Are you listening to me? Understanding children's rights through Hungarian pedagogic practice

Natalie Canning[1], Eleonora Teszenyi[2], Sándor Pálfi[3]

Abstract: Hungarian pedagogues agree that children should be listened to, have their rights recognised, and their voices heard. The UNCRC recommends that children's rights should be part of early childhood education, but this is not typical in Hungarian kindergartens and there is little pedagogical material to support the education of children about their rights. This paper focuses on 5 kindergartens each typically accommodating over 150 children between the ages of 3-6 years old across Hungary. Six pedagogues worked with multi-age groups (4 kindergartens) and same-age groups (2 kindergartens). The research adopted participatory methods to gather children's views recognising them as valuable collaborators. Children provided insight into their own lives through play based creative activities that focused on eliciting children's thoughts and feelings. Pedagogues collected video data using a 'toolkit' of children's play activities during a 6-week period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Pedagogues reflected on children's play through a series of online focus groups with emphasis on how children expressed their views and preferences through play. Participants were encouraged to examine the power relationships between children and adults and analyse their role in knowledge production rather than knowledge extraction. Six themes emerged through thematic analysis, mapped to the 4 guiding principles of children's rights: participation, survival, development and protection. The findings highlight the juxtaposition between children's life-as-experienced and life-as-told by adults; the skill of pedagogues to hear and sensitively interpret children's voices based on their play and the challenge to slow down and reflect on practice.

Introduction

The complex and multi-layered issue of children's rights and its meaningful implementation in early education practices is a widely discussed topic worldwide (Herczog, 2012; Lundy, 2007; 2012; Visnjić-Jevtić et al., 2021; Yoon & Templeton, 2019). The central concern to give voice to children and to listen attentively to their views in matters that concern them has become increasingly urgent (de Sousa, 2019; Facca et al., 2020), particularly in light of the rights of the child being fundamental in achieving sustainable development with targets to be achieved by 2030 (specifically Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) (Zamfir, 2019).

Children's rights are enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989), which imposes an obligation to fulfil on all state parties to respect children's rights to protection, provision and participation (Murray et al., 2019). Key to realising children's rights in their everyday lives is their right to be heard, their right to have a say and their views to be taken seriously on matters that are important to them, as articulated in Article 12. Children express their views in a variety of ways and key to listening in early childhood is the ability to harness children's preferred modes of expression including verbal and non-verbal means (Clark, 2017; Clark et al., 2011; Elfström Pettersson, 2015; Palaiologou, 2013) as well as taking account of silences and dissenting voices (Spencer et

_____

[1] The Open University, WELS, Education, Milton Keynes, UK, e-mail: natalie.canning@open.ac.uk, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7683-400X

[2] The Open University, WELS, Education, Milton Keynes, UK, e-mail: eleonora.teszenyi@open.ac.uk, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7465-4988

[3] University of Debrecen, Faculty of Education for Children and Special Educational Needs, Hajdúböszörmény, Hungary, e-mail: palfis@ped.unideb.hu, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0819-0235

al., 2020).

Hungary signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991 and pedagogues agree that children should be listened to, have their rights recognised and their voices heard (Pálfi et al., 2019). Developing practice that addresses these fundamentals is significant in contributing to children's learning and development. However, practice does not exist in a vacuum, it is rooted in the cultural, social and pedagogical values of the people and places in which it takes place and is intrinsically tied to previous histories. In Hungary, ratifying the convention came at the end of the Soviet regime, when children's rights were only understood in terms of protection, and participation was still seen as compulsory in activities that met the needs of a socialist society. In this context, due to the 'unfinished business of socialism' the rhetoric of understanding children's rights and embedding them in kindergarten practice continues to be challenging (Jelača & Lugarić, 2018, p. 1). The UNCRC recommends that children's rights should be part of early childhood education (UNCRC, 2005). Although it is claimed that every aspect of the National Core Programme for Kindergarten Education (Hungarian Ministry of Culture and Education , 1996) incorporates consideration for children's rights, implementation in practice is not typical in Hungarian kindergartens and there is little pedagogical material to support the education of children about their rights (Pálfi *et al.*, 2019).

This paper examines the issue of children's rights and voices in early childhood education and care (ECEC context) in response to the research question: *In what ways are children's rights explored and expressed in Hungarian kindergartens by children?* and *How can pedagogues and kindergartens support a rights-based approach to values and practice?* The research used thematic analysis to distinguish between how children's views are sought, expressed and understood. It was important to identify young children everyday concerns and to highlight how recognising and valuing children's meaningful communication and expressions contribute to building knowledge about them and things that matter to them. This in turn, has the potential to inform right-respecting pedagogic practices, laying the foundations for child-centred pedagogy. Consequently, this can transform practice and thinking in nurturing children's learning, development and understanding of the world.

Children's Rights in Hungary

Understanding children's rights in present day Hungary requires looking back to the past and the country's socio-cultural history. The 1990s brought with it a sharp decrease in birth rate partly due to the collapse of the socialist economy, which prompted the new government to look after its children through providing full-time, fully funded early education and care provision for three to six-year-olds, whose parents were employed (Teszenyi & Hevey, 2015). Kindergartens provided conditions for healthy development (including, nutrition, paediatric care, and specialist services on site), which aimed to acknowledge children's rights to survival and development (Pálfi et al., 2019). Rights to protection and social security dates back to the first European kindergarten established by Teréz Brunszvik in Budapest in 1828. Its emphasis on a protective function of kindergartens as an institution laid the foundations for children's rights to be understood primarily in safeguarding and legal terms today.

