connected to the social, economic and cultural production and reproduction of society. Such forms of participation should be estimated as being of central value and therefore as worth being included in the conceptualisation of children as social participants (Kjørholt and Qvortrup 2000).

Try Yourself can be seen as an interesting attempt to recognise some forms of participation that are connected with everyday life activities. To put it bluntly, children were paid to play. Try Yourself can thus be interpreted as an exciting effort to construct new positions for children's social participation in society by including them as citizens and recognising their particularity. On the other hand, as I have argued, in other respects children are not taken seriously as citizens on a par with adults (Article 3).

Children as citizens – being equal and being different: ambiguities and paradoxes

As I have already demonstrated, the construction of children as belonging to a separated age group in this national project contributes to placing them in marginal positions in certain respects. Though they are claimed to participate 'totally on their own terms', their participation was restricted to cultural activities that were only undertaken together with similar age

groups. In this they were separated, instead of being integrated into an intergenerational relationship and a participatory democracy. Their recognition as citizens in local communities, in certain respects on a par with adults, did not imply being included as individual subjects in intergenerational participating communities.

Try Yourself is an example of a project that aims to recognise children as *equal* citizens on a par with adults by acknowledging them at the same time to be *different* from adults. It is first and foremost a different sort of citizen that is to be included in society. As I have demonstrated in articles 3 and 4, this is hard to realise and suggests particular ambiguities and paradoxes. Try Yourself can be seen as an endeavour to embrace the different citizen as part of a renewal of Norwegian democracy. The challenges associated with this ambitious aim are particularly hard to realise within the Norwegian cultural context, due to certain traditional core values in the Norwegian society, which under-communicate difference and interpret equality as sameness (Gullestad 1992, 2002, 2003). The particular construction of children as participants who are both different to adult citizens and similar at the same time, as in Try Yourself, is therefore hard to reconcile.

The new application procedures within the project are an example that illustrates how traditional bureaucratic processes and procedures connected with applications for funding in local communities were changed in order to recognise children as citizens in those communities. When adults apply for funding for cultural activities, for instance, the decision is usually taken by an appointed assembly based on a critical assessment of the application with respect to particular criteria. On the one hand the new practices introduced in the Try Yourself project can be interpreted as serious attempts to

recognise *difference* and include different groups of individuals as social participants in their local communities. Try Yourself can thus be seen as an interesting endeavour in the development and renewal of local democratic traditions, as part of an increasing emphasis on *participatory democracy* in recent years (see also Kjørholt and Lidén 2004). On the other hand, one might argue that, by avoiding established procedures, including assessing the quality of the project that a particular democratic body is applying for, children are not being taken seriously as citizens on a par with adults. The slogan 'anything goes', when it is put into effect by children themselves, can paradoxically also be seen as an illustration of how children may not be taken seriously as contributing and responsible social citizens.

There are several aspects of the Try Yourself project that illustrates how children are constructed as *different* from adults. As I have revealed, the project was characterised by particular application procedures aimed at replacing an 'adult administrative bureaucratic structure' with 'child friendly' procedures that children are supposed to manage. Another characteristic that underscores the difference is the emphasis on self-determination and play that are supposed to be part of 'children's own culture'. Cultural notions of childhood are closely intertwined with play, seen as a 'natural skill' children inhabit in respect of being children. By relating citizenship to play and child cultural activities, children are then expected to inhabit the competence that is needed. The aim of Try Yourself to revitalise 'childhood of the past' and realise "children's need to be children", interpreted as having the right to play, also underscores this point. The time perspective in the project is another example that further illustrates the emphasis on difference. That the varieties of child-projects described by children on the application forms were supposed to be realised right away, and the intention

to make decisions concerning the funding almost immediately, further illustrates an adaptation to what was considered as children's notions of time and 'here and now' orientedness.

Other characteristics of the project stress how children are seen as *equal*. The fact that the project recognises children as participants by giving them funding for cultural activities of their own, without being supported by adults, means recognising them as fully competent actors on a par with adults. The emphasis on autonomy relating to the construction of children as competent actors further demonstrates this equality. The fact that children's cultural and creative activities are seen as equally good (or even better!) than those of adults also underscores the emphasis on equality. The notion of 'participation entirely on the children's own terms', frequently used during the project, further illustrates this point: the intention is to treat a different group equally. However, an important paradox is involved in the particular construction of children as participants in the Try Yourself project. Although it is claimed that they participate 'totally on their own terms', their participation was restricted in various ways. In addition to points made in the discussion of this issue in Article 4, I shall present an example which demonstrates that children did not always receive support 'entirely on their own terms'. The following text is taken from an application form sent to the municipality by two girls: (the text in *italics* is the text written on the application form):

> To Lillevik municipality:
>
> *Give a short description of the project for which you are applying for funding:*

> We are two girls, aged 14, who are very fond of dancing. We would like to start a dance group in order to be excellent dancers. We plan to make our own costumes – beautiful dresses for the girls, black suits for the boys. Same colours on the boys' ties as our dresses, then. And then we are going to arrange dancing demonstrations, so that people can come along and look…"
>
> *What kind of support do you need? How much money are you applying for?*
>
> We need two cute boys aged about 14 or 15, preferably with black hair, as dancing partners. We are sure the municipality can provide us with this.

