

## Chapter 8

# Making the Voice of the Child Visible



## Documenting and Fostering Language from a Children's Rights Perspective

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**Abstract** This chapter discusses language practices in regard to infants and toddlers in early childhood education and care (ECEC) classrooms from a children's rights perspective. It looks at two different theoretical approaches to language learning that were identified in the German scientific community and discusses their implications for practice under a children's rights perspective. The chapter then argues for a cultural–historical theory of language learning and pedagogic strategies that make the voice of the child visible. It advances the claims made by presenting research findings on interaction quality in ECEC classrooms to demonstrate that an interactional style that targets children's rights promotes self-efficacy and language skills. To illustrate how children's language can be fostered from a cultural–historical perspective, the chapter introduces a framework for language development which can be used in the infant-toddler classroom to target and document the strategies of young children to make the individual voice of the child visible. These pedagogical strategies for documenting and promoting language learning will be illustrated through the analysis of language education and documentation practices in German day care centres. Based on the presented research findings, it is argued that a rights-based approach to language education for young children leads to individualised and responsive pedagogical strategies for language education in infant-toddler classrooms. It also demands a high level of professionalism in early childhood settings that explicitly values the voice of the child and their agency in the educational process.

**Keywords** Children's rights · Infants and toddlers · Language learning · Cultural historical theory · Early childhood education · Professional development

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## Introduction

Children's rights have been on the agenda of early childhood education and care (ECEC) for several decades. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly links children's rights to a legal duty to make the voice of the child visible:

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. (United Nations General Assembly, 1989, Article 12)

Germany has taken legal measures to ensure ECEC settings support children's rights. To receive its operating licence, for example, a German ECEC centre must have a complaint management system for all children (SGB VIII, 2013). In line with such legal requirements, ECEC services implement various tools that allow children to participate in the centre's decision-making processes (e.g. children participate in developing the centre's constitution; weekly children's conferences are held to involve children in educational programming and planning). Even though these measures include infants and toddlers, discussions about the full participation of this age group have been rare. Similarly, a lack of discussion on making children's voices visible in ways that support language learning can be identified.

This chapter addresses this gap by discussing how children's language can be fostered in infants' and toddlers' classrooms in a way that secures the full participation of the children. I start by presenting two different theoretical approaches to language learning and reflect on their implications for practice under a children's rights perspective. I then argue for a cultural–historical theory of language learning and pedagogic strategies that make the voice of the child visible.

## Theories of Language Learning and Pedagogic Practices that Uphold Children's Rights in the Language Education of Infants and Toddlers

Language development in the early years has been of interest to various research disciplines for many centuries (Jampert et al., 2007). In recent years, early childhood research has generated special interest in how ECEC can be a powerful resource for early language learning of young children before school (Tures, 2014). Stressing the importance of the early years and the key role of language skills to fight social, cultural or gender-related disadvantages has heightened efforts to improve the quality of day care.

As a result, many language programs have been developed for early childhood education with rather different ideas on how to promote language skills successfully. These differences can be explained by the different views of, and theories about, the nature of language learning, which again has led to language programs

having different goals. As van Oers et al. (2008) point out, “the goals of learning especially can have decisive influence on how the actions are organized and regulated and what strategies are selected for the accomplishment of one’s goals” (p. 10). While there have been heated international discussions about the outcomes of certain language programs based on empirical data and their implications for language education in day care (e.g. programs that successfully foster vocabulary), there has been very little debate about the aspect of children’s rights in language learning (Sens, 2011).

In the context of ECEC for infants and toddlers in Germany, two dominant types of theories can be identified: approaches that stem from a cultural–historical view of language education; and programs that are implicitly linked to monologicistic theories of language learning (Sens, 2011). This chapter focuses on language activities in infant-toddler early childhood education from a cultural–historical perspective. I will argue that these sociocultural theories of language learning are better able to support a children’s rights perspective on language education than traditional monologicistic theories of language learning. I will do so by explaining why a cultural–historical approach to language learning aims to foster children’s rights and why monologicistic theories do not align with a rights-based perspective.