Children's rights to participation and play, however, reflected (and to some extent still does) the enduring influence of socialism. Early childhood had an 'iconic status' in the 1970s and 1980s (Penn, 2011, p.16). Children were placed in the centre of the social, political and economic re-making of society and they were viewed as an embodiment of a new social order, where kindergartens nurtured a new generation of soviet citizens (Silova et al., 2017). Children were perceived to be shaped by adults through instilling socialist political ideals, values and beliefs (Millei et al., 2019; Millei & Imre, 2016) including expectations of discipline, orderly and unquestioning behaviours which continued into the 1990s. Consequently, children had very limited opportunities, if any, to understand, learn and realise their rights and needs. Although children's right to play was declared with Hungary ratifying the UNCRC in 1991, the content of children's play in kindergartens continued to be heavily censored and led by pedagogues under the controversial pretext of 'teaching children to play', which inadvertently led to the 'right to play' being curtailed.

The socialist ideology, that any change to society started with the collective upbringing of children with conformity and group goals as priority, was replaced by an individualised approach in the late 1990s (Kirschenbaum, 2001; Penn, 2014). This gave way to Westernised ideas flooding the country (Millei, 2011; Molnár et al., 2015; Nagy Varga et al., 2015) and the introduction of the National Core Programme for Kindergarten Education in 1996 (Ministry of Culture and Education, 1996). It established statutory requirements for all aspects of care and education to be in accordance with fundamental human rights and with respect for children's rights (Pálfi et al., 2019). However, the social and cultural phenomenon of socialism did not disappear overnight and still has influence at each level of the education system in Hungary (Józsa et al., 2018). In this context, the rhetoric of understanding children's rights and embedding them in kindergarten practice is challenging.

Focus on Children's Play

Play is important for children; it is where they explore, try out new things, and voice their opinions. It acts as a vehicle for nurturing their interest and provides a platform for exploring curiosity and creativity (Canning et al., 2017). Children's active engagement in play supports their cognitive and physical development as they bring what they already know to the situation and build on or experiment with their knowledge through play. Children also come to play situations with experiences from home, their family, and community (Keung & Cheung, 2019). When children are able to set their own agenda in relation to how they play, who with and to some extent be able to control the environment they are able to explore new ideas, concepts and experiment with their own understanding (Canning, 2020). Children also use the knowledge and experience they already have with regard to how they approach play situations, how they act within them and how they respond to other children. Consequently, play is the ideal platform for listening to children's voice and understanding their emotional responses to what is happening around them as well as how they understand their own experiences.

A Mosaic Approach

The Mosaic approach combines reflections on a range of ways to listen to children's voices, and to gather their views and experiences through child-led methods and observations, in order to inform pedagogy and research (Clark et al., 2011). Each element of the Mosaic approach is valued and recognised as making a significant contribution to knowledge generation about children and the things that matter to them. Central to this is listening which is an 'active process, involving, interpreting, constructing meaning and responding' (Clark, 2017, p. 26). Pedagogues work with information which can be seen and heard out of context – for example, the things children say and aspects of play that reflect learning and knowledge from home. Therefore, it is important for pedagogues to step back and recognise how children feel and see the world. Rinaldi (2005, p.19) terms the development of collaborative understanding as 'interpretative theory', that ascribes significance and meaning to events and objects that are shared, layered and revised on 'intellectual, affective and aesthetic' levels. This research represents children's voice, their interpretations and views on the world, through their play and conversations, whilst recognising and drawing upon interpretations and reflections made by pedagogues who know the children. Play activities which promoted conversation, projects that produced artefacts such as drawings and models and conversations with pedagogues were the mosaic 'tools' utilized in this research.

Theoretical Framing

In this research understanding what children bring to play situations and how they interact with others or in particular spaces, draws on a socio-cultural perspective of learning and development. Sociocultural theory suggests that learning is inherently a social process mediated through interpersonal interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). For example, sharing the same cultural background means that children enter play with similar expectations of what might happen. Pyle & Bigelow (2015) consider that play, learning and development cannot be isolated from contextual influences such as the home and kindergarten. They all influence the process of playing and learning and developing a holistic picture of children's preferences and how those preferences support the expression of voice and rights. Consequently, the role of the pedagogue is significant in interpreting and supporting children's

interactions. Their understanding of the balance between social exchanges and the knowledge and experiences that children bring to play situations requires sensitive pedagogical innovations (Clark, 2017). Pedagogues have greater knowledge of social and cultural traditions within the community and therefore are not only able to impose these on children through behavioural expectations but are also able to occupy a sense of power over children because they can control the kindergarten environment and what happens in it (Burke, 2008). Therefore, in considering children's rights, pedagogues' skill in providing space, time and flexibility for children's self-expression alongside giving opportunities for new experiences, choice and preference is critical (Brunson & Vogt, 1996).

Method

The study followed a qualitative ethnographic narrative design exploring the opinions and experiences of children in kindergarten as they explored their rights through specific play from a toolkit of activities which were video recorded. It specifically looked at the way in which children expressed themselves through their play and how that play linked to the UNCRC rights of the child. A unique element of the research was that data was generated by pedagogues in the kindergartens because of the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, a clear framework was in place for pedagogues generating the data to understand the purpose of the research, how a toolkit of activities could be utilised, the ethical implications, data generation procedures, the method of analysis, and potential for future research. This paper reports on the first phase of a larger project and therefore it was essential that each stage of the data generation process was carefully considered.

The research question asked: *In what ways are children's rights explored and expressed in Hungarian kindergartens by children?* and *How can pedagogues and kindergartens support a rights-based approach to values and practice?* A narrative methodology sought to understand children's 'in the moment' lived experiences and emotions (Chase, 2017). Play experiences for the children in the five kindergartens that participated was different in terms of context, yet they also had commonalities. These included a sense of freedom within their play to express views and opinions and to build on their own stories. Children's play was captured by pedagogues through video footage and electronically transferred for analysis. Their narrative contributed to a portrayal of experiences and linked with pedagogues' reflections, enabling a layered picture of children's rights to emerge. Knowledge created through this type of analysis constantly evolves and understanding is situated within a context; it is not value-free or independent of interpretation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). However, there is richness in the detail and insight provided through narrative data and the nature of shared experiences.