This application is an example which illustrates demands that were far beyond the scope of the project.

As I have argued in Articles 3 and 4, children's participation was restricted to cultural activities that were only undertaken with similar age groups. In this way, their participation can be characterised as being *separated* from the intergenerational networks of relationships that characterise the local communities. Their recognition as citizens of local communities, in certain respects equal to adults, did not imply being included in intergenerational communities of participation. Age thus remains an important category for the definition of citizenship within the project. This situation reflects children's position in society in general. The construction of children first and foremost within an age related social order, legitimates placing them in segregated physical and social places defined as being 'unproductive', such as day-care centres, schools, particular leisure time activities etc. This segregation means limiting children's social and cultural environments and

placing them in a social situation being 'forced' to participate with similar age groups only.

Though they are seen as *different* from adults in respect of having their own peer culture, children were also recognized as being the *equals* of adults, as autonomous subjects with a right to apply for funding for their activities without asking their parents or other adults for permission. This can be considered a quite radical idea, loosening children in some respects from their position as dependants in the family and opening up new positions for them as social participants in public spaces.

As I have shown, the particular construction of the participating child subject in Try Yourself has clear commonalities with the construction of children as citizens in texts related to the Danish project entitled Children as Citizens. In both projects, children were constructed as competent autonomous actors belonging to a specific age group in need of being freed from adult control and power. Self-determination was seen as a core issue and an overarching aim for children in day-care centres, as well as for their participation in local communities. This particular construction of the child subject is, as I have shown, related in some ways to international discourses on children as social participants. Before emphasising further the similarities and differences between these two constructions, therefore, I shall draw further attention to theoretical discussions relating to the construction of children as autonomous, self-determining subjects, presented in Article 5. The starting point for this discussion is the construction of children as participants in international rights discourses (also outlined in Chapter 2).

International rights discourses and the participating child subject

In order to shed light on how childhood and children as participants are affected by universal children's rights discourses, I shall present the voice of a girl living in a quite different cultural context than the Try Yourself children in Norway. This voice clearly illustrates paradoxes and dilemmas connected to the construction of children as citizens in the international movement for empowering children, lacking approaches that connect autonomy to dependency and relationships in a cultural context.

At the international conference on 'Children's Rights and Wrongs', arranged by the Centre for World Dialogue in Nicosia, Cyprus on the 10th anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1999, I met Mary Benjamin Olarita, a 14-year-old girl from the Philippines with a moving testimony about her life. For many years Mary had been working as a labourer in the docks in the slums of Davao City from seven o'clock in the evening to seven o'clock in the morning. Her job was to load 50 kg sacks on and off barges. Her wages were symbolic, and if she ate during the twenty-minute break, they would be reduced accordingly. Most of the money Mary earned was given to her family, which depended on her wages for their living. The rest of the money was used to pay for Mary's schooling. Mary slept three hours a day, from 8 to 11 in the morning, before attending school until about 5 in the evening. Often she fell asleep at school because she was so tired.

Besides being a child labourer, Mary was also a child activist. She participated in the Global March of the mid-1990s, and, together with the other children who were 'child-speakers' at the conference, sang one of the songs that was written for the March, entitled 'Stop child labour!', the message of

the children's voices, sung in a manner that was both emotional and confrontational. Mary was quite professional in her role as a child activist, as she was used to testifying about her hard life and speaking against child labour at large conferences, like that in Nicosia which had 450 participants from all over the world. However, at the end of her prepared speech she became lost for words, and tears replaced her appeal to 'Stop child labour'! With her tears streaming from her eyes, she cried out: 'But how can I speak up in support of stopping child labour? My family needs the money I earn! They cannot afford to pay for my school!'

There are many lives like Mary's. Children are active participants in society in many ways world wide. About 250 million are child labourers, many of them suffering extremely poor working conditions. The British sociologist Kevin Bales estimates that about ten million children in the world today are bound in slavery (Bales 1998).

Mary's testimony clearly illustrates certain dilemmas and ambiguities involving the universal discourses on children's rights that are also of great relevance for other forms of children's participation in late modern societies. I argue that her voice demonstrates the global character of discourses on children's rights to participation, as well as certain paradoxes associated with the construction of the child subject that are the basis of universal rights discourses. Mary is given the right to participate and express her opinions about her living conditions, as stated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. If her voice in support of 'stopping child labour' is heard, we should then question the consequences for her and her family's lives. Without fundamental changes in the world economy, as well as in living conditions in Davao City, including family structure and the cultural

way of life, Mary's life would probably change for the worse. Her participation in child labour represents a ticket for her entry into school, as well as to achieving a better standard of living for her family.

Though living under quite different life circumstances, the participating children in the Try Yourself project in Norway stressed similar themes in their narratives about their participation in society, as revealed in Mary's testimony: belonging, community, intergenerational relationships, dependency. Just like Mary, they demonstrated how human subjectivity is constructed within a complex web of relationships with others. Mary's voice also illustrates a point made by Charles Taylor, namely how autonomy, self-realisation and individual choice are closely intertwined with preferences relating to the values and norms of the community she belongs to. The hut builders presented in Article 4 also demonstrate this in various ways.