A cultural–historical perspective recognises the fundamental situatedness and dialogicality of learning. It views learning as a joint activity which is located within daily routines and social practices that are meaningful to young children (Vygotskij, 1934/2002). Conceptualising language education in the infant-toddler classroom from a cultural–historical position presupposes that language development is embodied and embedded in interaction and everyday practices. It can therefore not be separated from the child and their individual way of communicating and thinking (Bertau, 2012). From such a perspective, we can conclude that the level to which the language abilities of young children develop depends on the availability of another person who is stimulating and an environment in which a child’s voice is heard and their curiosity can flourish. Theoretically, such sociocultural and interactionist perspectives of language development attribute a major facilitatory role to caregivers’ ability to provide responsive social contexts and linguistically stimulating environments (Bruner, 1981, 1983; Hoff-Ginsberg, 1986).

Cultural–historical theories begin by viewing children in their comprehensive development as expressive personalities who are not merely capable of learning, but who are positively eager to learn. Children are situated in a social environment within a community with a set of specific cultural routines and rules. The self-efficacy of the child is particularly strengthened in such an approach and their right to participate and engage with others through language is fostered. Best et al. (2011) thus speak of a fundamental “dialogic attitude” (*Dialoghaltung*) towards the developing child, their personality and interests. From a cultural–historical perspective on (language) learning, language development cannot be divorced from young children’s interests, topics and experiences, nor from their daily routines and social practices.

Monologist learning theories rely on the opposite focus: on the internalisation and retention of some objective “input” (Linell, 2009). The aim is for one language

expert to teach language for certain hours of the day through practising grammatical rules and labelling words. Instead of being sensitive towards the infant's or toddler's interests and initiatives, the language teacher decides which language activities are meaningful and important. Most concepts in Germany which follow a monologistic understanding of language learning consist of clearly defined program units (e.g. with a set of vocabulary that has to be trained). From a children's rights perspective, monologist learning theories can hence be rejected because they do not take infants' and toddlers' right to initiate their language learning into account. Alarming, this perspective is still widespread in the scientific community and results in many different training programs for young children aside from daily routines and meaningful social practices. (For an overview of the most prominent language programs in Germany for day care, see Jampert et al., 2007.)

If one acknowledges that young children act fundamentally socially in dialogic exchange with their caregivers, peers and environment, one must neither artificially confine language education to a small timeframe nor support the idea that only experts can, and indeed are, eligible to support young children's language learning. Even more so from a children's rights perspective on language learning, one has to argue clearly against the idea that children's language learning is best facilitated by some kind of monologist input that will effectively stimulate the child as long as it is applied as often as possible in a particular systematic manner. Rather, language education should support children to make sense of the world and to think through practices that are mediated through language. This involves experiencing different genres of acting in social contexts while being supported to learn community rules and practices in order to participate independently, critically and creatively within the borders of the community's practices (van Oers et al., 2008). ECEC teachers must also critically reflect on the sociocultural context in which language practices take place and the extent to which it aligns with individual children's family and community experiences. In Best et al.'s (2011) words, they must adopt a "dialogic attitude".

Since I have clearly argued for an approach to language education which stems from a cultural-historical perspective, I will now outline the pedagogical strategies for adopting such a perspective to effectively support children's language growth based on empirical data.

An approach to language learning that focuses on the right of children to socially meaningful interactions that are based on their interests demands a responsive interactional style from ECEC teachers. The aim is to use naturalistic interaction strategies that are associated with accelerated language development in infants and toddlers. A significant number of studies have reported that children who engage mainly in such responsive, elaborative interactions with adults display higher levels of language development than children who are exposed to a directive interactional style (Barnes et al., 1983; de Kruif et al., 2000; Hoff-Ginsberg, 2000; Snow & Ferguson, 1977). This, in turn, highlights the role of the dialogic quality of language activity. Girolametto et al. (2003) identify three main clusters of strategies ECEC teachers can use within the interactive language stimulation model:

1. Child-oriented techniques that are designed to promote frequent episodes of joint activity around the child's interests (e.g. wait for children to initiate, follow their lead)
2. Interaction-promoting techniques that are intended to encourage balanced turn-taking and peer interaction among children (e.g. pause to allow children to take turns)
3. Language-modelling techniques that provide developmentally appropriate language models (e.g. labels, expansions of children's utterances). (p. 300)

An interactional style that builds on the language activities children initiate can promote self-efficacy and thus encourage language use and development much better than directive styles. Hence, the most important and first strategy for ECEC teachers who work with infants and toddlers is to be child-oriented and let the child initiate and lead. To be child-oriented, ECEC teachers have to be aware of who initiates dialogue and critically reflect on whether they are sensitive towards children's initiatives. Infants, and often toddlers as well, will often initiate by using nonverbal cues that the teacher can build the interaction on (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2008).