A Toolkit of Activities

Pedagogues were asked to contribute to designing a toolkit of play activities through a series of online workshops. The toolkit not only focused on different types of play, but the ability of pedagogues to choose from a mosaic of possibilities for data generation. The activities included 9 core areas: drama/role play; talking circles; dance/movement; story making; projects; daily routines; cooking; arts and crafts; photo/drawing elicitation. Although some of the activities were familiar to children and pedagogues, the toolkit provided suggestions on how to make them rights focused and for children to lead and shape the conversations around things that mattered to them.

Once an activity was selected, pedagogues made written and/or video observations of children's engagement and participation. They provided written reflections of their observations of children's play in relation to how children expressed themselves and the potential links between play and rights. The combination of this data and artefacts produced by children provided a mosaic of experiences and a creative framework for sharing children's perspectives.

The toolkit mitigated to some extent pedagogues' subjective interpretation of the data. In Hungarian kindergartens there is an assumption that research is a judgment on practice and pedagogues generally have extensive freedom in interpreting any data generated (Pálfi *et al.*, 2019). Using a toolkit provided

pedagogues with a structure and focus. It afforded a limited choice of activities but ensured pedagogues could not compare directly with others.

Participants and Data Generation

Kindergartens and pedagogues were recruited through the Hungarian National Pedagogues' Network after initial interest was expressed at an online conference. Pedagogues were introduced to the research, children's rights and the positioning of children with regard to understanding freedom of expression within play activities during an initial online meeting. After this, pedagogues were asked to make a commitment to the research and a total of five kindergartens and their lead pedagogues agreed to proceed.

Pedagogues talked to their children about the activities that they wanted to do with them as part of the research and how they would feel about participating. They explained that they wanted to find out about their views and opinions about subjects that were important to them. Pedagogues explained that through play, the children would naturally reveal what was important to them because they would want to include the topic in their game or engage in conversation about it. The pedagogues emphasised that the children were not being judged or tested, but they were interested in their views because they had forgotten what it was like to be a child and what kinds of things mattered to them. Pedagogues allowed children time to think about whether they wanted to participate and if they were happy for the pedagogue to film their play as part of the research. Pedagogues answered any questions the children had in circle time at various points throughout the weeks leading up to the generation of data. It was important that children were respected in their views on taking part in the research and that their voice was captured authentically through their play. Video was not edited by the pedagogues or researchers, play artefacts were unchanged and children's conversations in play were captured naturally as part of the game they were engaged in.

The participating kindergartens were diverse in size and pedagogical thinking. They also represented different local pedagogical programmes and were located throughout Hungary. Local pedagogical programmes are a feature of Hungarian practice. It essentially means that a Kindergarten follows a bespoke curriculum that has a particular focus on a theme or pedagogical influence. Table 1 indicates the size, scale, pedagogical programme and particular 'tool' each kindergarten used during the research:

Table 1. Research participants, focus and toolkit activity

Kindergarten	Detail	Tool used
1	109 children in 4 multi-age groups; affluent small-town location rich in cultural heritage; church run setting; Catholic faith; local programme focuses on **nurturing talent**.	Circle-time/ talking/story circles led by children
2	216 children in 8 same-age groups; affluent county town kindergarten maintained by the Local Authority (LA); the local programme is designed to develop **citizenship** with the added foci on **environmental issues and sustainability**; accredited 'Green Kindergarten'; achieved a cultural award in 2019 for nurturing old (mainly folk) traditions.	Drama, role-play Taking photos and making drawings
3	185 children in 7 multi-age and 1 same-age groups; LA run city kindergarten with mixed socio-economic background; the local programme focuses on **citizenship,** preparation for contributing to society.	Picture cards that provoke discussion amongst children
4	137 children in 5 multi-age and 1 same-age groups; LA run setting town with mixed socio-economic background; local programme focuses on the cyclical, **natural rhythm of the four seasons** and **folk tradition**.	Cooking and baking
5	186 children in 8 multi-age groups (3-6 years); mixed socio-economic background; LA run; town location; local programme focuses on **relationships** and the development of the **mother tongue** through play and stories.	Arts and crafts including model making

Video Data

Video of the toolkit play activities were considered the most appropriate way of capturing children's peer interactions and self-expression rather than relying on field notes or written observations made by pedagogues (Haw, 2008). This meant that the video data were open to interpretation. However, the advantage of using video as a non-participant observational tool was that it enabled repeat viewing and opportunities for detailed analysis and alongside pedagogues' reflections enabled a layered picture of children's lived experiences in relation to their rights to emerge. Pedagogues recorded multiple short (approximately 2 minute) video clips of the toolkit activity and uploaded the files to be shared with the researchers. Short video sequences were essential to limit the file size being shared, the upload time and internet bandwidth needed.

Pedagogue Reflections and Children's Artefacts

Pedagogues' reflections were collected in the form of written accounts of what they observed children doing in the toolkit activities and through online focus groups organised after the data had been collected. The online focus groups were necessary because of the research being conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and the geographical spread of the kindergartens across Hungary. Reflections were linked to the artefacts that children produced whilst participating in the toolkit activity, for example, a clay model from kindergarten 5 or the cakes made in kindergarten 4. The artefacts prompted pedagogue reflections in relation to the socio-cultural understandings they attributed to children and their families. The social relationships between children prompted pedagogues to reflect on the conversations children engaged in and how those conversations could be seen through a rights-based lens.

The online focus groups to facilitate pedagogues' reflections were led by a researcher and asked pedagogues to share the toolkit activity they focused upon, how they had found filming the activities, what they found interesting or surprising in what they heard children express and how that linked to previous knowledge they held about that child or group of children. Pedagogues did not necessarily know each other, but they were willing to share their experiences and reflect on what they observed children doing and saying linked to a rights-based approach to practice.