The construction of the autonomous toddler-citizen in the Danish day-care centre, discussed in the texts that are analysed in Article 5, provides something of a contrast to Mary's testimony and the narratives of the Try Yourself children. As I have argued the toddlers and older children in the day-care institution are constructed in accordance with values that stress independence, individual choice and self-determination as ultimate goals.

Individualisation, citizenship and autonomy: constructions of children as subjects – a critique

As mentioned earlier (see Chapter 2), the UNCRC has been described as a cornerstone, and rightly so, for the recognition of children as competent social actors with the right to influence their everyday lives as equals with

adults. The universality and hegemonic position of this discourse make it an effective and necessary tool to improve children's life conditions in the world and ensure that fundamental human rights will be realised by everyone. As such the UNCRC is part of globalisation processes, representing particular images of children as subjects that are claimed to be universal. Rights to active social participation and citizenship are, I argue, among the fundamental rights that should embrace all age groups, including young children. On the other hand – and this is my main argument here – international discourses on children's rights are associated with certain fundamental problems relating to the conceptualisation of the child subject, as well as to the concept of freedom. Jo Boyden raises the following question: 'What kind of globalisation is the Convention going to bring? The answer is largely dependent on what implementation strategies and what theoretical concepts and values it inspires' (Boyden 1997, 219).

As demonstrated by the testimony of Mary, from the slums of Davao City, the movement for empowering children that is anchored in universal discourses on children's rights seems to lack concepts and approaches that take the child's *dependence* on the cultural and political context he or she is part of into account.

The recognition of children as social participants and actors capable of influencing their life courses and the construction of their own childhoods are first and foremost constructed within the discourses on children's rights. As I have argued, this construction also represents a cornerstone of the new social research on children and childhood. The attribution of agency as self-possession to children in sociological theory is based on an implicit understanding of children as 'mature' and independent. This theoretical

position, which is anchored in an essentialist view of agency that has made maturity into an ideal that children have to fit in order to be accepted as social actors, must be questioned (Lee 1998). The construction of the subject in discourses on children's rights has also been criticised from various feminist perspectives (Minow 1996, Gilligan 1982, O'Neill 1992, Diduck 1999).

Human rights discourses have been criticised for being rooted in the idea that human dignity and worth can only be realised by individual rights and for paying no attention to the alternative possibility, that human worth may be rooted in care, interdependence and mutual needs (Diduck 1999). Rights discourses are anchored in the Anglo-American liberal tradition, which constructs human beings as legal subjects capable of speaking for themselves and acting in their own interests. The subject is constructed as a rational autonomous individual, with the consciousness to formulate his or her own needs and wishes. This particular notion of the legal subject embedded in children's rights discourses frequently receives expression (Diduck 1999). The critique of this subject for being based on a *particularistic* notion of the human being, referred in Article 5, is of great importance (Vetlesen 1996). In international discourses concerning rights to participation, the child subject is constructed as a rational, autonomous human being, with the consciousness to formulate his/her own needs. Within these discourses, it has been argued that children are: 'deemed to possess the autonomy and self-consciousness sufficient to be able to make rights claims' (Diduck 1999, 128).

It is often suggested that this subject is mainly a *legal subject* anchored in *legal discourses* (Diduck 1999). One might also add that these discourses

also exclude the embodied subject and thus the embodied expressions that are vital in order to understand and recognise children as human beings. This perspective is of particular relevance in relation to toddlers and other children in day-care centres. It is highly important to be aware of the 'unspoken words', the huge complexity of bodily movements and emotional expressions, by which children construct their identities and social practices in everyday life. Emotional support and close and caring relationships with both adults and other children are significant in order for children to become active social participants in everyday life within the day-care centre. However, this does not imply that toddlers are not granted autonomy and competence. My main point is that autonomy as well as competence is dynamic and relational concepts constituted within particular social and cultural contexts (Article 5). These contexts are constituted by discourses that make certain kinds of subjectivities and practices possible while prohibiting others. The glimpse into daily life in a day-care centre in 1970s, and the particular assembly that I presented in the introduction chapter, reveals different construction of children as subjects than represented in the Danish texts about children as citizens in day- care centres in the 1990s. With care and sensitivity, Karen interpreted Ronny's bodily movements and 'unspoken words', gave him a joyful experience of 'running together' and, I would add, by this contributed to developing his self-esteem as a competent social participant in the day- care centre. The construction of Ronny as a subject in the day- care centre was related to concepts such as needs, care and relationships. Karen, the preschool teacher, acted on the basis of moral obligation of care. To me this example illustrates Diduck's points. She argues that placing children within moral discourses instead of legal discourses would have constituted other subjectivities within a relationship with others. The fact that justice for children is discussed with ref-

erence to rights and freedoms, not their needs and welfare, is problematic. Diduck points to discourses on the moral subject that have recently begun to influence law. Notions of the subject and of justice are quite different in moral discourses, which constitute the subject within relationships to and dependence on others, from legal discourses, which construct the subject as autonomous and independent. Diduck argues that:

> If, then, we are able to break down boundaries between legal and moral subjectivities, we can go further and suggest that justice for those subjects may cross those boundaries as well. Justice may for example, require attention both to people's welfare and to their rights, to both their dependence and to their independence (Diduck 1999, 121).