Teachers can also promote child-initiated dialogue by helping infants and toddlers to engage in conversations. Therefore, ECEC teachers need to engage with all children on a regular basis and encourage them to participate in dialogue. This way a child's voice will be heard, their initiatives will be responded to and they will experience the language activities as meaningful. It is therefore necessary for ECEC teachers to develop an attitude that appreciates contributions from all children to the classroom dialogue, because

the infant's will, initiatives and intrinsic motivations are constantly encouraged by caregivers, or discouraged, if the behaviors are undesired by them. In these processes of continuous interplay, children are enticed into perceiving the same aspects of the environment as the caregivers, and their behaviors and actions get channeled and calibrated into patterns. (Linell, 2009, p. 256)

So far, I have introduced a cultural–historical theory on language education and explained why it aligns with a children's rights perspective. In the following section, I will discuss how language practices can be implemented when children's rights are at the core of the pedagogical approach by introducing a framework for language development which can be used in infant-toddler classrooms to document and foster language development.

## **Implications for Language Practices from a Children's Rights Perspective**

This section focuses on how a children's rights perspective towards language education in the early years can be translated into practice by addressing two questions:

1. How can children's language be observed from a rights-based perspective?
2. Which kind of language activities do we have to provide for young children if we want their voices to be heard?

In the following section, a German approach to language education in ECEC will be introduced to answer these questions in detail. In 2005, the German Federal Department of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, BMFSFJ) commissioned Germany's largest non-university research institute, the German Youth Institute (Deutsches Jugendinstitut, DJI), to develop a framework for language education in day care. The underlying principles and strategies of the framework are based on a cultural–historical approach towards language education developed by an interdisciplinary group of researchers (Jampert et al., 2006) and further adopted into practitioners' guidelines for language education in the early years (Jampert et al., 2009, 2011). The framework and guidelines for implementation in ECEC classrooms are based on principles that constitute a children's rights approach towards observing and supporting the language development of infants and toddlers. This will be illustrated below using two examples from language documentation and practices in infant-toddler classrooms in ECEC settings in Germany from 2009 to 2011 (Jampert et al., 2011).

## **Observing Children's Language from a Children's Rights Perspective**

The framework for language development from Jampert et al. (2011) can be used in the infant-toddler classroom to target and document the strategies of young children. It adopts two key principles for observing language development:

1. A holistic view towards language which is theory-driven
2. A strengths-based approach to development by focusing on the individual strategies of each child.

These principles allow ECEC teachers to look at the nexus of social, cognitive and linguistic development, in relation to the ways in which children act and think, with the aim being to clarify the ways in which different linguistic abilities—word meaning, syntactic ability and so on—develop between birth to 6 years. Consequently, the long-term nature of the process of children's language acquisition was carefully taken into account. The curriculum provides ECEC teachers and other child care providers with theory-based knowledge to help them (1) better understand the stages and strategies in language development in the early years, and (2) establish developmentally appropriate language practices.

In addition, ECEC teachers are encouraged to look at language development in a strength-based way in making the individual voice of the child visible. Jampert et al.'s (2011) practitioner guidelines support ECEC teachers to understand the stages and underlying strategies in different areas of language development in detail so they are enabled to document the individual strategies of infants and toddlers in a differentiated way (see Table 8.1). The aim is for ECEC teachers to move away

**Table 8.1** An overview of stages and areas of language development: Birth to 3 ears

Area ⇒					Grammar: syntax and morphology
Stage ↓	Social–communicative	Linguistic–cognitive	Sounds and prosody	Words and word meaning	
Absorbing the environment	Patterns of dialogue	Impressions via sensual experience	Perception of sounds Exploring voice	Perception of words and utterances	Perception of grammatical patterns
Joint attention	Joint attention through turn-taking	Reference function of language/ object permanence	Specialisation in sounds of environment	Establishing a reference between gestures and sounds	
First words as a tool	Messages through language	Acting with objects	Build-up of first sound inventory	Comprehending and uttering words	One-word phase
Worlds of words	Discovering the self and expressing it verbally	Memories and goal-oriented actions	Extension of sound inventory	Vocabulary spurt	Two-word phase Telegram style
Power of language	Complex social discourse	Symbolic play/theory of mind	Production of complex sound combinations	Expansion and differentiation of vocabulary	Beginning complex syntax

Jampert et al. (2011, p. 28)

from simplistic milestones that label infants and toddlers as developing in an appropriate or non-appropriate way by comparing them to children of similar age or ticking boxes on a checklist. Furthermore, the goal is to consider a child’s individual language skills and link them to language development.