Ethics

Ethical considerations included processes that provided pedagogues with the confidence and freedom to enable them to collect data and gain children's and families' consent. This was important, given the aim of gaining insights into children's voice through self-expression and lived experiences via specific play activities. Alongside adhering to the British Educational Research Association (BERA) revised guidelines (BERA, 2018), Hungarian ethical approval and protocols were followed (Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2010). Families consented for their child to participate through signed consent managed by the pedagogues, and they had the opportunity to withdraw from the research before a set date. The children, aged between 4 and 6 years old, were asked for their assent rather than full informed consent (Hill, 2005). This mitigates against not knowing whether children understand the context in which the research will be presented or the implications for them later. The research was explained in child-friendly terms and children were asked if they were willing to be part of the study and help adults understand their views and opinions. They were asked several times over a period of 2 weeks leading up to the start of the research and any questions that they had were answered by pedagogues. In the planning of the study children were at the heart of the process and the motivation to action change. Therefore, it was essential they be part of the process in deciding if they wanted to participate, the level at which they engaged with the activities and if they wanted to talk about their experiences with pedagogues during or after the study. This approach also supported a rights-based pedagogy enabling children to have ownership and voice in decision making.

Parents/carers and pedagogues acted as 'gatekeepers' for children's wellbeing and gauged if they were happy to participate in the toolkit play activities. Pedagogues submitted video, reflections and children's artefacts electronically which were stored securely and all names of participants in this study are pseudonyms to protect their identity. There were no withdrawals from the research during the process.

Time before the project began was given to ensure that pedagogues, parents and children had information, time to ask questions and time to reflect on whether they wanted to participate.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used for data interrogation (Braun & Clarke, 2021). From the video of the toolkit activities, pedagogue reflections and focus groups, a systematic review was conducted identifying patterns of reoccurring words and topics relating to children's rights. These were identified as the codes. From the codes themes were identified and analysed in relation to the research question, whilst reflecting on the theoretical framing of socio-cultural theory. Thematic analysis as a flexible method enabled focus on analysing meaning across the entire data set of children's play experiences and pedagogue reflections.

Findings

From the analysis, three examples are presented relating to how children explored and expressed their rights. The synopsis of video data, where children controlled and led their play, exemplify the narrative affordances of the toolkit for drawing attention to and conveying children's interests, and what is important to them. The layered approach of including pedagogues' reflections supports the sensitive need to understand children's expression and context in relation to their knowledge and understanding of their immediate environment.

Example 1: Being a television reporter

From Kindergarten 2 where the toolkit activity was role play: Sara aged 4 years is standing behind a large cardboard box with a square hold cut out which represents a television set. It is balanced on a table and Sara is framed by the 'television'. She is talking out to an audience of 3 boys who are watching as if she were on television. She starts by pretending to be a weather reporter, but her description contains a narrative of what she is thinking, feeling and wishing for:

> It could happen that the corona virus comes to an end… and … and ….and we are allowed to go everywhere… to the seaside, to Parád (an open air spa) and it will be the summer and we will be allowed to go anywhere and the sun will shine… and …and… we will be able to leave our homes and then we can go to the play park and then we are allowed to go everywhere and there won't be corona virus any more.

Pedagogues' reflection after thinking about approaching practice from a rights-based perspective and allowing children time and space to play:

> I discovered how much I am able to lead by following the children. When I have a helpful and supportive attitude, I am able to support children's self-affirmation.

Example 2: Playing with dinosaurs

From Kindergarten 5 where the toolkit activity was arts and crafts: Six children aged from 3 to 6 years are standing around an elevated plastic water tray. The tray does not contain water, but a variety of materials including fabric, cotton wool and polystyrene shapes. There is a plastic bowl on the edge of the tray that contains water and each child has hold of a small plastic animal toy. They are taking turns to dip their animal into the bowl of water and then into the tray to explore the different materials. As they do this, the conversation, initiated by one of the children explores whether dinosaurs clean their teeth.

> Ava: But what shall we dry this on?
>
> David: I am a real spring (as in, spring water)
>
> Ava: What shall we dry his hair on?
>
> Tomas: Do animals brush teeth?
>
> Bella: Animals don't brush teeth.
>
> Tomas: Animals don't.
>
> India: This has not even got teeth.
>
> Bella: So animals do not have to brush teeth then.

India: Yes, because they don't even have toothbrushes.

Tomas: Yeah…This one (dinosaur) also fits in there. We are putting them in the water. Oh… yuppy (as he dips the dinosaur into the water)

Ava: Look, this is still black.

Tomas: Me coming here…. Argghhh

Bella: I am brushing my toothie tooth

Tomas: See, this dino is not brushing teeth because it has not got any.

Pedagogues' reflection after reviewing the video:

It came as a surprise to me that a little girl who had not opened up much in kindergarten before did in this situation, and a boy from the younger children's group also revealed a lot about the things that were important to him.

Example 3: What can you see?

From Kindergarten 3 where the toolkit activity was picture cards: This activity is based on adult-child interactions with the focus on images of different situational contexts. The pedagogue asks questions to find out what the child is thinking and feeling about the situation. In this example, Elba is shown a photograph of two children pulling a teddy bear in opposite directions.

Pedagogue: I'm going to show you a picture. Can you tell me what you see?

Elba: Two boys *(He's visibly very excited and curious. He answers as soon as he receives the picture)*

Pedagogue: What are they doing?

Elba: They're pulling the teddy

Pedagogue: And why is that?

Elba: Because they're arguing

Pedagogue: And what do you think? Who could have that teddy? *(Elba thinks about this and names one of his groupmates)*

Elba: Aisha! *(A little girl from his group)*

Pedagogue: And of the two of them, who could have it? *(pointing to the picture)*

Elba: Him *(pointing to the younger child)*. And he'll play with it a little bit, and then he'll give it to the other one too. *(He replies quickly, confidently, and decidedly)*

Pedagogue: How do you think they're feeling right now?