The sociologist Nick Lee, referring among others to Diduck's perspectives while also criticising the construction of the autonomous subject, speaks for a theoretical position that places the subject within relationships with others, thus moving between positions of dependence and independence. Lee continues: 'I have suggested that children and adults can be moved in and out of competence, in and out of maturity, and in and out of the social inclusion that these characteristics afford' (Lee 1998, 474). This position requires what Lee describes as an ethic of motion instead of an ethic of position. Children's voices are, then, not authentic voices spoken by independent subjects, but rather voices spoken from particular positions within an intricate web of relationships with others. One implication of this approach is that children's spoken words are not the genuine expressions of autonomous and essentialised subjects, but rather speech performances resting on what Lee calls 'underlying dependencies'.

It has been argued that there are some: 'needs that are not easily expressed in rights claims – like the need to be loved, to receive emotional support and so on' (Mortier 2002, 83). Care, dependencies, affection, affiliation,

intimacy, love etc. are silenced in discourses on children's rights to citizenship. One important question here is what consequences these silences have for both children and children's citizenship.

Placing children in legal discourses on autonomous, rational child subjects may represent new forms of oppressive subject positions for children. In order to create liberating discourses, it is important to avoid placing children in dichotomous constructions of subjectivity as either dependent or independent, either mature or immature, either vulnerable or competent, either equal or different.

Freddy Mortier has raised an important question here: what are the implications of individualisation for children's citizenship? (Mortier 2002,79). In order to discuss this, we need to examine other powerful discourses on identities in modernity that is interrelated with universal children's rights discourses. Taylor's perspectives, which are outlined in Article 5, implies warning against forms of individualism that centre on the individual subject and therefore overlook how cultural and political contexts influence how subjects and individuality are formed. In other words, the fact that cultural and political discourses create particular spaces for children, thus making possible certain ways of acting and thinking while prohibiting others must not be ignored. If the realisation of children's citizenship, as manifested in universal rights discourses, is related to self-determination and negative freedom, as Charles Taylor suggests, then there is a danger of transforming children's voices into empty echoes of 'perverted individualism'.

In line with Taylor, I argue that it is important to explore contemporary discourses critically in order to reveal negative forms of individualisation

that are connected with notions of freedom, as self-determined freedom and individual choice are overarching moral values in themselves. This form of individualisation may lead to the importance of how cultural, social and political contexts affect individual choice being overlooked. As Mortier argues: 'The impact of choices depends on the general environment […]The strategy of allowing individuals to choose freely may be a way of perpetuating structural defects' (Mortier 2002, 81). Any form of citizenship that is connected to this sort of individualism thus turns into what Ulrich Beck has described as the standardisation and impoverishment of individuality in our times (Beck 2003). An important part of my project has therefore been carrying out contextual analyses, focusing on how different discourses are interrelated and trying to reveal the different kinds of individualism that emerge. Citizenship for children and young people must avoid being related to choice, self-determination and freedom – conceptualised as negative freedom – being treated as overarching moral values. Individual choices and self realisation is always closely intertwined with a social and cultural context. It is highly important to move the focus from the self-determinating subject to the social and cultural contexts children are part of, in order to get insight into how different subjectivities, relationships and cultural practices are discursively constructed.

'Doing citizenship': autonomy and dependency, visibility and belonging

Identities as participating subjects whether child or adult, are not fixed but constructed by dynamic processes of identification within human relationships and communities. Identities are multiple and self-transforming through the life-course, constructed by participation in a diversity of social practices within a web of social relationships in different cultural contexts.

Just as girls and boys are 'doing gender' (Article 4), I argue that they are also 'doing citizenship' within discourses on children as social participants in society by actively 'working on' relationships with others, engaging in mutual social processes of autonomy and belonging to different social and cultural communities. I have demonstrated that these processes involve the construction of *'places of visibility' in public spaces*. 'Doing citizenship' further implies different kinds of social and cultural competence. Competence is not an essential, generalized or 'natural' trait ascribed by birth, but a dynamic concept referring to specific and differentiated forms of practices and skills. There are also huge individual variations according to degrees of competence and of skill in a particular field. Different competences are, like identities, continually changing and developing, dependent on individual and social experiences and the elaboration of particular practices in a specific context. Hence to ascribe an essential 'competence' to children and young people, without being specific and concrete by relating to particular social and cultural skills and practices, can be interpreted as a barrier to recognizing them as citizens with diversified and differentiated skills and competencies on a par with adults.