Jampert et al. (2011) also developed orientation guidelines (*Orientierungsleitfäden*) for the five different areas of language development for infants and toddlers:

1. Social–communicative development
2. Linguistic–cognitive development
3. Sounds and prosody (phonetics and phonology)
4. Words and word meaning (vocabulary and semantics)
5. Grammar: Syntax and morphology.

Each orientation guideline illustrates the strategies children display in the five stages of language development:

1. Absorbing the environment
2. Joint attention
3. First words as a tool
4. Worlds of words
5. Power of language.



Each orientation guideline consists of two columns for each stage of language development: the columns contain information about the key aspects of development and list the strategies that can be observed for the area of language development during this stage (see Table 8.2).

The orientation guidelines are accompanied by a publication on language development, which explains the stages and strategies in detail. It also contains a pool of example strategies for every developmental stage in the different areas. These examples were collected by day care centres throughout Germany. Early childhood teachers can use the orientation guidelines to document the strategies in language learning that children demonstrate and analyse them in a number of different ways. They can (1) focus on one area of language development to highlight the particular strategies a child currently shows; (2) create a holistic picture of the child's language skills by bringing together the individual strategies a child displays in all language areas; and (3) consider the individual development of a child by comparing the documentation that has been collected over time. The following example demonstrates the individual focus of documentation throughout different areas of language development.

*'Dadadidida' —who is babbling?*

Nika (11 months, female, Spanish/Polish/German): 'Brrimbam, blaaaalauä, ploplopplpoppolop [fast:] brimbrimbrim.'

Nika looks at her teacher und giggles.

Nika: 'Ah, brrrr, blaaa.'

Nika looks at her teacher again, wiggles with her butt and claps with her hands.

Teacher: 'Shall I sing you a song?'

Nika: 'Äähhhhhhhhhhhh [loud]: mamamamamamamamamamamamama.'

(Jampert et al., 2011, p. 77, translated by the author)

In this example, Nika is using language at the stage of *Joint Attention*. We can analyse a set of strategies in different areas of language development. Nika has moved from canonical (reduplicated) babbling (as analysed in previous documentation) and now displays a wide range of variations in her babbling. She produces a variety of sounds from her different language environments. She plays with her voice to explore sound volume and speed (*Sounds and Prosody*). Babbling is her strategy of communicating with others. She initiates dialogue by getting the teacher's attention through babbling. She explores turn-taking and experiences the role of a partner in dialogue with her teacher (social-communicative development).

The documentation approach by Jampert et al. (2011) aims to highlight the individual developmental strategies of a child and to make the child's unique way of expression visible. This approach to documentation links each child's strategies to theory and shows the pathway to further developmental stages and strategies. If a child's language strategies remain static over a long period of time, this becomes evident throughout the documentation process. It will then indicate that a child's language development needs extra support and attention in order for them to acquire new strategies. Hence, through a long-term documentation process, development can be illustrated for each child and their family as well as for collaborations with