Elba: Well…they're feeling that…good, but they're arguing about the teddy

Pedagogue: Who do you think could help them?

Elba: Their Mummy

Pedagogue: How could their Mummy help them?

Elba: She could put the teddy away and give it to them later when they're not arguing.

Pedagogues' reflection after reviewing the video:

After reviewing the video and the way I was asking the questions, I think I could have done it better. It wasn't a conversation; it was questions and answers which maybe Elba thought he had to answer because I am the adult. I understand now that I need to be more gentle in my approach. Give children the time to think and speak, not question them so hard, but explore with them what they are thinking and feeling.

Assumptions

Video data was the predominant form of data generation and as such was important to remember at the analysis stage that it was not 'neutral' because it is a snapshot based on the pedagogues' decisions around what is significant to record. Pedagogues' values and beliefs influenced not only what was filmed but also when it was filmed. Consequently, understanding the theoretical framework of a socio-cultural approach, the research question and acknowledging impact of the decisions made in filming selections shows awareness of the interpretive nature of the research. These considerations are important because

within different social and cultural contexts there are many common practices that occur based on unquestioned assumptions about how things are done or roles that different people occupy. Corsaro (2018) suggests that these assumptions not only influence pedagogues' actions and decisions, but also shape children's cultural understanding and influence their contribution to the adult world. Therefore, common or taken-for-granted practices are often reaffirmed through actual experiences, for example, what has been seen or heard or emphasized through physical actions. Therefore, how children relate to the world is largely a function based on what they know of their own cultural context and the influence of wider societal norms (Greene & Hill, 2005). This is significant in relation to understanding research around children's rights and hearing children's voices so that as adult researchers we question our assumptions and are led by the data that the children have generated and have richly contributed to. This is exemplified by a pedagogue from Kindergarten 4 where cooking and baking were the toolkit activity focus:

> It was very useful for me to be part of this project because, I have started approaching our daily activities from a children's rights perspective.

Thematic Analysis

The discussion and actions initiated by the children, generated through their play, enabled the process of thematic analysis. From example 1, Sara is talking about what she wants to do with her family, where she wants to go and why she is unable to because of the pandemic. The video was coded as: play park; family holiday situations; and COVID-19. These codes were then grouped, developing the themes of 'special places' and 'events important to children'. The 'playing with dinosaurs' was coded as: personal hygiene and conributions, resulting in the themes of 'health and wellbeing' and 'caring for others'. The discussion amongst the children is important as they ask each other questions, seek clarification and different opinions alongside 'playing out' the actions of cleaning the dinosaurs teeth. This process is signifiant to the children in making sense and creating their own narrative around personal hygiene expectations as well as shared cultural experiences. Table 2 outlines all of the codes and themes generated from the research:

Table 2. Codes and themes from the data

Codes	Emerging theme
Extended family members	
Parents and siblings	
The Kindergarten pedagogue	Significant people
Friends	
Arrival of a new baby	
Play park	
Family holiday destinations	
Grandparents house	Special places
Holidays	
The difference between child/child and child/adult interactions	
Conflict	
Choice/own decisions vs. rules	Power relations
Winners being rewarded	
Medical help - COVID-19 and the effect of the pandemic	
Relaxation/rest and sleep	
Personal hygiene	Health and wellbeing
Nutrition	
Helping each other	
Acceptance	
Contributions	Caring for others – community
Showing affection	
The presence of home and home life in the Kindergarten	
Feeling left behind	
Love	
Being cross or angry	Feelings
Longing	

Discussion

Listening to Children's Voice

The examples from the findings demonstrate how children's play can open up opportunities for other topics that children are concerned about to be expressed. This reflects Article 12 of the UNCRC; yet, this was a revelation to Hungarian pedagogues who had not approached children's play from a rights-based perspective before. In the 'being a television reporter' role play, Sara had freedom within her imagination which facilitated her to have a voice. Because that particular 'snapshot' of play was recorded, it alerted the pedagogue to her anxieties. In this way, there was an opportunity for Sara's voice to be heard and this created further possibilities and generated discussion around activities that might address those concerns.

Article 12 expresses the right for children to voice their views and sets the expectation that their opinions are given due weight (United Nations, 1989). Practice in Hungarian kindergartens reflects children's voice within a particular frame of reference set by pedagogues and is limited by what they understand as a 'right'. This reflects an adult-centred view of children, where they hold power in decisions such as developing rules and boundaries without consulting or including children's ideas (Sutton Smith, 1997). Consequently, the reality of practice reflects the rights of adults more than the rights of children. The findings of the research show how children are expressing their voice through the play decisions they make and the way they communicate them, however pedagogues are at the initial stages of moving away from tokenistic opportunities to a listening approach that actively seeks, recognises and acts on children's views (Lundy, 2007).

Children's rights in Hungary are typically seen in terms of protection or safeguarding and so putting children at the centre of practice in a democratic, inclusive position of power is an alien concept. The National Core programme provides the foundations for practice that enables children to realise their rights. The programme affords a significant degree of autonomy to pedagogues in all aspects of their work with children. But respecting children's rights varies across practice. For example, physical and physiological needs are consistently met and children's rights to provision and survival is respected. However, children's social, emotional and cognitive needs are largely overlooked with development understood in relation to biological age and stereotypical characteristics.