The 'Try Yourself children' in my case study placed themselves in different ways as autonomous competent subjects within discourses on children as social participants in society (Articles 3 and 4). Their *autonomy*, however, was not constructed as a counterpart to *dependency*. Quite the contrary, the construction of identities as competent social participants derived from intertwined processes of autonomy and belonging to various kinds of communities, intergenerational as well as age-related. This complies with empirical studies of children's daily lives in Berlin illustrating how children's relationships with adults are characterised by intertwined relations of

dependence, independence and interdependence (Zeiher 2001). Competence is developed through participation in different forms of relationship and different social practices in particular cultural contexts. The three different hut-building projects illustrate how children's competences are embedded in intergenerational and gendered social relationships and practices. These competencies – skills relating to carpentry, fishing and hunting, and other forms of 'wild life' out in the forest – are gradually developed and refined. The oldest boys demonstrated autonomy as well as excellent skills in these areas, developed through years of participation in such social practice in masculine communities. The younger boys living in the same local community; Ragnar, Martin and the others needed the support of an experienced adult, the grandfather, who had outstanding skills and experience in carpentry. His help was not a seen as a threat to the boys' construction of identities as autonomous and competent participants. On the other hand, through his support a place to belong and identities associated with autonomy and competence were realized within an intergenerational community. These two hut-building projects reveal how autonomy and competence depend on and develop through relationships with others and experience of the particular social practices. The hut-building girls were excluded from such relationships and communities, as well as from being introduced to social practices connected to carpentry and building huts. As I have demonstrated in Article 4, they therefore started on constructing communities, as well as identities as autonomous and social participants, by placing themselves in alternative discourses on childhood, play and secrets.

The girls who initiated a music band in another local community also demonstrate these points (Article 3). Their identities as autonomous and competent musicians were not derived from being freed from adult control or ac-

quiring opportunities for self-determination. As I have shown, in order to learn to play their instruments, they needed to be taught by somebody who was experienced and a specialist in this field. When the music teacher acted according to the rules of the project and told the girls that they would have to decide and learn on their own, they became frustrated. The children's experiences clearly illustrate that self-determination was not an overall value in itself. The emphasis on self-determination connected with the construction of children as social participants in Try Yourself – as the name of the project itself clearly illustrates – was thus challenged. According to poststructuralist perspectives, the term 'subject' – or rather 'subjectivities' – that has been developed within discourses, draws attention to the double sense of agency. The subject is not an independent and self-determined subject constituted outside discursive contexts but is *subjected* through discourses, a process that includes being *subordinated* to non-subjective determinations. In order to be constituted as an autonomous subject, one has to be 'subjected to power' (Butler 1997). The participating independent subject is, in other words, activated through dependence. Hence, children's work 'doing citizenship' can be related to the underlying dependencies that Lee speaks about, since it can also be understood in terms of subjection.

The children's narratives also demonstrate how, in order to construct identities as social participants, they relate to the past as well as to the future, to earlier experiences and to questions of where we are going (Taylor 1989). Identities as competent social participants are therefore not fixed and static, but dynamic phenomena, always moving and developing in relation to other human beings, a moral space, and judgement about what is good.

‘Authentic communities’: paradoxes of being different and being the same

As I have argued, the notion of authenticity taken from Taylor relates to contemporary moral ideals of ‘being true to oneself’ by listening to one’s ‘inner voice’ (Article 5). Whereas Taylor relates the contemporary ‘culture of authenticity’ above all to the construction of individual identities, I argue that this is also a matter of prevalent moral ideals connected to children’s collective culture, seen as ‘imagined communities’. This is demonstrated by the public, cultural narrative of children as an endangered people (Article 1) that emphasises self-determination, freedom and ‘authentic child culture’. The construction of children as subjects belonging to a separated age group inhabiting their own culture above all is associated with paradoxes and challenges. The girls’ stories demonstrate their involvement in complex collective processes of identity, being simultaneously the same and unique and original (Article 3).

The applications from children in the project were characterised by similarities according to the choice of activity in each municipality. Whereas building huts was particularly popular among children in one municipality, the number of applications to start a music band predominated in another. We may ask if this tendency to ‘do the same’ reveals a standardisation of individuality as described by Beck (2003). The similarity indicates that children were influenced by each other and that they wanted to do the same as each other. However, as the narratives of the Funny Girls show, this similarity caused a lot of frustration, challenging the idea of ‘being oneself’ and becoming a subject of negotiation over originality and the construction of a unique group identity. The narrative of the Funny Girls thus reveals, I would say, how the girls are confronted with a moral ideal of ‘authenticity’,

of being true to the 'inner nature' of an essentialised culture of their own. Guro's narrative of the girl band also illustrates how she, together with her friends, tries to create an 'imagined community' among herself and her girlfriends. One indication of this is her constant use of the term 'we' when she speaks about the social practices she is engaged in.

Line's story of how she positions herself and the band in relation to other bands reveals the relations of power among the girls. The construction of identity includes Guro and Line being genuine, being true. To copy the ideas of someone else means not behaving according to the cultural values of 'being oneself'. The girls' narrative illustrates how the identity project of constructing an authentic and original identity as a music band is even more complex and complicated than the project to 'be oneself' on an individual level. The Try Yourself project can be interpreted as an attempt to escape from power relations by trying to construct a structure on the children's own terms. In the interviews, many children talked about their difficulties in realising this 'collective self-determination and authenticity project'. Quarrels and conflicts among children were not unusual, and since many children were not able to realise their ideas, the project collapsed. As the Funny Girls' narrative further shows, they positioned themselves as *different* from other peer groups and tried to make it hard for others to copy them and be 'like them'. Children's experiences reflect the paradoxes associated with this particular construction of being different and being the same, with this 'collective authentic identity' which confronted children as participants in Try Yourself.