**Table 8.2** Orientation guideline for the area of social–communicative behaviour

	What happens in development?	What can be observed?
Absorbing the environment	Turning to the world from the start: Infants are susceptible to human voices and have a preference for faces Infants have an ability to imitate Infants experience their utterances as effective through the reactions of others Infants acquire basic patterns of dialogue	We are communicating: Infants express sentiments: kicking, making a face Infants make eye contact Infants trigger reactions through gaze, smiling, sounds and body expressions Infants enter dialogue with care givers through sounds
Joint attention	Devote oneself to a thing with a partner: Children discover gestures and sounds as a communicative tool Questions are expressed through intonation Children acquire nonverbal communicative patterns of acting: saying goodbye, saying no, agreeing	We are communicating <i>about</i> something Children draw attention to something through pointing, eye gaze and sounds Children love collaborative games (e.g. peekaboo) and nonverbal forms of turn-taking Children communicate through gestures and facial expressions: “Bye-bye”, shaking their head, nodding
First words as tools	Wrapping messages into language: Children communicate questions, messages, rejections and desires through first words with the support of intonation Children discover and explore the power of words	Self-efficacy through imitation and powerful words: Children imitate the tone of voice and the gestures of adults Children differentiate their intonation (“Ball?” “Ball!”) The use first words to communicate: “no”, “meou” (me too)
Worlds of words	Language is connected to the perception of the self Who am I? What belongs to me? Children show an interest in their reflection Children show attention towards the verbal actions of adults Children attune their nonverbal actions with other children	Discovering the self and expressing it verbally Children call themselves by their name Children recognise themselves in pictures Children address their wishes, intentions and claims verbally: “wanna have”, “mine” Children imitate the expressions and sayings of adults: “nonono”

(continued)

**Table 8.2** (continued)

	What happens in development?	What can be observed?
Power of language	Mastering complex communicative situations Children explore their identity and the identity of others: being little, being grown up, being a boy, being a girl Children talk about their feelings and the feelings of others Children verbally interact with other children Children use language to shape their play with others Children carry out conflicts through language and nonverbal expressions Children play with words and their voice	From “I” to “You” Children talk about themselves Children correct other children Children repeat what others say Children engage in symbolic play and role play with adults (e.g. drinking coffee, feeding a baby doll) Children re-enact familiar situations with other children (e.g. put the doll on the toilet, read a book to others, talk on the phone to each other) Children shape their play with other children verbally (“you are mummy, you are daddy”) Children enjoy the play with words and voice

Jampert et al. (2011, p. 140)

other teachers in the ECEC classroom and multi-professional partners inside and outside the centre.

When ECEC teachers are sensitive towards the strategies infants and toddlers display, they can acknowledge the individual voice of each child. While Nika uses babbling as a powerful tool for communication and sound development, her peer might display a different strategy at a different stage of language development. While infants and toddlers develop language by displaying strategies stage by stage, their individual strategies might differ widely, even if they are in the same stage of language development. Each child’s babbling might be different and influenced by their home language environment, yet the transition from reduplicated to colourful babbling is a development we can observe in most children who verbalise. It is particularly important to look at the individual child and their specific voice in language development for the infant and toddler age group. The aim is to document each infant’s and toddler’s unique way of acquiring and using language. ECEC teachers can ask the following questions:

- Which current strategies does a child display to communicate and to think (cognition) with others in their environment?
- Which activities and dialogue partners can foster these strategies?

These questions address the relationship between documentation and fostering the language skills of infants and toddlers. In the following section, I will discuss how ECEC teachers can use their documentation and analysis of language development to support the further development of infants and toddlers.

## Supporting Children's Language Learning from a Children's Rights Perspective

The framework by Jampert et al. (2011) establishes language activities within broader educational areas and daily routines for children from birth to 6 years in early childhood settings. ECEC teachers can look at pedagogical activities in the infant-toddler classroom to systematically analyse how curriculum areas provoke and foster certain strategies in language learning (e.g. How does music circle support the development of *Sound and Prosody* in our setting? How does it generate meaningful language activities for the children in the classroom? Is an activity appropriate for the children's stage of language development? Does an activity relate to their situational interests?).

We can identify a set of different situations and routines throughout the day in the ECEC classroom, which children experience for the hours they are in centre-based care. For infants and toddlers, caretaking routines (e.g. snack time, lunch, nappy changes, getting dressed) are a major part of their time in the centre. Furthermore, daily routines like *circle time* structure the day for young children in the ECEC classroom. Such situations and routines can be a powerful resource for language activities with infants and toddlers (Jampert et al., 2011), if they are based on the relationship between children and their teachers and offer social experiential spaces for young children to explore language in a meaningful and stimulating way. Through daily routines and practices, children can expand their practical knowledge and acquire knowledge about the culture of the centre. They experience how adults and children communicate with and treat each other. Hence, daily routines provide a variety of opportunities to create important learning experiences for young children.

Caretaking situations like changing diapers can be an intensive source for language learning, since infants and toddlers experience dialogue on a one-to-one basis. The following example demonstrates how language learning can focus on the child's situational interest.