Slowing Down Practice

Pedagogues' voluntary participation in the research induced and required a slower pace; both through participating in the research and in reflecting upon practice. Slow participatory research includes re-awakening skills and senses that may have become lost in a busy kindergarten environment (Clark, 2021). These include time to think and reflect, talk and consolidate with colleagues, listen to what children are actually saying when they play and interact with other children or adults. The pedagogues were the drivers of their own thinking with the focus on the children rather than their practice. Consequently, because they were thinking about the children, it made them reflect on their practice. The slow pedagogy employed led to 'in between time' which enabled pedagogues to process the ideas shared between them and develop a renewed understanding of the toolkit activities and their purpose.

How time was perceived and used during the data generation period was influenced by the culture and historical values of the kindergartens as well as individual personality and pedagogic beliefs. Some pedagogues experienced time and pace as pressure, whereas others as a reassuring expansion (Cuffaro, 1995). Both reflect what pedagogues consider meaningful and significant, which includes the time children need to frame their own views on matters that are important to them. Those pedagogues, who afforded children with 'experience stretches' (Cuffaro, 1995, p.58) claimed that they got to know children better as they used their chosen toolkit activity to elicit children's views. Others were governed by the deeply engrained habit of setting out time for asking children's opinions. In these situations, time was dictated by adult pacing and direction (Lipari, 2014). Embedding slow pedagogy where significance is given to time and space for children and pedagogues to develop interests and to notice details that concern children

require a 'slow lens' (Clark, 2021). Although greatly rewarding when slow pedagogy is employed, it can be challenging for pedagogues to step back, observe and allow children to lead their play.

An adult planned activity always has a hidden agenda in that there is always a planned outcome (Hughes, 2001). The adult then dictates the pace and direction of children's engagement and involvement. For the power dynamics to shift so that activities follow children's pace and rhythm pedagogues have to feel comfortable with the notion that where children undertake an activity regardless of the outcome, it is still worthwhile and valuable, even if pedagogues envisaged it differently. However, in Hungarian practice this is a challenging concept. It is hard for pedagogues to give up control and slow down. Nevertheless, pedagogues did reflect through the online focus groups that they were surprised to find out something new about their children and to understand them better. This is potentially due to having no expectations of an outcome for children's play and a realisation that children have the capacity to engage with activities without adult direction. This is the beginning of a process to learn to trust and respect children's choices.

Pedagogues have seen through participating in the research that they do not have to be the gatekeepers of the content of children's play, but if they listen to children to find out what themes dominate their play, they can plan more open-ended activities where outcomes are flexible which better reflect children's interests. This is considered a breakthrough in thinking about practice and supporting a rights-based pedagogic approach. This considers how teaching and learning can be centred around children's rights and how children can be empowered to contribute to their learning environment. It ensures that children's voices are not tokenistic, but valued as a way in which to enhance and inspire activities and teaching that children can actively participate in.

Let the Activity and Environment Do the Work

If pedagogues understand and embrace a rights-based approach, the space and resources available in kindergartens will reflect children's explorations, ideas and interests. Artefacts created will be individual and spontaneous. Children will be able to move freely in the space where they are able to express themselves through verbal interaction and non-verbal cues. The flow of the environment will be with the children, created and maintained by their curiosity and motivation for learning. The environment will respond to the continuum of children's experiences, enabling different experiences to be had for individual children within the same space.

Findings suggest Hungarian kindergartens do not reflect this ideal. The content of activities provided for children are very important to pedagogues. They see it as a personal failure if not all children want to do an activity that was painstakingly, precisely and carefully planned. The culture of kindergartens supports a tradition where the pedagogue feels that it is only them who can teach children about what is important. The term 'important' in this context relates to what pedagogues have planned through a scheme of work that is thematically designed, such as 'spring and new life'. However, this research has begun to break down some of the embedded approaches to practice. The toolkit activities forced pedagogues to tune into children's spontaneous play and leave activities open-ended. Pedagogues embraced this approach because they were taking part in research seen as significant. But through the process of championing the toolkit activities and allowing them to do the work in terms of supporting children's voice, engagement and discussion about what is important to them, pedagogues acknowledged they gained a deeper insight into children's preferences and passions, laying the foundations for meaningful interactions. This 'new' emerging approach to pedagogic practice provides foundations for honouring children's rights and for children to have the opportunity to learn and experience their rights through interactions with other children and adults.   Their relationships with the environment and the way in which play and activities may be directed by children, developing a deeper connection with their interests, supports child-centred meaning making.

Creating a Layered Approach to Practice

In the same way that children are not one dimensional, Hungarian practice has many layers and functions. A holistic approach to practice requires tuning into children's expressions and patterns; the variations they create form an integral part of a listening pedagogy (Ingulfsvann et al., 2020). How and what children express is likely to have connections to the world outside the kindergarten which is reflected in example 3 in the conversation between the pedagogue and Elba. The pedagogue is learning about what Elba understands and how he makes sense of the world around him. Awareness of children's various contexts are crucial in interpreting their views. Children's uniqueness is understood in the context of their relationships with and the environments they inhabit as the codes of the themes 'significant people' and 'special places' suggest.

Building knowledge about the children within and outside kindergarten is integral to understanding their individual circumstances; their starting point in how they are empowered and how introducing the ideas of rights could support their learning, development and confidence. It is not a 'one size fits all' approach, but requires sensitive planning, putting the needs of the child at the centre of practice and building around the four foundations of children's rights: participation, development, survival and protection. The themes that emerged from the findings of this research map onto these areas and create a layered view of where issues central to children's lives intertwine with their rights. Acknowledging the themes as things that concern children, that emerged from their play and listening to their conversations demonstrates how a rights-based pedagogy, whether recognised or not, already exists in practice. Figure 1 illustrates the mapping of themes onto the 4 foundations of children's rights.
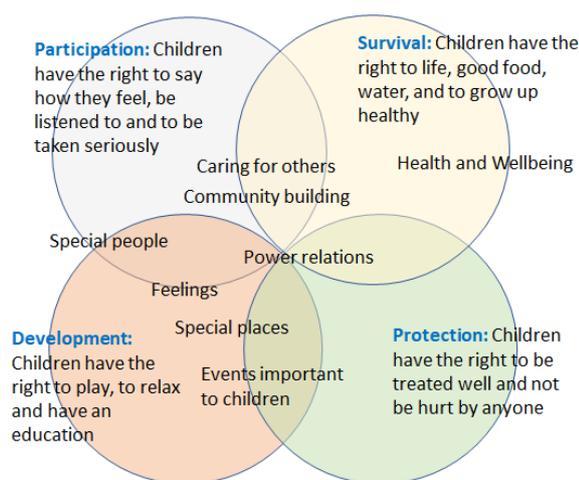