Children as active participants in the construction of national identity

The construction of 'imagined authentic communities' was closely related to the construction of spaces of visibility in the public community. The aim of being recognised as public actors was closely intertwined with children's work on relationships and belonging. While being located in discourses on children and childhood as belonging to a *separate age group*, children's constructions of themselves as social participants were characterised by attempts to be *included* into an intergenerational social structure in public spaces. Some children's projects also show how the construction of citizenship is interrelated with discourses on place identity and belonging to the local community they live in. Belonging to a particular geographic place is greatly emphasised in Norwegian culture (Gullestad 1992). I have argued that, by being young citizens, children also participated in the process of making their local community strong and vital, as well as visible in the wider public community. The application from Toralf that I presented in the introduction to Article 3 is a vivid illustration of the connection between discourses on 'children and participation' and on vital local communities in Norway. Through the formulation, 'All those things Bird-Island may take part in', Toralf both represents and redevelops the local place where he is living into an 'imagined local community'. The local place is narrated into being as a symbolic place for close social relationships and belonging. His written text about starting a club with public funding can be regarded as a way of narrating himself into being as a visible social participant in public space. This narrated subject – who is capable of initiating and managing different activities not only in his own interests, but also for the benefit of others – is also helping load the public space with a particular social and cultural meaning. By including the local place he is living in

within the text on the application form, he is revealing the inter-discursive relationships between discourses on 'children and participation' and discourses on *national identity* and vital local communities in Norwegian society (Article 2). Within the Try Yourself discourses, being a young citizen also included participating in the process of making the local community strong and vital, as well as visible in the wider public community, as Toralf's text illustrates. This construction of sustainable local communities within traditions of *egalitarian individualism* represents a core issue in the construction of national identity in Norway.

The huge national children's forum (Article 2) is another example which illustrates how children have become active participants in the construction of national identity and the renewal of Norway as a modern democratic society. This national children's forum further illustrates another major point of this thesis: the significance of childhood and children as symbols of society in late modernity.

Childhood as a social and ideological space

In Article 1, I referred to Jenks's argument that children in late modern societies are envisioned as a form of 'nostalgia' and have become symbolic representations of society (Jenks 1996). My studies confirm this statement by revealing how, in different ways, children as social participants both represent and are revitalising significant values connected to constructions of childhood of the past, national identity, modern democracy and global development.

Try Yourself is a national project, representing, I suggest, an extremely interesting combination of all these ingredients, and demonstrating how par-

ticular cultural notions of childhood of the past merge in a melting pot with global discourses on children's rights as citizens. More than that, the melting pot also contains core values of Norway as a democratic nation, being revitalised by including still another group – children – in a renewed participatory democracy.

The particular construction of children as social participants in Try Yourself further demonstrates how both childhood and local communities are constructed as 'imagined communities', thus bringing to the fore traditional 'nostalgic' and romantic notions of child-cultural communities, consisting of creative, competent, cooperating equal subjects practising their own culture, just like the inhabitants of sustainable local communities. The last form of 'imagined community' represents a reconstruction of core values related to traditions of egalitarian individualism in Norwegian democracy.

Furthermore, as I have argued, another powerful ideological value in late modern western societies is also being added to the melting pot to some extent, namely a form of individualism that associates the individual subject with choice, self-determination, freedom and authenticity. This melting pot, representing a mixture of different discourses associated with significant cultural values, constitutes a social and cultural space for children as social participants in society. Children's importance as significant symbols, contributes to constitute childhood as an *ideological* space as well. The concept of 'ideology' needs some clarification. In the social constructionist perspective, all social phenomena are associated with cultural values and norms. According to Laclau, rejecting the classic Marxist position, ideology consists of 'particular discursive forms within a totalising horizon that projects on to a particular discursive form an impossible fullness and trans-

parency' (Laclau 1990, cited in Torfing 1999, 114). The social and cultural spaces of participation are constituted by two nodal points, denoted by the terms 'child' and 'participation', both of which are loaded with significant symbolic meaning. As I argue in Article 1, these terms operate as myths in the discourse, since they refer to an imaginative totality and are thus in danger of producing essentialist and stereotypical notions of children and childhood, rather than constructing different subject positions and thus making possible a variety of subjectivities and social practices.

I have referred to literature emphasising the significance of narrativity in the construction of both individual identities and policy and cultural identities. Narratives and texts have become increasingly important as constitutive of places, seen as physical locations that are socially constructed (Article 3). As I have demonstrated this increasing importance not only concerns places, it is also of great relevance for other social phenomena, such as childhood, nation and democracy. Texts, images and symbols are therefore of vital importance in the construction of children as social participants or citizens. As I have argued, children are powerful symbols of nature, autonomy, authenticity and freedom, as well as of egalitarian communities, vital democracy and national identity.