One-to-one dialogue while changing diapers: Adrian wants to grow big  
Adrian (3 years 3 months/German): Lays on the diaper table and the teacher begins to undress him.

Adrian: 'I am not a baby, no more baby.'

Teacher: 'No, you are not a baby anymore.'

Adrian: 'Bigger, bigger.'

Teacher: 'Yes, you are big.'

Adrian: 'I want grow.'

Teacher: 'You still want to grow?'

Adrian: 'Yes!'

Teacher: 'Then you will get even taller!'

Adrian: 'Still fits a little, fits a little [points to his pants, laughing]. A little not taller taller.'

Teacher: ‘You will grow taller. What do you have to do to grow taller?’  
 Adrian: ‘Yes, but very little I am.’  
 Teacher: ‘You are little in size?’  
 Adrian: ‘Yes. I am not little.’  
 Teacher: ‘Well if you grow, you will get taller.’  
 Adrian: ‘Yes, I want to grow tall.’  
 Teacher: ‘Ok. As tall as your mother?’  
 Adrian: ‘Yes, rather I want to grow [...] taller!’  
 Teacher: ‘You want to grow taller? I can understand that.’  
 Adrian: ‘No, nothing fit...fits.’  
 Teacher: ‘What won’t fit?’  
 Adrian: ‘Nothing will fit?’  
 Teacher: ‘What doesn’t fit?’  
 Adrian: ‘This will not fit’ [points at the diaper table].  
 Teacher: ‘You won’t fit onto the diaper table.’  
 Adrian: ‘No.’  
 Teacher: ‘Ok.’  
 Adrian: [laughs] (Jampert et al., 2011, p. 88, translated by the author)

This dialogue between Adrian and his teacher lasts for one minute while the whole diaper change takes six minutes. After the conversation about growing, further topics are addressed: if Adrian needs a diaper and if he has put his pants back on. Adrian initiates the conversation about growing. It appears to be a topic that is important to him. In this conversation with a rather challenging topic for a toddler, Adrian uses his strategies in the developmental stage of *Power of Language*. He is capable of talking about abstract content, which is not visible. Despite the challenging cognitive topic, Adrian cares about the words he uses and corrects himself. Adrian uses this caretaking situation in his own unique way. He is learning language through the content that is important to him in this particular situation.

This child–teacher interaction shows that the right to participate is implemented by using the strategies from the language stimulation model by Girolametto et al. (2003) introduced earlier in this chapter.

1. The teacher let the child lead, using *child-oriented techniques* that are designed to promote frequent episodes of joint activity around the child’s interests, which we discussed earlier.
2. The teacher responded to the child’s topic in a sensitive way by enquiring, therefore applying *interaction-promoting techniques* that are intended to encourage balanced turn-taking.
3. The teacher mirrored Adrian’s complex grammatical sentence structure, using *language-modelling techniques* that provide developmentally appropriate language models.

The core idea of the approach by Jampert et al. (2011) is that infants and toddlers create their own language learning environment by communicating using the stage-appropriate strategies. From a children’s rights-based perspective, it is crucial that

children can actively lead dialogues with their caretakers. In this way, children are enabled to participate in their learning experiences. They set the agenda for their educational programming and they experience high levels of self-efficacy. When ECEC teachers are sensitive towards the individual strategies infants and toddlers display, they can respond in a meaningful way and enhance the child's language by modelling and expanding language.

To illustrate how children's language can be fostered from a cultural–historical perspective, I presented a framework for language development which can be used in infant-toddler classrooms to target and document the strategies of young children to make the individual voice of the child visible. These pedagogical strategies for documenting and promoting language learning were illustrated through the analysis of language education and documentation practices in German day care centres. I will conclude by discussing aspects of professional development towards a children's rights-based perspective on language in the ECEC classroom.

## **Professional Development Towards a Children's Rights-Based Perspective on Language**

A rights-based approach to language education for young children demands a high level of professionalism in early childhood settings that explicitly values the voice of the child and their agency in the educational process. This is even more important if ECEC teachers are supposed to provide meaningful dialogues that can foster the language skills of young children within every curriculum area and in a variety of social practices. For this reason, I will discuss and critically reflect on the implications of a children's rights perspective for professional development.