Participation: Children have the right to say how they feel, be listened to and to be taken seriously

Survival: Children have the right to life, good food, water, and to grow up healthy

Caring for others
Community building

Health and Wellbeing

Special people

Power relations

Feelings

Special places

Development: Children have the right to play, to relax and have an education

Events important to children

Protection: Children have the right to be treated well and not be hurt by anyone

Figure 1. Findings themes mapped to children's rights

The challenge therefore is to recognise the rights-based practice that already exists and build on that so that pedagogues can view children's learning and development through a child-centred, listening lens, where rights form the foundation of pedagogues understanding.

Conclusion

This paper has argued for a rights-based approach to underpin practice in Hungarian kindergartens based on the data generated by children participating in open-ended play activities and pedagogues' reflections. However intertwined with the routine of daily practice are influential forces that present potential barriers to adopting change. These include the power relationships that exist as an underlying current between children and pedagogues and the cultural and historical weight of expectation that shapes values and beliefs.

This paper has argued that children already demonstrate their ability to articulate what they think and feel; their views and opinions when engaged in play that is open-ended without prescribed outcomes. However, there is need for greater awareness of children's rights and the articles of the UNCRC so that

rights are not seen as formulaic or offered as a tokenistic activity. It is also important that children recognise the importance of having rights and what that means in their everyday lives. Understanding their contribution to their community in terms of their rights and responsibilities supports wider ideals of cohesion, accountability and inclusive relationship building. Pedagogues require support to achieve these goals and a willingness to acknowledge that rights can be built into the foundations of their practice. Pre- and in-service training could provide a way to support pedagogues' engagement in rights-respecting pedagogic practice and raise the awareness of the need to listen to children's voices. The UNCRC articles are legally binding and in particular, Article 12 requires children's rights to be realised in their everyday lives (Lundy, 2007). Consequently it is urgent that the way in which children's rights are viewed and implemented into practice are recognised, celebrated and drive a change in approaches to acknowledging what is important and transformative for children.

Declarations

Authors' Declarations

Publisher's Declarations

Editorial Acknowledgement: The editorial process of this article was carried out by Dr. Mehmet Toran.

Publisher's Note: Journal of Childhood, Education & Society remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliation.

References

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide* (1st edition). SAGE Publications Ltd.

British Educational Research Association. (2018). *Ethical guidleines for educational research* (4th ed.). https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018

Brunson, D., & Vogt, J. (1996) 'Empowering our students and ourselves: A liberal democratic approach to the communication classroom'. *Communication Education,* 45(1), 73-83.

Burke, C. (2008) 'Play in focus: Children's visual voice in participative research In P. Thomson, (Ed), *Doing visual research with children and young people* (pp. 23-36). Routledge.

Canning, N. (2020). *Children's empowerment in play*. Routledge/TACTYC book series.

Canning, N., Payler, J., Horsley, K., & Gomez, C. (2017). An innovative methodology for capturing young children's curiosity, imagination and voices using a free app: Our Story. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 25(3), 292-307. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2017.1353953

Chase, S. (2017). 'Narrative Inquiry: Towards theoretical and methodological maturity'. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln, *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (5th Edition, pp. 546–560). Sage publications.

Clark, A. (2017). *Listening to young children: A guide to understanding and using the Mosaic approach* (3rd rev. ed.). Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Clark, A. (2021, February 24). *Accelerated childhoods and the case for slow pedagogies*. Social Pedagogy Professional Association, webinar. https://sppa-uk.org/news/watch-the-recording-of-the-webinar-accelerated-childhoods-and-the-case-for-slow-pedagogies/

Clark, A., Carr, M., & Moss, P. (2011). *Listening to young children: The Mosaic approach*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Corsaro, W. A. (2018). *The sociology of childhood* (5th ed.). SAGE.

Cuffaro, H. K. (1995). *Experimenting with the world: John Dewey and the early childhood classroom*. Teachers College Press.

de Sousa, J. (2019). Pedagogical documentation: The search for children's voice and agency. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, *27*(3), 371–384. https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2019.1600807

Elfström Pettersson, K. (2015). Children's participation in preschool documentation practices. *Childhood (Copenhagen, Denmark)*, *22*(2), 231–247. https://doi.org/10.1177/0907568213513480

Facca, D., Gladstone, B., & Teachman, G. (2020). Working the limits of "giving voice" to children: A critical conceptual review. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *19*, 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920933391

Greene, S., & Hill, M. (2005). Researching children's experience: Methods and methodological issues. In S. Greene, and D. Hogan, (Eds.) *Researching children's experiences: Approaches and methods* (pp 1-21). Sage Publications.

Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2019). *Ethnography: Principles in practice* (4th edition). Routledge.

Haw, K. (2008). Voice and video: Seen, heard and listened to?.In P. Thomson, (Ed.), *Doing visual research with children and young people* (pp 192-207). Routledge.

Herczog, M. (2012). Rights of the child and early childhood education and care in Europe. *European Journal of Education, 47*(4), 542–555. https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12008

Hill, M. (2005). Ethical considerations in researching children's experiences. In S. Greene, & D. Hogan, (Eds.), *Researching children's experiences: Approaches and methods* (pp. 61-86). Sage Publications.