The huge advertising of Try Yourself, as well as children's wishes to be pictured in the newspaper and to be visible in public spaces, underscores this growing significance of narrativity. The variety of different creative child-cultural activities initiated within the project represented excellent material for narrative constructions of children as creative, autonomous, competent actors in various public spaces, for instance in different media, in the evaluation report and also in this thesis. Constructions of local com-

munities, national identity and traditional cultural notions of childhood were thereby reconstructed and renewed.

The particular 'design' of the huge national children's forum reported in the national newspapers (Article 2), producing colourful images of Norwegian ministers and child citizens, all dressed in the same colourful T-shirts that had been designed especially for the event, is another example that illustrating the importance of narrativity as constitutive of social phenomena, as well as the significance of children as symbolic actors.

The need for solid social actors constructing 'imagined communities' in global societies where traditional individual, local and national identities and borders are becoming blurred is therefore vital. As I have showed the particular construction of children as social participants in society are connoted with significant symbolic values. This crucial role of ideology, related to current discourses on children as social participants and citizens in society, implies placing children in both powerful and vulnerable positions. Critical analyses are highly important in investigating how this space for participation affects children's abilities to be influential social participants in everyday life and to being included in society as citizens. Ideological constructions may easily conceal structural deficits and the 'poverty' of the social and cultural environment in providing opportunities for social participation. An important challenge is to unpack the ideology in order to liberate children from being placed in positions that simply represent new forms of repression.

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Application Form

1. For what kind of activity do you apply for funding? (Describe briefly what you intend to do)

……

……

……

……

2. When are you going to start? (month and year)……..
3. Where are you going to be? ……
4. When are you going to end? ……
5. Write down what materials and other things you need to start. Work out how much it will cost.

   ……

   ……

   ……

6. If you are going to earn money, then write down how, and how much money you think you are going to earn

   …….....…….

7. You can get help by contacting the address below:

The application should be sent to this address:

Appendix 2 ***Try Yourself: interview with children***

Interview guide

Introduction:

You have experienced something unique. You have participated in Try Yourself, and as a researcher I am going to make a report about children's experiences in the project. The aim is to inform politicians and other adults who take decisions that affect children's lives about children's thoughts and experiences.

I am very interested in knowing your experiences and thoughts about the activities you have engaged in, how your ideas came about, and how the activities and plans were carried out together with other children. I want to hear about things you liked – and disliked. I am also interested in your thoughts and reflections about a project like Try Yourself.

Children who have participated in Try Yourself live in different communities in our country. We do not know much about how children think about their everyday lives in different environments. May be it is quite different to be a boy or a girl in places like Lillevik or Strand, or maybe girls and boys think and act quite similarly. In order for me to understand your thoughts and experiences, I am therefore also interested in learning about your everyday life in this local community. I have never been in Lillevik, so I know nothing about life here, and would be very excited to hear your stories!

Many children are going to be interviewed. Often it is adults who are asked to tell about children's thoughts and activities. We think it is very important to ask children, because they are the most experienced ones, those who know what it means to be a child.

It is important that you tell as much as possible of your everyday life and your experiences in Try Yourself. But remember that it is up to you to decide what to tell me. Everything you have to say is equally important to me. No one, whether parents or teachers or others, will be told what you have answered. Your name will not be used in the report, so nobody will come to know exactly what you have told me.

Section one: Try Yourself

Description of the child-funded project

You have received funding to ……(for example build a hut). Can you tell me your story about this (how you got the idea, what you have been doing, how the activity was developed, relationships with friends, what happened etc.)?

Time sequencing structure: start – middle (highlights) – end

Feelings and emotional experiences:

What did you like best? Tell me! What did you dislike (social processes and practices)?

What was difficult? Easy? What made you happy? Did you manage? Were your expectations fulfilled?

Themes

1. Social practices; interest in this particular activity; earlier experiences with this activity.
2. Social processes within the group; relationships with children, cooperation, leadership, joy and happiness, relationships, conflicts and quarrels etc.
3. Inter-generational relationships; support, control, friendship, communities.
4. Individual identities and group identities; feelings of enjoyment, success and failure, competence, autonomy.
5. Being a participant in a public project; what kind of support did you get (enough, too much, too little)?
6. Reflections and opinions about the Try Yourself project and public funding for children.

<u>Possible additional questions if needed</u>

Who suggested to apply for funding? Why? Did adults speak to you about Try Yourself? Teachers? Parents? Others?

Have you ever engaged in ….. (for example, building huts) before you participated in Try Yourself?

Background and motivation for being a participant in Try Yourself; the role of money: would you have been able to ….. (for example, build a hut) without public funding? Does anybody in this community know about Try Yourself?

Do you think Try Yourself should continue and develop into a permanent arrangement of public funding for children?

Section 2: Everyday life

Descriptions of yesterday

Tell me your story about your life yesterday, from the moment you got up in the morning until you went to sleep in the evening.

Time sequencing structure

Time sequencing structure: social relationships and activities. What did you do? With whom?

Themes

1. Social relationships with other children
2. Inter-generational relationships and networks; control, power, cooperation
3. Social practices in everyday life; interest, experiences; cooperative activities and communities
4. Attachment to place and local community
5. Autonomy and the right to decide by yourself

Additional questions (comments on the different descriptions during the day)

Do you usually do this, or did this happen only yesterday, only occasionally?