Studies I conducted (Tures, 2014, 2015) to examine the professional development of ECEC students at university level in Germany accentuated the key role of ECEC teachers in taking a sensitive stand towards children's individual development. By looking at the individual strategies of each child and linking them back to theory, ECEC teachers can gain a deeper understanding how each child uses language as a tool to communicate and think. Through documenting and analysing language using the orientation guidelines by Jampert et al. (2011), it will become evident how children use strategies systematically throughout their language development. My research (Tures, 2014) also showed that the process of analysing language documentation in a theory driven and individual way helps ECEC teachers to value the strategies of infants and toddlers and to understand the underlying acquisition patterns.

Working with the orientation guidelines by Jampert et al. (2011) requires differentiated knowledge about the stages and strategies in different areas of language development. More importantly, it needs a perspective towards children that values their individual voices. It is important for ECEC teachers to comprehend that each utterance is purposeful and underlies a strategy in language development that is appropriate for the current stage. In my research (Tures, 2014), I also found that

detailed knowledge about language development can still sometimes lead to an interpretation of language skills that is focused on comparing children with each other and that labels their way of expressing themselves as well or poorly developed. ECEC teachers found it challenging throughout the two-year in-service training program of Jampert et al. (2011) to focus on the individual child and the unique strategies each child displayed.

Van Oers et al. (2008) emphasise that:

Educators' interactions with children are directly based upon their belief systems and theories about the nature of children, child development, knowledge, society, pedagogy, and so on. And different interactions tend to result in different developmental outcomes. (p. 4)

Approaches to teacher education or in-service training must therefore not only focus on the delivery of knowledge and skill training, but also encourage reflection and the development of developmentally appropriate beliefs and practices—in this instance, a rights-based perspective on child development. According to Phipps (2010), research on conceptual change leads to the conclusion that the following strategies in teacher education can promote changes in teachers' beliefs and practices:

reflecting on concrete teaching experiences, helping teachers explore the beliefs underlying their practice, helping create dissatisfaction with existing beliefs, offering alternative theories which are intelligible and plausible, considering the advantages of new practice, seeing examples of this new practice, experiencing the new practice as learners, and providing support and guidance to integrate new practice into their own teaching. (Phipps, 2010, p. 23)

Hence, in-service training in the area of a children's rights-based approach to learning needs to provide individual support for ECEC teachers and the opportunity to carefully investigate ideas about language learning. Consequently, in-service training should be provided with a coaching structure, which leaves room for individual development, and it should be organised as a long-term provision. The training must further offer knowledge about language development; on the one hand, it should introduce principles of effective teaching based on research findings, and on the other hand, it should be inquiry-oriented, thus "encouraging teachers to reflect on their own teaching and developing their ability to do so, and ... constructivist in that it acknowledges the importance of cognitive processes of learning to teach" (Phipps, 2010, p. 21).

## Conclusion

This chapter has emphasised the need for an approach to language education that is based on the perspective of a cultural–historical tradition towards learning and thus acknowledges the fundamental situatedness and dialogicality of any language activity. It claims that children's rights are enacted for infants and toddlers if their language development is documented in a sensitive, strength-based way that helps ECEC teachers and other caregivers to understand the developmental interests and

needs of a child. It stressed the importance of an approach to language documentation which appreciates the individual pathways children take in the process of language learning and brings forth the individual voice of each child. This is a necessity when learning is conceptualised from a children's rights perspective because the individual abilities and strategies of young children are the basis for a responsive environment that enriches their language skills and supports them towards full participation in their own learning process. A children's rights-based perspective on language learning in the early years hence acknowledges:

- the individual pathways towards language development and unique strategies children display which can be documented throughout different stages of language development
- the nexus of social, cognitive and linguistic development when assessing language learning in the early years
- the voices, interests and ideas of all children in ECEC classrooms as the starting point for fostering language skills
- the fundamental situatedness and dialogicality of language learning
- that language learning takes place within broader educational areas and daily routines
- that ECEC teachers and other caregivers play a very important role for language learning by providing responsive social contexts and a linguistically stimulating environment
- authentic and meaningful dialogues with others as fundamental to children's overall development.

This chapter has also stressed that a children's rights-based approach towards language learning in infant-toddler classrooms implies a high level of professional development for ECEC teachers. This involves not only the delivery of knowledge and skill training but, even more importantly, a reflection on one's individual belief systems and, if necessary, conceptual change.

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