Hughes, B. (2001) *Evolutionary playwork and reflective analytical practice.* Routledge.

Hungarian Academy of Sciences. (2010). *Ethics code of the Hungarian academy of sciences*. HAS.

Hungarian Ministry of Culture and Education (1996) *Hungarian National Core Curriculum.* SCRIBB. https://www.scribd.com/document/64807027/Hungarian-National-Core-Curriculum

Ingulfsvann, L. S., Moe, V. F., & Engelsrud, G. (2020). The messiness of children's voices: An affect theory perspective. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *19*, 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920958601

Jelača, D., & Lugarić, D. (2018). The "radiant future" of spatial and temporal dis/orientations. In J. F. Bailyn, D. Jelača, & D. Lugarić (Eds.), *The future of (pos)socialism: Eastern European perspectives* (pp. 1–16). State University of New York Press.

Józsa, K., Török, B., & Stevenson, C. (2018). Preschool and kindergarten in Hungary and the United States: A comparison within transnational development policy. *International Journal of Educational Development*, *62*, 88–95. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2018.03.001

Keung, C., & Cheung, A. (2019). Towards holistic supporting of play-based learning implementation in Kindergartens: A mixed method study. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *47*(6), 1-14. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-019-00956-2

Kirschenbaum, L. A. (2001). *Small comrades: Revolutionizing childhood in Soviet Russia* (1 edition). Routledge.

Lipari, L. (2014). *Listening, thinking, being: Toward an ethics of attunement* (Illustrated edition). Penn State University Press.

Lundy, L. (2007). 'Voice' is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal*, *33*(6), 927–942. https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033

Lundy, L. (2012). Children's rights and educational policy in Europe: The implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *Oxford Review of Education*, *38*(4), 393–411. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2012.704874

Millei, Z. (2011). Governing through early childhood curriculum, 'the child,' and 'community': Ideologies of socialist Hungary and neoliberal Australia. *European Education*, *43*(1), 33–55. https://doi.org/10.2753/EUE1056-4934430103

Millei, Z., & Imre, R. (Eds.). (2016). *Childhood and nation: Interdisciplinary engagements*. Palgrave Macmillan US. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137477835

Millei, Z., Silova, I., & Gannon, S. (2019). Thinking through memories of childhood in (post)socialist spaces: Ordinary lives in extraordinary times. *Children's Geographies*, *20*(3), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2019.1648759

Molnár, B., Pálfi, S., Szerepi, S., & Varga Nagy, A. (2015). *Kisgyermekkori nevelés Magyarországon [Early childhood education in Hungary].* CORE. https://core.ac.uk/reader/161045816

Murray, J., Swadener, B. B., & Smith, K. (Eds.). (2019). *The Routledge international handbook of young children's rights* (1 edition). Routledge.

Nagy Varga, A., Molnár, B., Pálfi, S., & Szerepi, S. (2015). Hungarian perspectives on early years workforce development from the beginning till today. In V. Campbell-Barr & J. Georgeson (Eds.), *International perspectives on workforce development in early childhood eduaction and care: History, philosophy and politics* (pp. 109–121). Critical Publishing.

Palaiologou, I. (2013). 'Do we hear what children want to say?' Ethical praxis when choosing research tools with children under five. *Early Child Development and Care*, *184*(5), 689–705. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2013.809341

Pálfi, S., Rákó, E., Varga Nagy, A., & Teszenyi, E. (2019). Children's rights in Hungary in early childhood education and care. In *The Routledge International Handbook of Young Children's Rights* (pp. 354–365). Routledge.

Penn, H. (2014). *Understanding early childhood: Issues and controversies* (3 edition). Open University Press.

Penn, P. (2011). *Quality in early childhood services - an international perspective: An international perspective*. Open University Press.

Pyle, A., & Bigelow, A. (2015). Play in kindergarten: An interview and observational study in three Canadian classrooms. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 43*(5), 385–393. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-014-0666-1

Rinaldi, C. (2005). Documentation and assessment: What Is the Relationship? In A. Clark, A.T. Kjørholt, & P. Moss, (Eds.), *Beyond listening: Children's perspectives on early childhood services* (pp 17-28). Policy Press.

Silova, I., Millei, Z., & Piattoeva, N. (2017). Interrupting the coloniality of knowledge production in comparative education: Postsocialist and postcolonial dialogues after the Cold War. *Comparative Education Review, 61*(S1), 74–102. https://doi.org/10.1086/690458

Spencer, G., Fairbrother, H., & Thompson, J. (2020). Privileges of power: Authenticity, representation and the "problem" of children's voices in qualitative health research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 19*, 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920958597

Sutton Smith, B. (1997) *The Ambiguity of Play.* Harvard University Press

Teszenyi, E., & Hevey, D. (2015). Age group, location or pedagogue: Factors affecting parental choice of kindergartens in Hungary. *Early Child Development and Care, 185*(11–12), 1961–1977. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2015.1028391

United Nations. (1989). *The convention on the rights of the child*. UNICEF.

United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2005) *General comment No. 7 (2005): Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood*, 20 September 2006, CRC/C/GC/7/Rev.1. https://www.refworld.org/docid/460bc5a62.html

Visnjić-Jevtić, A., Sadownik, A. R., & Engdahl, I. (2021). *Young children in the world and their rights: Thirty years with the United Nations Convention on the rights of the child* (Vol. 35). Springer International Publishing AG.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: Development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.

Yoon, H., S., & Templeton, T. N. (2019). The practice of listening to children: The challenges of hearing children out in an adult-regulated world. *Harvard Educational Review, 89*(1), 55–84. https://doi.org/10.17763/1943-5045-89.1.55

Zamfir, I. (2019). *Children's rights and the UN SDGs: A priority for EU external action* (Briefing PE 642.285; Memebers' Research Series). European Parliamentary Research Service.