What are your feelings and thoughts concerning the different descriptions during the day? Do you enjoy (like) it? Is it boring? Sad? Problematic?

Inter-generational relationships and networks; control, autonomy, freedom, cooperation and communities; comments on the different descriptions during the day, and additional questions relating to these themes.

Appendix 3

A SURVEY OF CHILDREN'S ACTIVE PARTAKING IN SOCIETY
– CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION

Anne Trine Kjørholt
Norwegian Centre for Child Research (NOSEB)

ID

Name of institution (organisation/municipality/ministry):_____

1. **Has your organisation implemented measures/tests/projects related to the realisation of "children's participation between 1985 and 1995?**
   - ❑ Yes
   - ❑ No

   If yes, how many? Indicate the number in the box.

   The name of the project: _____
2. **Give a short description of the aims:**
3. **When was the project initiated?** Tick off the one box.
   - ❑ 1985-1987
   - ❑ 1988-1990
   - ❑ 1991-1993
   - ❑ 1994-1995
4. **What is/was the duration of the project?** Tick off one box.
   - ❑ Less than six months
   - ❑ 1-2 years
   - ❑ 3-4 years
   - ❑ More than four years
   - ❑ A permanent measure
   - ❑ Not sure

5. **What is the age of the target group?** Tick of the correct box **either** under a) **or** b).

a)
- ❑ 4-6 years old
- ❑ 7-10 years old
- ❑ 10-14 years old
- ❑ 14-18 years old

b)
- ❑ 7-14 years old
- ❑ 7-18 years old
- ❑ No specific age group

6. **What was the motivation for starting the project?** Tick off one box.
   - ❑ The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
   - ❑ Inspired by similar measures in other countries
   - ❑ Inspired by similar local projects
   - ❑ Personal commitment and engagement among one or several persons within the institution
   - ❑ Initiatives/requests from children
   - ❑ Other

   Please specify:

7. **Who has been responsible for the design and management of the project on the local level?** Tick off one box.
   - ❑ A central project management group
   - ❑ Local responsibility connected to a cultural agency
   - ❑ Local responsibility connected to school/ education agency
   - ❑ Children are responsible for project organisation and management
   - ❑ No central project management; activities depend on children's initiative
   - ❑ Other. Please specify:_____
   - ❑ Not sure

8. **Where does the project take place?** Tick off one or several boxes.
   - ❑ Kindergarten
   - ❑ School
   - ❑ After-school programme
   - ❑ Recreational activities – voluntary organisations
   - ❑ Community house
   - ❑ Town hall, public building
   - ❑ Local area, residential area
   - ❑ Home

- ❑ Other. Please specify:
- ❑ Not sure

9. **What type of activity/theme has children's participation been related to?** Tick off one or several boxes**.**
   - ❑ Planning/development of the local environment
   - ❑ Local political decision making processes (municipality level, county level)
   - ❑ Central political decision making processes (ministry, Storting, politicians, etc.)
   - ❑ Development of physical environment (school yards, residential areas, playgrounds, etc.)
   - ❑ Environmental initiatives
   - ❑ Influencing the content/organisation of recreational activities/school/after-school programmes/kindergarten etc.
   - ❑ Other. Please specify:_____
   - ❑ Not sure

10. **How has children's participation been realised?** Tick off one or several boxes.
    - ❑ Through a grown up spokesperson
    - ❑ Through representatives elected by the children
    - ❑ Through children's direct participation
    - ❑ Other. Please specify:_____
11. **Give a description of children's "direct participation if this has been emphasised in the project.** Tick off one or several boxes.
    - ❑ Individual verbal contributions in adult forums
    - ❑ "Children's municipality board"/local negotiations, etc.
    - ❑ Discussions/talks with adults
    - ❑ "Journalistic" methods (interviews)
    - ❑ Questionnaires
    - ❑ Logbooks
    - ❑ Play
    - ❑ Theatre/role play/stage performances
    - ❑ Drawing, model making, etc.
    - ❑ Activities together with adults
    - ❑ Activities initiated by children without adult participation
    - ❑ Exhibitions
    - ❑ Children's hearings

- ❑ Work
- ❑ Other. Please specify:_____
- ❑ Not sure

12. How is the project organised? Tick off one box

- ❑ Casual meetings/events according to needs
- ❑ Organised meetings/events at least once a week
- ❑ Organised meetings/events at least twice a month
- ❑ Organised meetings/events at least once a year
- ❑ Not sure

13. Does there exist any written material relating to the project (e.g., project descriptions, formulation of goals, project background, reports, etc.)? If you give a positive response, we will be very grateful if you would send us this material.

- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No
- ❑ Not sure

14. Is the project assessed by a research institution?

- ❑ Yes
- ❑ No

15. What is the formal background of the project? Tick off one box**.**

- ❑ Political decision
- ❑ Political control group
- ❑ Described in municipality plan (political document)
- ❑ None

16. Are there any other aspects of the project that you wish to mention? Please give a description.